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An ICE Home Raid before Church

Saturday, we went out to a picnic. Sunday, we were going to go to church. On Sunday morning around 8:30, they knocked on the door really hard. They called from outside: "Maria Lopez, this is immigration. We need to talk to you." Maria didn't have nothing to fear, so she went down. They asked, "Does your husband live here?" --Vern, Guatemalan deportee¹

Vern went downstairs and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents at his door handcuffed him and put him in their car. His wife and two children were devastated as they watched Vern being taken away. Eight days later, Vern was deported to Guatemala. Maria had to figure out how to get by with her minimum-wage job. Vern had to learn to readjust to Guatemala City—which he had left eighteen years earlier.

There have been five million deportations from the United States since 1997—two and a half times the total of all deportations prior to 1997. Mass deportation has not affected all immigrants equally: the vast majority of deportees are Latin American and Caribbean men. Today, nearly 90 percent of deportees are men, and over 97 percent of deportees are Latin American or Caribbean, even though about half of all non-citizens are women and only 60 percent of non-citizens are from the Americas.²

Vern, for example, was born in 1971 in Guatemala City to a single mother who struggled to get by. When Vern was 16, he got a job as a bus inspector. When he and his co-workers began to organize a union, they received death threats. Vern saw emigration as his best option for survival. With no option to enter the United States legally, Vern decided to enter surreptitiously into the United States.

When Vern arrived in the United States in 1991, he applied for asylum. The Immigration and Naturalization Service gave Vern a work permit as his case was being processed. Vern thus began to work in a frozen food processing plant in Ohio. He met a Honduran woman, Maria, who had also applied for political asylum, and they began to date. Each year, they received work permits that allowed them to continue working. Hopeful their cases would eventually be resolved, Vern and Maria married, and had their first child, born a U.S. citizen, in 1996.

In 1998, Vern received a notice that he should leave the United States. His asylum application had been denied, even though he faced death threats after trying to organize a union. If Vern had an immigration lawyer, his asylum plea may well have been granted: 88 percent of asylum seekers without lawyers are denied. Vern's plea may also have been granted if he had a different judge. Some judges have a record of denying 100 percent of asylum cases, whereas other judges deny as little as 4 percent of asylum cases. In Cleveland, where Vern's case was heard, the approval rate by judges varies from 50 to 87 percent.³

Once Vern heard his plea was denied, he was distressed—he had established a life in Ohio and had few ties to Guatemala. He decided to stay and hope that his wife’s application would be approved, and that she could apply for him to legalize his status. They had another child, and continued to make their lives in Ohio. Vern became a supervisor in the food processing plant. Maria also worked there, but she worked on the line, earning less money than Vern.

Vern and his wife had a comfortable life in Ohio, but Vern lived in fear that immigration agents would come looking for him. To avoid this, he stayed out of trouble. He did everything he could to avoid problems with the police—he never drank, avoided committing traffic violations, and abided by the laws at all times. He learned English, took his kids on outings every weekend, and tried to blend in as much as possible. Vern told me, in deliberate English, “I was a model citizen.” Then, he followed it up with “or illegal,” clarifying that his good citizenship behavior did not actually endow him with any legal status.

Once unauthorized migrants are in the United States, they have an extremely small chance of being apprehended and deported. The threat of deportation, however, keeps migrants compliant as they try to stay under the radar. In 2014, ICE officers apprehended 65,332 people—a small fraction of the 11 million undocumented migrants in the country. About 15,000 of these apprehensions involve home raids like the one Vern experienced.⁴ Despite Vern’s relatively low risk for deportation, like many undocumented

immigrants, he lived in constant fear of deportation. One Sunday morning, his worst nightmare became a reality. He became one of the 250 people torn from their homes by ICE agents each week.

ICE agents came to Vern's house and arrested him in front of his wife and his children—aged 12 and 9. The immigration agents were part of a Fugitive Operation Team—designed to find “fugitive aliens”—people like Vern who had ignored their deportation orders. Vern was put into detention, and, eight days later, he was in Guatemala, the country he had left eighteen years before.

Vern was never given the opportunity to explain to a judge that he had not abided by his deportation order because he had already formed a family in the United States, that his family depended on him to meet their daily needs, that he had worked at the same job for sixteen years, that he had never had any trouble with the law, that his two children are U.S. citizens, or that his wife was very close to attaining legal status, and thus to ensuring his own legal status. Instead, he was summarily detained and deported to Guatemala.

Vern thus soon found himself not too far from where he started. He arrived back in Guatemala City, where he stayed with his sister in a shack made of cement block and cardboard. In 2014, 51,157 Guatemalans, like Vern, were deported from the United States.⁵ Upon his return to Guatemala, many things had changed, but violence and instability continued to pose challenges to the country, and to Vern.

Guatemala had been in turmoil for all of Vern's life—between 1960 and 1996, there were over 30,000 documented killings and disappearances in Guatemala, carried out as part of “a deliberate and drawn-out policy of extra-judicial murder by the Guatemalan government.”⁶ The armed conflict began with the overthrow of socialist President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, organized by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and carried out by military officials trained in the United States.⁷ Over the course of the war, the United States supplied arms and military support to the Guatemalan military—even as reports of massive terror spread. In response, many Guatemalans, like Vern, fled the country. He returned to a Guatemala ravaged by decades of war, state violence, and now gang violence, where—as a middle-aged man—he has to figure out how to survive on his own in the poverty he fought his whole life to escape.

¹ Vern's name, as well as Maria's, are pseudonyms. [Complete citation/author interview with Vern and Maria]

² Tanya Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Global Capitalism, and Disposable Labor* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

³ TRAC. 2014. "Judge-by-Judge Asylum Decisions in Immigration Courts FY 2007 - 2012." *Judge-by-Judge Asylum Decisions in Immigration Courts FY 2007-2012*, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/361/include/denialrates.html>.

⁴ TRAC. 2017. "ICE Immigration Raids: A Primer." *Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) - Comprehensive, Independent, and Nonpartisan Information on Federal Enforcement, Staffing and Funding*, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/459/>.

⁵ AFP. 2015. "Aumentó En 2014 La Deportación De Guatemaltecos Desde EEUU." *Vivelohoy*. N.p., January 2, 2015, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.vivelohoy.com/mundo/8427741/aumento-en-2014-la-deportacion-de-guatemaltecos-desde-eeuu>.

⁶ Patrick Donnell Ball, Paul Kobrak, and Herbert F. Spirer, *State Violence in Guatemala, 1960-1996: A Quantitative Reflection* (Washington, D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1999), 3.

⁷ On the history of state violence in Guatemala, see Ball, Kobrak, and Spirer.