

Viewpoint Viewpoint



Immigration Debate Is About More Than Numbers

It turns out that politicians are as fickle as the people who elect them and the media that cover them. Or maybe they are as easily distracted or their memories are as short-lived. Whatever the case, there's no accounting for which problems get the most political attention and when. Unfortunately, many of the issues Congress takes up so very publicly have little real impact on the vast majority of Americans. Little more than a year ago, for example, Capital Hill was all

worked up over the imminent death of one poor woman, Terri Schiavo, whose husband only wanted what he believed she wanted – to die with dignity. Never mind that any decision in her case would affect no more than a handful of people at best. Similarly with the bird flu pandemic – even though it has yet to infect a single American, let alone mutate into something transmittable between humans.

And so it is with the immigration issue. All of a sudden it is sweating under the bright light of what passes as public debate. That we've lived with – and prospered off of – a growing population of undocumented immigrants for decades seems to escape those who whipped up the latest false sense of urgency. Certainly Congress could spend its time (and our dime) addressing issues that are actually on Americans' minds – universal health coverage, for example, or our dependence on fossil fuels, outrageous prescription drug prices, seriously flawed homeland security. But this is an election year, and politicians find it more helpful to tackle issues with emotional appeal than those requiring intellectual will. If it has a built-in fear factor, all the better.

After we released our most recent Fiscal Policy Project report, **Undocumented Immigrants in New Mexico: State Tax Contributions and Fiscal Concerns**, the heavily emotional nature of this issue became immediately apparent. The report (which you can read at our website, www.nmvoices.org) looked at how much undocumented immigrants contribute to the state in gross receipts, income and property taxes and how much it costs the state to educate undocumented children. What we found is that undocumented immigrants who have been in the U.S. fewer than 10 years (which accounts for the majority of the undocumented immigrant population) contribute more – far more – in taxes than the state spends to educate undocumented students.

It is a simple enough equation. We did not look at costs associated with law enforcement or emergency medicine – because very little, if any, data exists that

(Continued on page 2)

(Immigration continued from page 1)

is quantifiable. We do know that hospitals charge undocumented immigrants for any health care they receive – something few New Mexicans know. American citizens who are poor and uninsured, however, often do not pay for emergency medical care because those costs are covered by taxpayer supported indigent funds. What’s more, the undocumented and uninsured pay higher costs for routine medical care because they lack the bargaining power that allows insurance companies to get lower rates. Even if they did not pay for emergency medical care, undocumented immigrants make up only 2 percent of the state’s population, while the uninsured make up 23 percent. Nonetheless, we did not include a discussion of medical payments made or not. Nor did we consider any federally funded costs that could possibly be attributed to undocumented immigrants. That was simply beyond the scope of the report.

What we found – aside from the report’s basic conclusion – was how pervasive and persistent was the myth that undocumented immigrants come to this country for government handouts. We found that some people who wrote or emailed us would rather dismiss the report – and its sources and methodology – out of hand than question comfortable old assumptions, no matter how irrational. These are generally the same sorts of people who prefer not to think about the many ways in which undocumented immigrants make our lives easier and our produce cheaper. As long as the people who change the hotel sheets, wash the restaurant dishes, and pick the grapes that make California wine stay out of sight, many are only too happy to keep them out of mind.

Some have even questioned our motives for producing the report. After all, why would an organization called New Mexico VOICES for Children care about immigrants? It is a logical question, but then too is the answer. First, we are a research-based policy advocacy organization, and this was an area in which very little research was being done. Second, just like many of us, undocumented immigrants have children, many of whom are American citizens. Regardless of how people feel about their parents, we speak for every child, citizen or not. The last and least easily defined reason has to do with what sort of world we envision. People who work in human rights advocacy

generally do so because they have a vision of what our world could be. It is a world in which each of us cares at least as much, if not more, about the needs of others as our own wants, and because of that, no one is considered “needy.” It is a world in which every person has value – no matter where they were born or what contribution they can make to society. That world includes those with disabilities and diseases, the poor, and yes, the undocumented. It is a world in which love, compassion and empathy are abundant because they expand in direct proportion to how much they are shared.

That’s the world in which we’d like to see everyone live. Moreover, in this little niche called New Mexico, we’d like to live in a community where people come together to solve problems, not build fences; where we delight in our diversity instead of squelching it; and where we study the past, if for no other reason than to fully appreciate the present.

We think that’s the sort of world everyone would like to live in, too, if we were not so afraid of opening our hearts.

