

The Difficult Decision to Emigrate, Leave Family Behind

How do you feel when your parents migrate to the U.S. and leave you behind?

This wasn't an easy question for students to answer in El Salvador.

Seven of us, all Baptists, visited an inner-city high school, Instituto Isaac Newton, located in the heart of San Salvador.

We were seeking to better understand this country and how churches and individuals in the U.S. can come alongside and help with the challenges faced by families there and to learn more about immigrants in our own country in the process.

The challenges of the neighborhood were apparent. We saw young men being cuffed and interrogated by the police. We walked through busy streets lined with vendors and learned that many were parents of students at the school.

It was a section of the city rarely seen by tourists.

Many students asked to meet with us, to tell their stories and ask questions about the United States.

Approximately 25 percent of the students said they had a parent living in the U.S.; more than 75 percent had a close friend or family member in the U.S. Only a few had not been directly touched by emigration.

Public education is free through secondary (ninth grade). Isaac Newton and other similar schools seek to provide a high-quality private school education for upper-level students at minimal cost (less than \$40 per month).

These students are studying for careers in healthcare, tourism, business and so

on, largely thanks to assistance from parents and other relatives in the U.S. who send money back.

Ana (name changed), a petite girl standing in the back of the packed classroom, raised her hand and bravely answered our question: “It’s hard, really hard” when you don’t have both parents with you. “My dad is in the U.S., and I miss him so much. But I know he’s away because he loves us and we need the money he makes there.”

There’s no work for him here, Ana said, and she wouldn’t be in school if her dad wasn’t sending money back home to support the family.

She was very appreciative of the sacrifice he had chosen to make for her and for her family.

While the kids often feel hurt, abandoned or lonely when their parent or parents leave them behind, they have other family around to help; they know that the absent parent has made a hard decision that is for the good of the family.

Immigrant parents say that one of the hardest issues for them is the decision to leave a child behind.

“How could I bring my son with me, to a place where I had no job, no place to live?” said Maria (name changed), a mom from Honduras. “I think it would have been too hard. He was better off with my mom until I could get established.”

After a few years, she sent for her son, Jorge (name changed), who was 10, to join her.

Maria rents a room and works part-time at McDonalds to support her family. Jorge is able to petition for asylum.

But even the best intentions can cause pain for the immigrant parent.

Martin (name changed) talks about his children with regret for what he’s lost.

“My son stayed in Mexico, on the ranch with my parents,” he said. “He’s a great kid - almost a man.” He can count on one hand the number of times he’s seen his daughter.

Martin’s wife eventually divorced him and remarried. While he thought of bringing his children to the U.S., he decided they were better off in Mexico.

“It seems to have worked out well for everyone but me,” said Martin, who is an undocumented roofer. “I just work and send money so they can all live well.”

The decision to bring children later on to join parents doesn’t always work out well either.

Cecilia (name changed) was almost 16 when she joined her mom, stepdad and four younger siblings in the U.S.

Coming from a rural part of El Salvador where she had lived with her grandparents, she misses the freedom of the country.

“Here, I can’t go outside; there’s no place to go, and I don’t feel safe,” Cecilia explained. She doesn’t speak English and doesn’t relate well to her siblings. “I don’t even like them; they’re so spoiled and self-centered.”

While Cecilia worked the land and helped grow beans, corn and vegetables until coming to the U.S., that concept is totally foreign to her U.S.-born siblings.

She feels they’re unappreciative of her parents’ hard work to provide a good home for them and wants to go back home.

Cecilia’s mom agrees that perhaps it was a mistake to bring her to the U.S. “But I wanted to make things right, to have us live as a family,” she said. “I always felt guilty for leaving her behind.”

The decision to emigrate is a highly individual decision based on a number of factors, including violence, safety and security, poverty, economic and

<https://ethicsdaily.com/the-difficult-decision-to-emigrate-leave-family-behind-cms-23990/> March 27, 2017 Sue Smith

educational opportunities, and the desire to provide the best for one's children.

It is never made lightly, and it isn't without sacrifice for both parents and children. It changes the family dynamics forever.

[Sue Smith](#) and her husband, Greg, are Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field personnel who work with LUCHA Ministries in Fredericksburg, Virginia. A [longer version](#) of this article first appeared on LUCHA's [blog](#), LUCHA Stories, and is used with permission.