

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Tracie L. Morgan & Ashley Glimasinski

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Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

Tracie: Christian teaching also reminds us to honor the dignity of every person because every human being is made in the image of God. That truth doesn't stop at our borders. It stretches across cultures, languages, and nations.

Ashley: So as followers of Christ, we're invited not to just understand the issue, but to respond, to let compassion guide us, to defend the dignity of families, to recognize the moral cost of separation, and to stand for policies and practices that reflect the heart of a God who brings people together, not tears them apart.

Welcome to Hope in Action, where we offer clear insights, practical tools, and inspiring stories to navigate immigration with confidence, compassion, and faith. Each week, we break down the law, share real-world examples, and help you speak up, live out your values, and make a difference in your community.

Whether you're looking to understand immigration through a faith-driven lens, have courageous conversations with those who matter to you, or take small steps toward justice, you're in the right place. Let's dive in.

From separating Native American children from their families by placing them in boarding schools to African families broken apart by slavery, to modern day immigration policies, family separation has tragically been a part of American history since the beginning. And that's what we're going to focus on today.

Tracie: Family separation is often reduced to headlines, political sound bites, or short video clips shared on social media. But think

[**Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care**](#)

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

about how you would feel if you were separated from your family. I don't think we should ever be numb to this idea. It is such a heartbreakingly situation encountered by so many who just really want to do things the right way.

Ashley: And most people hear family separation and think only about what happened at the US Mexico border in 2018. But the truth is, family separation is so much broader and far more common than most Americans realize. Today, we're going to talk about the different types of family separation. We'll talk about separation at the border, through immigration detention, through arrests at green card interviews or ICE check-ins, and the so-called permanent bar that can force a family apart forever. And that's true, that really can happen. So for that last one, we're going to have a special guest who will be joining us a bit later in the episode, so stay tuned to hear from her.

Tracie: So, let's start at the border. I think that is what we're all most familiar with hearing. And family separation still happens there, even though maybe it doesn't feel as shocking as it did in 2018 when the media shared images of children in cages, separated from parents and guardians. I remember the shock I felt when I first saw those and the anger.

Families may arrive together today at the border, and they ask for asylum as a family unit. But they'll be separated and held in different detention centers for processing. Sometimes this happens when documents like birth certificates are missing. Customs and Border Protection, the folks that the immigrants, the asylum seekers are first encountering, maybe won't believe that the family is a family. If there's no birth certificate, how do they

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

know that child belongs to those adults? And they'll remove the children from their parents and then classify the child as an unaccompanied minor.

So even when a family is trying to do it the right way and they approach CBP at an official port of entry, which is the legal way to ask for asylum, they can be separated. And I may have talked about this before, but I remember advising families in Mexico when I was down there a few years ago, and these were families who were preparing to cross into the United States and share with the CBP officer their fear of returning to their home country. And I had to tell them that they needed to be prepared for potential family separation. And I really couldn't believe that I was telling a father that my government could take his children away from him.

Ashley: That is so awful. And you're right that family separation still happens. You're talking about a father and his probably minor child. But I also know a family of adult siblings who they waited months in Mexico for an appointment through the old CBP One app. They had their appointment, they crossed the border and met with the asylum officers, and they were taken into custody and sent to different detention centers. And one of those siblings is still detained today, even a year later. So the family separation is still happening.

And just a quick note, our borders are not open. We don't have, and really no one is advocating for, a policy where anyone can cross the border anytime without a visa or other authorization. We believe in secure, but also humane borders, where we know who is coming in and that they're safe people, but also where they don't

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

have to wait months or years in detention or the bureaucratic limbo that we see so often.

And another way that families can be separated is through immigration detention. Within the last year, we've all seen the stories of ICE and CBP detaining people on public streets, grocery and hardware stores, and from personal cars and houses.

Sometimes it's just one person who's detained, and other times there are sweeps that detain several people at once. In these cases, children can come home from school to find one or both of their parents missing, or a spouse gets a phone call that their loved one has been detained or sometimes even deported very quickly.

Some of these cases have involved undocumented immigrants, but many have also included documented immigrants or those with some kind of legal status that allows them to remain in the United States on a temporary basis or while their case is proceeding through the immigration system. So you would think that undocumented immigrants might be caught up in these sweeps, but why are documented immigrants, people with legal status being caught up in these as well? It makes me question sometimes, who is our government targeting in this space?

Tracie: I will 110% attest to that. I mean, just earlier this week, Monday morning, I woke up to an email from a client who was in the process of being detained by ICE. He has an appeal pending with the Board of Immigration Appeals. He, you know, may have had a case denied, but he still had legal rights to exercise. He has the right to do this. And nothing has changed in his case. He has some arrest from the 1990s, but immigration has been well aware of this for the last 10 years while we've been fighting his case.

[Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care](#)

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

But just out of the blue, Monday morning, he's driving his daughter to school, and he gets pulled over by ICE and they choose to detain him. And part of me just has to wonder, is that designed to try and break him? Because now he's going to have to wait to figure out his case from a detention center. Sometimes people just want to give up and go back home instead of dealing with all of that. So, yes, again, even doing it the right way can lead to some pretty horrible consequences.

And so to kind of build on this, I want to talk a little bit about what's happening with bond and things like that. I won't get too much into the weeds, but I think it's really important that people understand what's happening in our system. So, in September 2025, a decision from the Board of Immigration Appeals, which controls all the immigration courts, they made this situation of people being detained even more difficult. They said that anyone who had entered the United States without inspection was subject to mandatory detention. That meant that people who had deep ties to the United States, even if they'd been here 20 years, they had to be detained. They could not be released on bond like they had been able to.

Now, recently, and this is in December 2025, there has been some positive movement by federal courts to try and stop this practice. But parents, caretakers, and otherwise law-abiding people have been caught up in this, saying that they cannot be released while their case is pending. And again, it's just a horrible situation to be in.

And another thing that I want to talk about is with ICE check-ins. And ICE, again, Immigration and Customs Enforcement. These

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

check-ins can be a bit like parole for immigrants. These check-ins are for those who have a removal or deportation already. That is, they've gone through the process and they lost their case. But for some reason, maybe it's because they have an extremely sick family member in the US who relies on them, maybe they have small children, or the home country conditions are unsafe, or maybe even the home country won't take them back. But ICE has used their discretion in these cases not to what we call execute the order of removal, that is to put the person on the plane to send them back home.

Well, that discretion is gone now. And people who have been doing these check-ins for years, sometimes even a decade, they're being told at these check-ins that you're not leaving this building. You're staying here and we're going to put you on a plane. There's no chance to say goodbye to their family, no chance to pack. And nothing has changed. The removal orders haven't changed. It's only the willingness to use judgment and mercy in enforcing them that's changed.

Ashley: And one of the more shocking things that we've seen during the last few months of 2025 is that people are being arrested at their green card interviews. And that means that people who are maybe they're married to a US citizen, who are doing things the right way, are getting arrested because they've overstayed their visas. And they overstayed for a variety of reasons, but in the context of marriage-based cases, an overstaying isn't a bar to getting a green card.

Yet, instead of allowing the lawful process to move forward, the government is choosing harsher enforcement, pushing families

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

into court and prolonging their separation and uncertainty. And remember that when you're filing all these papers for immigration, you've let the government know months, years in advance who you are, what your background is. They've done biometric screenings, they've done legal background checks. They've done criminal background checks. Nothing has changed in their cases, and they've been allowed to proceed to this point of going for their final interview for the green card process to become a legal permanent resident. And yet, at this final stage, it feels like a trick. They go into an office and instead of speaking to an immigration officer, there are two people waiting to detain them and take them to detention.

Tracie: It is a shocking development. When I first heard about this, I couldn't believe it because for as long as I've been practicing, as long as some of the OGs in immigration law have been practicing, overstays is not an issue. It's not anything that would stop a green card from getting approved. And so you're not just saying, oh, they're enforcing the law. They're not. They're just finding a new way to be cruel. So Ashley, thank you for highlighting all of that.

And so, when things are dark like this, trying to figure out where to go, of course, you know, we turn to the Bible. And the Bible has amazing wisdom about this. Scripture affirms the importance of law, but it also insists that laws must be applied with kindness, discernment, and justice. Over and over, the Bible calls leaders to temper judgment with mercy, to protect the vulnerable, and to ensure that legal power does not become a tool of harm. Proverbs speaks of a wisdom that is full of mercy. Micah calls us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. And Jesus himself reminds us that the weightier matters of the law include justice and compassion.

[**Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care**](#)

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

So removing discretion doesn't make the system more lawful, it just often makes it less just. True fidelity to our laws includes honoring the humane, careful judgment that those laws intentionally allow. And as Christians, we are called to advocate for systems, including immigration systems, that reflect not only legality, but also the mercy, compassion, and thoughtful discernment that are at the heart of biblical justice.

Ashley: So we've talked about family separation at the border, through immigration detention, and through arrests at green card interviews or ICE check-ins. And another way that people can be separated is through long wait times and backlogs. And I remember this very well with my husband when we applied for his visa and then for his green card. And when we were living in Poland, we were deciding which pathway did we want to take to come to the United States. And for us, there were really two pathways because at that point we were engaged, we weren't married.

And one of the pathways is that we could apply for the fiance visa. And we would apply for that from overseas, and eventually, I would move back to the United States before he received it to establish a presence here. And then he would come to the United States, we'd have 90 days to get married because he would have a 90-day visa, and he would be here in the United States. And we knew that he wouldn't be able to work probably for a time. We just didn't know how long, but the important thing is that we would be together.