Immigration in the news

- ❖ Almost half of the undocumented immigrants in the U.S. had no need to sneak across the border – they entered on legal visas and simply never left. Authorities call them “overstays.”
- ❖ A recent AP poll found that Americans are more tolerant of immigrants now than they were two years ago.
- ❖ Since the National Guard has been dispatched to the Mexican border, detentions are down more than 20 percent.

Source: Associated Press

Why We Believe Race Matters

If there's one topic that will clear a room, it's racism. But bring up the issue of racial disparities and kids, and you have a whole different dynamic. People are willing to examine issues through a racial lens if it's with an eye toward making sure no American child is discounted because of the color of their skin.

That was just one of the things we learned from our **Race Matters conference** back in May, which we hosted along with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Albuquerque Human Rights Office, and the New Mexico Human Rights Coalition. The response to the topic and the conference – both from the public and the media – was overwhelming and positive. Out of that day of learning and growing we've begun to develop recommendations for public policy that we will pursue into the next legislative session. Since the recommendations are still in the works, your input is welcome and encouraged (see the 'Join us!' at the end of this article).

The conference brought together some 300 social workers, juvenile justice professionals, educators, civil rights activists, and quite a few young people. They listened to and asked questions of numerous speakers and more than a dozen youth, sitting on four different panels. The speakers talked about how structural racism has led to racial disparities within the juvenile justice, child welfare and reproductive health care systems – and posed working solutions. The youth panelists spoke about their own experiences with racial profiling, life within the foster care system, drug abuse and alcoholism in the Native American community, and their inability to access comprehensive reproductive information and health care.

Structural, or institutionalized, racism is embedded in policies and practices. Different from individual bias, structured racism is about the larger picture and laws that have racial impacts we never intended. A clear example is the recent cuts made to personal income and estate tax. These cuts have the greatest impact on the top 1 percent of earners, who are predominantly white. Lower wage earners – who are predominantly people of color – receive no benefit from these cuts. People may say that these policies are about the poor and the rich, which is

true. But poverty has long been, and continues to be, a proxy for race. We need to decide if policies should continue to exacerbate the poverty/racial divide.

The Race Matters conference examined how structural racism impacts youth specifically. It's not always in ways that are obvious. For example, the rate of chlamydia for African-American young women is 5,000 per 100,000, while it is 700 per 100,000 for young white women. The huge disparity is not due to differences in sexual activity, but differences in access to affordable health care.

More examples include:

- ❖ children of color are placed in foster care at higher rates than white children, even when the situations in their homes are comparable
- ❖ children of color are far more likely to have a parent in prison, which in turn, makes them far more likely to enter the criminal justice system themselves
- ❖ although youth of color only make up one-third of the country's adolescent population, they make up two-thirds of the youth in detention*

The reasons for these disparities are complex, but most involve one or more of the following: racial profiling, stereotyping, and the lack of cultural competency training and staff diversity within the systems. Poverty, the accompanying residential segregation, and lack of resources also play a large role.

Still in search of a solution

We want to believe that we solved the race problem back in the '60s and all is now right with the world. While we have made great gains in civil rights, hundreds of years of discrimination have left an ugly legacy. Consider the inability of African Americans to secure a home mortgage sixty years ago because of mortgage "redlining" practices and the ripple effect they had. An African American, unable to secure a home loan after World War II, and now a grandfather, had no equity upon which to borrow to provide his son with a college education. The son could only get a low-wage job,

(continued on page 6)

A Look at Recent Events

2nd Annual Fame and Shame Awards held April 5, 2006 at the Albuquerque Academy. The Oscar-style event marks National Kick Butts Day, which encourages young people to reject tobacco use. New Mexico's Kick Butts Day is sponsored by the New Mexico Department of Health Tobacco Use Prevention and Control Program, New Mexico's Youth Tobacco Prevention Coalition (YEAH) and New Mexico VOICES for Children. All photos by Ray A. Mares (www.sillypapas.com).

Right: Fame and Shame Youth participants from Clayton strike a *Charlie's Angels* pose in front of the eight-foot "Shamie Award." The dubious distinction is awarded to actors, actresses, producers, directors, and their movies that shamelessly portray smoking in the movies.



Below: Cozette Brown of Clayton (l.) proudly shows off her "Youth Kicking Tobacco's Butt Youth Advocate of the Year Award." The Clayton, NM, teen took First Place at the high school level for her advocacy work, which includes, among other things, creating educational materials. She's pictured with her adult sponsor Radna Running (r.).



Above: Amanda Gonzales of Albuquerque (l.), who was the middle school youth advocate of 2005, presents a plaque of recognition to Attorney General Patricia Madrid (r.). The AG was honored for her support of youth advocacy against tobacco use and spoke at the ceremony.