And another pathway that we could have taken is that we could have gotten married in Poland and then applied for a spousal green card. And that could have taken a lot longer. Tracie could

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

probably speak to the time limits for that a little bit more because again, we didn't do that pathway. But we understood that it probably would have taken two years at least for him to be able to come to the United States. And we just didn't want to wait that long before having to come back. I had family things I needed to take care of and people I needed to be with. So we decided to go for what we thought would be the shorter pathway with the fiance visa.

And it ended up finally that we were separated for about three months. Uh he was in Poland and I was in the United States. And that was a really hard time for us because we were engaged. We'd been together for three years at that point. And to be suddenly in different continents, different time zones, it was really hard for us to be apart for that time, especially, you know, this is the person I'm planning to marry and I don't even get to see him every day. So it was a strange time. But I think I also remember with that three months was actually a really short time for us to be separated compared to what some people go through with the immigration process. It can take so much longer. So I feel like we were really lucky with that case for it to just not take more than three months.

And the thing is also that these timelines where families are separated, they continue to get worse. For someone in the US who wants to bring their spouse to the US, the current wait time for just the first step is 50 months. Let me say that again, 50, 5-0 months. That's over four years. And then there's another 6 to 12 month process on top of that with the Department of State and the interview process. So when I look at those numbers now, like that was the pathway that my husband and I could have taken and I'm

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

so glad we didn't do that because we would have been separated for a much longer time.

Tracie: Yeah, it's insane. And it makes advising clients really difficult because today, the fiance visa, that first step will maybe take 10 months and the marriage process, that first step will take 50 months. But what's that going to look like next year? Is it going to flip-flop? And by then, you're already married if you made that choice, and so there's no take backs, so to speak. So, yeah, it's a roller coaster.

So I work with many clients who are married to a foreign national who entered the US without authorization. That is, they did not have a visa, they didn't come through an official port of entry. Sometimes they came as a child through no decision of their own. Other times they may have come as a young adult, maybe hoping to earn some money to send back home. But regardless of why someone entered, if there's no proof of a legal entry, they have to leave the United States to fix their status.

However, there is a law that says if you were in the US for more than a year without status and leave, you have a 10-year bar from returning, 10 years of separation potentially. Now, this bar, this one particular bar, can be waived or forgiven if you can show that your US citizen or permanent resident spouse or parent would suffer extreme hardship if you couldn't be in the United States. And so looking at finances, mental health, physical health, country conditions, all of that to show that that level of hardship. And that waiver can take about three years to be approved.

And so, once it's approved, though, it means that foreign national spouse or parent should only spend a few weeks outside of the

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

United States instead of 10 years, while their immigrant visa is processed. But these waivers are expensive. Uh for lawyer's fees, you're looking at, you know, starting at \$5,000 and going upwards from there. And that's just for this one small part of the case. And these waivers are writing a small book about the family. I call it a guilt trip on the government because we're showing all the reasons why a family should be together. And that cost is just so prohibitive to people.

And then there's the uncertainty. What if the waiver doesn't work? What if something else happens outside of the country? Will the foreign national, will that loved one be stuck outside the US forever?

Tracie: So, we've been talking about different forms of family separation, and we've mentioned something called the permanent bar, a rule that can keep families apart for life. So, to help us understand what that looks like for real families, we're joined by a special guest, Ashley DeAzevedo with American Families United. Thank you so much, Ashley, for being here with us today.

Ashley DeAzevedo: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really, really excited to be on this platform and share a little bit about what all of our families are going through.

Ashley: And Ashley, it's always nice to meet another Ashley. I have to say that at the start as well.

Ashley DeAzevedo: Same. Love it.

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

Ashley: So you're here to talk with us about permanent bars and it's something that I've kind of heard about before, but I don't really understand what it is. Can you explain that to us in simple terms?

Ashley DeAzevedo: Of course. So the permanent bar is, it's like this bear trap in immigration law. Many people who come to the United States without authorization find themselves in a scenario where they are going through a process that's legal and they're entitled to, and they go in for this interview or they're having a first consultation with an attorney, and they find out that they must leave the country for a minimum of 10 years. And in some cases, it is indeed a lifetime.

What that looks like or why that happens is in many cases, we've seen families who have an immigrant who has entered the United States, left for some reason. A lot of times it's like a family member was sick or someone passed away, and then they returned back to the United States to continue their life here. That is called a multiple entry, and that is an automatic 10 year outside of the country, no way around it.

A lifetime bar is for people who, I mean, even brought here as children, somebody claimed some sort of citizenship right on their behalf. And it seems so egregious, but when you hear the actual stories of how this is applied, it would blow your mind. People that are six months old have this lifetime penalty that will never get in front of a judge to, you know, weigh the pieces of the case. It is just, it destroys families. It really destroys families. And there's no way around it.

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

Tracie: I know as an immigration lawyer, I see this impacting families day in and day out. And my job is to look at the legal side and see what can be done, often there's not. And then I don't deal with the aftermath. But how do you see this playing out in the families that you work with once they hear this news? What does that look like?

Ashley DeAzevedo: It's devastating. The majority of families in American Families United are subject to the permanent bar. They find us many times in a moment of crisis, a lot of times after finding out that their family has this permanent bar. And it's a moment where they're really having to hold the gravity of the situation and make plans. And how do you make plans for a future that you just don't know what it's going to be, right? You don't know if your spouse is going to be able to ever return to the United States legally. You don't know if your family is ever going to be together in the country that you know as home.

Many times families are forced out of the country to maintain their unity. And in a lot of cases, there are just impossible decisions being made. It's one of the scariest, painful moments for so many families. And it does propel them to kind of, most people think they're the only ones, right? And then they find AFU and they're like, wait a minute, there's a lot of us. There's actually 1.4 million US citizens inside of the country facing this right now. And we believe about 300,000 outside of the United States who have been denied or who have made the decision to self-deport or leave, or got trapped when they went outside for consular processing.

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

Ashley: Wow, that is incredible. Over a million people are facing this right now. That's just like the citizens. Does that include like the spouses, the children? Like the whole.

Ashley DeAzevedo: No. That is just the US citizen who has filed the petition for their spouse and found out that they are inadmissible is what it's called, the technical term.

Ashley: That is awful. I cannot imagine that because it definitely would impact more people than just that 1 million.

Ashley DeAzevedo: It's a spiderweb. We say it's a spiderweb. You don't realize the ramifications of what this does to each US citizen family member. Obviously children in the scenario are, I believe, the biggest victims. But when you look, you know, people's in-laws, you know, who's helping take care of an elderly family member. Again, it just it's a spiderweb of people that are impacted by this. We have, you know, sisters and brothers and grandparents and, you know, there's grandparents that are now not watching their children grandchildren grow up because of this.

There are people who are, you know, sole caregivers for a parent who are now having to face the choice of do I leave the country with my spouse or do I stay here and take care of my aging parent? Yeah, the stories are just really difficult.

Ashley: Without sharing names of any of your clients, could you share a story of what that might look like, a family that you know who has experienced this?

Ashley DeAzevedo: Oh, absolutely. There are so many right now, as you can imagine with what's going on in the country. People,

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

we've never seen the scale right now of what's happening, the people that are proactively making these decisions instead of living in the shadows here in the country, but actually making the tough decisions to either separate or leave the country all together. So, one that comes to mind is a newer member of ours who contacted us just hearing about us through a similar platform. And she is unbelievable. So she's an RN out of Florida and married her husband who has one unlawful entry in the country. So for most people who don't know, that should be waivable and should be able to progress through the system pretty quickly. It does require going outside of the country to process. So there is, you know, some wait times, but ultimately they should be able to overcome this barrier.

They have a few children of their own and they have adopted, I think, five family members of her sister's who are like drug users and just people who have, you know, had to give up their children. So her and her husband adopted these children. One of them had a congenital heart defect and ended up passing away. Her mother passed away, and she had a heart attack. And right after that, one of her children started having epileptic seizures and they discovered a, I think, a growth on his brain.

And all of this is transpiring and her rock, her husband, is targeted by ICE because he filled out paperwork to go through this legal process. And has no crimes against him, like not even as much as a parking ticket. And he was pulled over. Well, actually, she got pulled over and it, you know, they wanted to ask her for ID. It was like some really strange interaction and then they let her go. A little while later, his work van with his employees got pulled over and she had to go and pick up the van. And then he left the house and

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

immediately ICE was there to scoop him up. And this process went so quickly that they didn't even have time to get legal representation. He was already deported out of the country.

The saddest part is now, you know, now there are how many US citizen children who our government allowed to be adopted by this man, regardless of his status. He is now deported and this member is faced with the decisions, what do I do? Right? That is my only person in this world and he is now removed from the country. I'm taking care of these children by myself. You know, obviously dealing with her own health situation had a heart attack from how stressed and, you know, difficult the situation was.

She left. She went to Brazil with all of her children. And her church actually had fundraisers to help them buy a small home and a car. There was such an outpouring of support from her church and they were reaching out to legislators on her behalf. I think at one point, there were 8,000 calls into her member of Congress's office and the member actually called her and asked to have the calls stop, which is crazy. She left, she went to Brazil and they live in such a remote part of Brazil that she's unable to get the healthcare that she needs for herself and the medication that her child, the epileptic child needs. She also has a severely autistic child who does not have access to the therapies and things that he needs to thrive.