Above: Girls from Eastern New Mexico await the arrival of stars—or, rather, teens dressed up as stars—to the red carpet. They're seated in front of the "Fame & Shame: Something Stinks in Hollywood" banner.

A Look at Recent Events

The **2006 Amy Biehl Youth Spirit Award Luncheon** was held April 28, 2006 at the Albuquerque Marriott. The annual event is held in honor and celebration of New Mexico's youth and their commitment to service and activism. All photos by Ray A. Mares (www.sillypapas.com).

Right: 39 New Mexican youth were nominated for the 2006 Amy Biehl Youth Spirit Award. (Not all nominees pictured.)



Below: Graciela Lopez of Albuquerque, the winner of the 2006 Amy Biehl Youth Spirit Award, was unable to attend the event due to her service commitments. Her parents, Victor and Antonette Sedillo Lopez, proudly accept their daughter's award.



Above: Finalists (from left to right) Albuquerque's Destiny Swisher, and Santa Fe's Erica Padilla and Antonia Clifford.



Right: Demetria Martinez, author, lecturer, activist and columnist, was the keynote speaker at the 2006 Amy Biehl Youth Spirit Award.



RoadRunner Food Bank of New Mexico's **Boxing Olympics** was held June 6, 2006. Teams from local businesses compete to fill the most **Senior Helpings** boxes during a 15 minute time period. The team that finishes the most boxes wins the coveted "Boxing Crown." This year, that honor went to the team from Albertsons. Senior Helpings is a program that provides special needs food boxes for older and medically frail seniors on a monthly basis.



Above: Volunteers fill boxes at the "Boxing Olympics" hosted by the RoadRunner Food Bank of New Mexico.

Below: Carla Chavez, Deputy Director for Programs with New Mexico VOICES for Children, participates in the "Boxing Olympics."



Let It Rain!



New Mexico's children and families have suffered too long from a statewide drought of services and opportunities, and it's high time for some local climate change. We're kicking off the new fiscal year with a new development campaign – **Let it Rain!** – but we need your help to fill the rain barrel with funds. As you know, one of the things that sets New Mexico VOICES for Children apart from many other advocacy organizations is our capacity to do solid research, communications outreach and lobbying. In fact, our data analysis, research, and strategic communications work supports many of the organizations with whom we work in coalition.

Research is not merely valuable in advocacy work – it is essential. Without the appropriate tools to educate policy makers and the public, our efforts would meet with much less success. But research and communications don't come cheap. We sport a two-person research team, a two-person communications team and a full-time lobbyist, and as gracious as these folks are, they gotta eat just like the rest of us.

So we're asking you to help us fill the rain barrel so we can continue to lift up those whose voices are not heard. And we can make it as easy as it is painless. You can set up your credit card account for an automatic monthly charge that will be sent to us. Even a contribution of \$10 a month makes a big difference. If you'd like to set up a monthly automatic contribution, please call us at 505-244-9505, and ask for Felicia Griffin (ext. 21) or Dee Dee Sanchez (ext. 15). Thanks!



(Race Matters continued from page 3)

but, by scrimping and saving, was able to send his son to the local community college. The son, however, had to quit school and take a job to help with the bills when his father became ill, because dad's low-wage job did not offer health insurance. For most middle-class Americans our home represents our largest accumulation of wealth. Because of mortgage lending practices in the 1940s, when grandfather died, neither his son nor grandson received any inheritance.

Many whites overlook or are simply ignorant of the accumulation of privilege they inherited from a system that favored their ancestors, generation after generation. It might be easy to brush off the above statistics as the consequences of poverty – that since racial minorities make up the majority of this country's poor, it logically follows that they make up a larger percentage of this country's broken homes, teen mothers and criminals. But to brush these stats off as a mere mathematical probability is to admit that this is the way things should be – a society divided by race. Unless we make systemic changes, we condemn today's children to lives weighed down by the mistakes of the past.

*For more statistics, the reasons for them, and possible solutions, visit the Annie E. Casey Foundation's website at www.aecf.org. Click on 'publications,' then 'racial and ethnic equality,' then on 'Race Matters tool kit.'