They were rationing bread. That's how bad it got. And she actually just made the decision right around Thanksgiving to come back to the United States so she could work, provide for her family, and go through this arduous process of trying to bring her husband back after a deportation, which gets so much trickier. And here are, you

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

know, five or six US citizen children in this family. Their entire lives have been flipped upside down. And for what? Who's benefiting from this man being ripped out of the country and not allowing to access the legal pathway that he should have a right to?

Tracie: That is so powerful. I encourage our listeners just to sit with that story and think about what would you do in that situation. And this is someone's reality. I mean, I'm sitting here with tears in my eyes listening to all of this. So thank you for sharing.

And I think, you know, a lot of listeners are probably hearing all of this and wondering like, what is this? I've never heard of it. How is this a thing? Doesn't marriage to a US citizen cure everything? That's one of the common misconceptions we get in immigration law. Why do you think this permanent bar is so invisible to the general public?

Ashley DeAzevedo: I think exactly what you said. I mean, there are movies, there are TV shows that portray filling out a piece of paper and voila, you're magically a US citizen because you're married one. And our members just find that is not the case. It is so much more complicated. And what we have to do is educate the public, educate our fellow citizens, and actually educate lawmakers because most of them don't even realize that this is an issue.

This came about during the 1996 immigration, I guess, legislation, big change under the Clinton administration. And we know from a lawmaker who was sitting in on that process, who participated that these bars were put in there as a bargaining chip. They were never supposed to stay in there. I think it was common knowledge on both sides that they would eventually take this out. It was like, you know, something to sweeten the deal to get some more

[**Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care**](#)

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

hardliners on and somehow they stuck in there. And there was no group at the time that could have understood what the ramifications on US citizens would have been advocating and saying, hold up, this is really scary and dangerous.

So here we are, 30 years later, almost yeah, 30 years later, and still screaming from the mountaintops. This problem exists, it needs to be fixed.

Tracie, I think, as an immigration attorney, you are probably well aware of the fact that on different visa pathways, so if you're applying for a process based on what you're entitled to, there are waivers that can overcome these bars. It's just not available on the spousal visa pathway, which is insane when you think about the fact that spouse visas are one of the only numerically unlimited categories, right? Like our government realizes how sacred the bond of marriage is in not capping that visa. But I like to picture it kind of like a road that's being paved with lots of potholes. That's what our immigration system is. And we're just paving these potholes and not ever smoothing out the whole road. There's no continuity.

So the fact that you could be on a visa pathway for someone who is a victim of a serious crime or of trafficking and automatically overcome these bars. But someone who has lived in the United States for 30 years, married to a US citizen, has children here, pays taxes, owns a home, is not able to access that same waiver. It just defies logic and that is the message we're trying to get out to not only members of Congress, but also to our fellow Americans to let them know US citizens are suffering because Washington can't

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

get their act together and the more people that know about this, I believe, you know, the action will happen sooner than later.

Ashley: I love that analogy of a road filled with potholes that we just fill and we never smooth it over. That really accurately describes our immigration system from what I've learned about it over the past several years. And it just seems like we have not reached a consensus over, can we pave the road? What do we use to pave the road? There's so many methods that have been, you know, suggested or voted on and we just can't seem to get anywhere with it. So I'm going to keep that analogy.

Ashley DeAzevedo: You know, Ashley, one of the things that again defies logic is every time we speak to people, regardless of their political background, anything, this is something that is pretty common sense and most people agree on. It's not that controversial. They hear US citizen spouses and they're like, yeah, isn't that the way the law already is? So the fact that we can't even get that moving forward is a really big indication of just how broken the system is. Anytime that anything's framed as immigration, it becomes this really controversial subject matter that people just want to fight over instead of realizing the human impact and understanding again, you know, the things that we're taught through our faith and, you know, in growing up and I'm Catholic, growing up in the Catholic church. Even just recently, I was at church and one of the homilies really spoke to this for me. We hear it every week, you know, all the time. Marriage is so sacred, right? How you treat other people is so important. But why can't we apply that to what's happening around us? It defies logic.

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

Ashley: It really does. And you work with American Families United and I think you focus specifically on US citizens and their families, right?

Ashley DeAzevedo: Yeah. Exactly.

Ashley: So, can you share what you're doing through your organization? I know you rely on your faith a lot in this matter as well, but what is your organization doing to address these immigration potholes, the permanent bars, and how are you trying to help with this?

Ashley DeAzevedo: Well, we are first and foremost trying to educate everyone about the issue because we do believe that knowledge is power. And when people hear about this, they are compelled to want to do something and participate and fix it. So we really first and foremost try to educate people on it. We empower our impacted members and their families to share their stories. Storytelling is so powerful. And we bring people to Washington DC to educate their legislators and let them know what needs to be done to solve these problems because people are suffering. You know, people really, like we were talking about the family earlier, I can spend hours going through stories of people that I deal with every single day, the people that reach out to me, the crisis that is happening in each one of these lives.