Our next Race Matters follow-up meeting is Wednesday, July 12 at 2:30pm. The meeting is free but please RSVP your attendance by calling Felicia Griffin at (505) 244-9505 ext. 21 or email her at fgriffin@nmvoices.org

Giving That's United In More Ways Than One

New Mexico VOICES for Children is one of the many organizations fortunate enough to receive generous funding from the **United Way of Central New Mexico**. (Plus, they're our upstairs neighbors here at the office and they're really nice folks.) Since most of us like to spread our largess around, we thought you'd like to know that you can support the United Way *and* NM VOICES at the same time. All you need to do is write New Mexico VOICES for Children on the memo portion of your check made out to the United Way. Of course, we gratefully accept donations of any size made directly to us.



Happy New Year!

We're celebrating the new year because July marks the beginning of the fiscal year here at New Mexico VOICES for Children. Also, it helps us forget about the heat. The fiscal year that just passed was punctuated by some sizzling successes. (Oops, a heat reference slipped in there!)

Some of the most recent include:

- ❖ Playing a key role in the fight to raise the minimum wage in Albuquerque. This strategic win will help tremendously to boost the campaign for a statewide minimum wage increase we've already begun.
- ❖ Producing data to help convince HSD to return to a twelve month (instead of six) Medicaid enrollment policy. The six month policy had a negative impact on tens of thousands of children.
- ❖ Convincing the state Human Services Department to continue a project we led, which enrolls in Medicaid eligible but hard-to-reach children.
- ❖ Setting the stage for "combined reporting" legislation to level the playing field for New Mexico businesses, which we will lobby for at the Roundhouse. Our research documented that while New Mexico businesses pay corporate taxes, some out-of-state businesses don't.
- ❖ Taking the first step toward getting a state earned income tax credit (EITC) for New Mexico's working families. Passing this legislation is a 2007 priority.
- ❖ Turning a spotlight on racial inequities and how race impacts youth of color with our Race Matters conference (see the related story). We're currently developing policy recommendations we can also pursue at the statewide level.
- ❖ Inserting new information into the immigration debate with our research, which revealed how much money the state takes in from undocumented immigrants in the form of the unavoidable taxes they pay (see the other related story).

While such a workload sounds like it could lead to one whopper of a hang over, we're not about to take a break. We've got more research and reports in the works, numerous programs up and running, and, of course, it's never too soon to gear up for the next legislative session. The end of an old year is also an excellent time to thank all of you who helped us achieve the above goals. Without your financial support, much of this important work would go undone.

So, thank you. Oh, and have a happy new year!

Is That An e-Voice I Hear?

Not long ago we started sending out the weekly e-Voices **Monday Minute** through the GetActive network. The idea was to keep you abreast of the kinds of stories you're not likely to see in the news – new reports out of Voices for America's Children, for example, or current legislation. We always include links to reports when possible and contact information for our congresspersons when applicable, and we try to keep it brief. We welcome your feedback, suggestions, questions and complaints. We also welcome anyone who's not receiving the Monday Minute, but wants to, to sign up. It's free and we won't share your email address with anyone. Just visit our website (www.nmvoices.org), scroll down to the bottom of the home page, then click on the GetActive link. That will take you through the steps.

KIDS COUNT's Coming

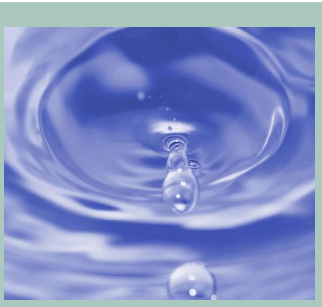
The national **KIDS COUNT Data Book** comes out at the end of June. The book-sized report, put together by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, takes a look at 10 key indicators of child well being – such as poverty levels and mortality rates – and ranks each state accordingly. Over the years, as you may know, New Mexico has bumped along at the bottom of the pack, usually in the company of Louisiana and Mississippi. New Mexico VOICES for Children's KIDS COUNT Program Director Sara Beth Koplik is working on a breakdown of New Mexico's stats on a county-by-county basis. We're all working on raising our score by improving the lives of our state's children and families.

As always, copies of the report are free while supplies last. You can either stop by the office (we're at 2340 Alamo SE, Suite 120, in Albuquerque, off of Yale, south of Gibson) between 8:30am and 4:30pm, Monday through Friday (except July 3rd and 4th), or send a check for \$5.50 to cover the cost of postage. Be sure to include your mailing address.



Immigration Debate Is About More Than Numbers 1
 Why We Believe Race Matters 3
 A Look at Recent Events 4-5
 Let It Rain! 6
 Giving That's United in More Ways Than One 6
 Happy New Year! 7
 Is That An e-Voice I Hear? 7
 KIDS COUNT's Coming 7

Newsletter
In this issue:



2006 Spring
Viewpoint



2340 Alamo S.E., Suite 120
 Albuquerque, NM 87106
www.nmvoices.org