And, you know, it's easy for us to talk about it here in the comfort of our homes, behind a microphone. But when this is happening to you and your family is being ripped apart, it is something that most people can never even wrap their head around. It's something that maybe you would see in movies or read in history books, but to have the fear of your spouse going to the grocery

[**Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care**](#)

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

store or leaving to go to work or if they're driving in the car with your child, what does that mean if they're late, if they don't answer the phone. All of these things hold ramifications that most US citizens could never even possibly understand. And it's really hard to believe that our fellow US citizens are going through this.

So, yeah, again, just really educating the public, amplifying the issue, letting people know the term mixed-status family. That's something most people have never heard before. Mixed-status family means one person or multiple people in the family have legal status, whether they're a citizen, naturalized citizen or permanent resident, and someone in the family is not. And that creates just so many barriers and hurdles for everyday life.

Tracie: Absolutely. Thank you for sharing all of that and for the work that you do. I know you're active on social media and so I definitely encourage our listeners to follow.

And I think many of our listeners are wondering, going through this, this processing of this is really awful. It's overwhelming, but I'm just one person. What can I possibly do to combat this huge problem? What do you say to them? How can an ordinary listener, maybe someone not going through this process, how can they respond?

Ashley DeAzevedo: That is the most important thing that I want to get out today is that each individual person is so powerful. And when we all work together, that power just multiplies. So what you can do to help people if you feel compelled, first and foremost is keep us in your prayers. That is, yeah, the number one.

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

Number two is share this story. Tell one, two, three, four other people about it. Because again, the more that people know about this, I think the harder it is to deny it or turn a head.

And the third thing is get involved. We have a website. You can find us. It's americanfamiliesunited.org. We have an AFUaction.org website. And on that, there is a form that you could fill out. You put in your address and it creates a template email that will send something to your legislator, your specific legislator, letting them know that this issue is important to you, that you feel compelled to say something about it and that you want them to do something about it. Because the more that they are hearing from their constituents, the more they will pay attention. And we have done amazing work in socializing the issue and letting people know that it's happening in the past few years. But if we can just really lean into that and have everyone speaking with the same voice, it would be incredible. And I do believe it would help so many families.

Ashley: Ashley, I love what you say about educating people but also our legislators because our legislators are people too. They also don't know these issues and they could be just like the public and think, well, if you get married to a US citizen, obviously it's an easy path. So I think what you said about sharing these stories with your friends, your family, but also your legislators, that's really powerful and just continuing to open people's eyes to what's happening.

And I want to thank you also for putting real faces and stories to this issue. I've heard of these things, but, you know, it's one thing to talk about bars and inadmissibility, but it's another thing entirely

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

to see how it plays out in everyday life. So thank you for sharing these stories. And I know that our listeners also probably might know someone even going through this struggle, but they haven't shared it publicly, their friend hasn't shared it. So our listeners may not know that person is struggling with this. And I think you've pointed that out to us as well that we just don't know as much. And we're grateful for your work and for the courage of the families that you walk alongside. We're so grateful that you came to be with us today and to share these stories. And we're actually going to take what you've shared and in the rest of our conversation, talk about how we as Christians should respond in our hearts, in our churches, and also in our communities.

Ashley DeAzevedo: Thank you so much. And I do just want to say, you're absolutely right. There is no way that you don't know someone facing this issue. They just haven't shared. The one thing that my members share with me regularly is that it's like their little secret because they're afraid to be public about it. And we want to encourage more people to be open, to hear each other, to have respectful conversations and put yourself in someone else's shoes for a moment and just imagine what that daily life must be like. So thank you Ashley and Tracie for having me on today and for amplifying this issue for your listeners. We are incredibly grateful for your support.

Tracie: So, coming off that conversation with Ashley, I think it's so important to never forget the human cost of family separation. And so, we want to highlight a few stories about what this looks like today for other families. And so, for example, in just July 2025, a 25-year-old Guatemalan farm worker without any legal status, she was jailed in Ohio after being stopped for driving without a license.

[**Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care**](#)

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

And honestly, she was probably stopped for not stopping at a stop sign or something like that because how do you know when someone's driving that they don't have a license? But what should have been a minor infraction turned into months in immigration detention under strict enforcement. So local law enforcement contacted ICE and she was detained by ICE.

And so during this mother's detention, which lasted over 125 days, her three-year-old son, a US citizen, he was placed into foster care because no family member could safely take care of him due to their own immigration status concerns. And I will say we have seen ICE go after sponsors of children. So that's not out of the realm of possibility. But after legal action and community support, this young mother, she eventually was released and regained custody, but only after ongoing welfare supervision. And this separation was just over four months, and that's horrible, but in the eyes of immigration, it feels like that's short. But it highlights how even brief, seemingly minor offenses can trigger severe family disruption under the current enforcement regime.

Ashley: And that reminds me of another story that we've heard about in the news recently. As we record this in December 2025, there was a story recently about a Chinese father and his six-year-old son who were seeking asylum in the United States, and they reported for their ICE check-in. That means, you know, they're coming to the office and saying, yes, we're still here, yes, we're still doing things the way that you've told us to. And, you know, you show up to that appointment in good faith that this is what you're just doing to follow the law. But they showed up to their ICE check-in New York and they were detained. And the six-year-old son was separated from his father.

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

And the father can now be located in ICE's online detainee locator, but the boy is not located in that system. The father does not know where his son is. He was finally, I think through a lot of public pressure, able to speak to his son on the phone. But DHS, the Department of Homeland Security, will not confirm where the son is being held if he's in a foster home, even if he's in a detention center. And the call with his son was brief, so the father really doesn't know anything about his son and his son's safety, his well-being, if anyone around him even speaks Chinese and if the boy can communicate. So there's a lot of worries there. And the Department of Homeland Security does acknowledge that the boy is in their care, but they said, ICE does not separate families. And as I hear that statement, what else can we call this but a family separation? And it breaks my heart to hear stories like this where we knowingly and our government knowingly does separate families from each other.

And there's also stories of couples who have been forced apart. Something that we're aware of in our We Choose Welcome and Women of Welcome communities is an Iranian Christian couple that has been here for years waiting on their asylum cases to be decided. Again, doing things the legal way. And they're a part of an Iranian Christian church. And they've been legally working and living here, but a few months ago, they were both detained and have been held in detention since then. Their pastor has advocated for them, groups like World Relief have advocated for them and asked, you know, their upstanding members of the community, they're part of this church, why do they need to be detained like criminals when the only thing they've done is come here on asylum.

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

And they've, you know, since been in asylum proceedings to have their cases approved. And the strange thing is that this husband and wife couple, one of them had their case for asylum approved, and the other one had their case for asylum denied. Now, remember, they're both from Iran, they're both Christians, where if they returned, they would be executed for their Christian belief because it's a severe crime in Muslim countries like that to convert from Muslim, from Islam, to Christianity. And so there's no way they could be returned. And yet, their cases were decided in different jurisdictions by different judges, and the judges came to different decisions on their cases.

So this couple has been separated for months now in detention, and it now looks like they will be separated across continents where one is in safety in the United States and one is possibly deported back to a country where they would face execution and if not that at least severe persecution.

Tracie: It's just awful. We talk a lot in the immigration law context about asylum roulette, about how your fate really depends on which jurisdiction you have, which judge you have. And as you can see, you can have the same set of facts and have adjudicators look at them very, very differently. And so, certainly we'll be praying for that couple.

I have a story about a client who applied for the waiver, what we talked about a little bit earlier, and his waiver was granted. And he thought he was going to return to Mexico and come back pretty quickly.

But life had other plans. His mom got sick and he hadn't seen her in decades and so he's like, I'm not going to wait for my interview, I

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

want to go see her now. And so he left, which was fine, and he was going to wait for his interview um in Mexico. But then COVID hit and the world shut down. He finally had an interview for his immigrant visa to return to the United States and that interview was held in 2021. It was denied though because he hadn't had the COVID vaccine and at that time it was a requirement and it was really hard in Mexico to get that vaccine. So he was denied. And that denial then that invalidated the approved waiver that we had worked so hard on all those years ago. And that meant we had to start from scratch.

We filed a new waiver in 2022, but it still remains pending today, all this time later, over three years. And the family has already shown extreme hardship once, but they're forced to wait in this long line again. And meanwhile, the US citizen spouse, the wife, she remains in the US. She has a cancer diagnosis. She's been faced with eviction. She works to the point of exhaustion because who else will support her family and her husband makes it back in Mexico because he's not able to work or he's getting paid less than a minimum wage. She has to support everyone. And this case especially reminds me that there's no justice in the system the way that it is today.

Ashley: Tracie, that's another really heartbreak story. I hope that our listeners as they're hearing these stories, will take time if you need to, hit pause. Take a moment to sit with these stories and realize the emotions that you're feeling and name them, and then take time to pray. Take time to pray for these families, for the heartbreak that they're going through, for the system like Ashley said is broken, like a road with too many potholes that we haven't actually fixed in years. And take time to pray for them, but also for

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

yourself that your heart would continue to be soft and open to stories like this. Your heart would continue to break and not become numb. And I believe out of that grief that we feel, we can then step into new places where we speak up, where we become the change that maybe we'll finally get that road paved.

Another thing that we've seen with family separation is where families are torn between safety and legality. Some families are what we call mixed status. And Ashley mentioned that when we spoke with her earlier, mixed status is where some members have a different legal status from others. For example, a family where the parents are undocumented, but the children are US citizens or maybe even DACA recipients. For the children, life in the US is all they've ever known. This is home. And despite years or decades of being here, they're still trying to find a way to legally adjust their status and their parents are still undocumented.

So they face a really impossible choice. The parents do as they think about this. If they're undocumented and their children are documented, their children are citizens. They face the choice of, do I take my children from their home here in the United States and place them in potentially dangerous situations back in my country, where they won't have the opportunities they would have here, where we might face gang violence. I would have to worry about them walking to school. Are they going to get kidnapped by the local gang? Or is there other things that are happening where we just won't have the opportunities for them to be able to have healthcare and to be safe.

So those are things that families consider, and it's often that they don't want to be here, we say undocumented, they don't want to

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

be here, they want to do what they can to be right with the law. But it's a really hard choice. Do I choose the legality over my family and my children's safety? Or do I continue to live and work here and just try to adjust my status and hoping and praying it will work out?

Tracie: And I just want to attach to that. We talked about the waiver process a little earlier. If you are a parent in the United States and you entered unlawfully, if you have US citizen kids but no US citizen spouse or parent, all you have for your family members are your children. You don't qualify for the waiver. So the moment you leave the US to try and get your status fixed, it's an automatic 10-year bar. I don't know why Congress wrote the laws that way, but simply having a US citizen child is not a fast track to get back to the United States.

So as we start to wrap up today's conversation, we want to pause and reflect on what our Christian values invite us to see in the issue of immigration and family unity. At the heart of the gospel is compassion, a compassion that moves us toward those who are hurting, displaced, or afraid. When we talk about immigrant families, we're not dealing with abstractions or statistics. As you've heard, we're talking about mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, each one carrying stories of hope, sacrifice, and survival. Our faith calls us to see these stories with tenderness rather than suspicion.

Christian teaching also reminds us to honor the dignity of every person because every human being is made in the image of God. That truth doesn't stop at our borders. It stretches across cultures, languages, and nations. When we look at immigrant families

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

through that lens, it becomes impossible to ignore the deep moral weight of forced separation, the wounds it creates, the trauma it inflicts, and the way it violates the very design of family that scripture upholds as sacred.

Ashley: And ultimately, caring about keeping families together isn't a political stance. It's a profoundly Christian one. From the earliest pages of scripture to the teachings of Jesus, we see God's heart for family unity, protection of the vulnerable, and restoration wherever brokenness threatens to divide. In the beginning, and going all the way back to Genesis 2:24, God's design is that families are formed in unity. God calls families to cleave to one another and become one. So how can we justify this forced separation?

And in the gospel in Matthew 2, it tells us how Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fled to Egypt because if they remained in Bethlehem, they would have faced separation or death. Our own government has placed an emphasis on the sanctity of the American family.

Shouldn't the same sacredness apply to families of all backgrounds? So as followers of Christ, we're invited not to just understand the issue, but to respond. To let compassion guide us, to defend the dignity of families, to recognize the moral cost of separation, and to stand for policies and practices that reflect the heart of a God who brings people together, not tears them apart.

Tracie: Before we close, we also want to leave you with a simple tool for real life conversations. Sometimes someone will say, well, if they did it legally, their family wouldn't be separated. And here's a gentle, grounded way to respond to that. I hear what you're saying. A lot of us assume that there's a simple legal pathway, but for many families, the law actually requires long separations,

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

sometimes 10 years or more, before they can even apply to fix their status. Many parents are forced into an impossible choice, leaving behind spouses and children, maybe for a decade, or do they stay together and remain living in the shadows? Once you understand that reality, it becomes clear that family separation isn't about people refusing to follow the law. It's about a system that makes family unity almost impossible. This kind of response stays calm and it honors a person you're speaking with, but it opens the door to empathy rather than to argument.

Ashley: That's right. And along with that conversation tip, we also want to provide a small action step that you can take. Something that you can focus on this week as you think about this episode. One is that you can pray intentionally for families who are separated right now. Parents and spouses waiting, children unsure of when they'll see their loved ones again. You can pray for the families that you've heard about in this episode even or a news story that's on the news right now. Prayer shapes our hearts and aligns our compassion with God's, and it opens our hearts to continue to see the way that God is working in the world around us and the way that God cares for others around us as well. Another thing you can do is take three minutes to learn one new thing about the 10-year bar, one of the core reasons families are separated. Understanding it equips you to speak truthfully and advocate wisely. And we really can't recommend Ashley's organization American Families United enough.

Tracie: If this episode resonated with you, we encourage you to share it with someone who may be struggling to reconcile their faith with their views on immigration. Thank you for listening to

Ep #7: Family Separation: What Most Americans Don't Know About Immigration Enforcement

Hope in Action, navigating immigration with faith and care. We'll see you next time.