Study Finds Rampant Migrant Abuse, Family Separation During Deportations at the U.S.-Mexico Border

More than one in three migrants experienced abuse or mistreatment at the hands of U.S. immigration authorities

(Washington, D.C., September 15, 2015) — As Pope Francis stated in his message for the 2014 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, “Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity.” A new study released today finds, however, that U.S. Customs and Border Protection is not fulfilling its obligation to protect the civil and human rights of migrants apprehended, detained and deported back to Mexico.

“Our Values on the Line: Migrant Abuse and Family Separation at the Border” (http://jesuits.org/valuesontheline) found that more than one-third of deported migrants experienced some type of abuse or mistreatment at the hands of U.S. immigration authorities. The range of abuses included theft, physical abuse, verbal abuse and inhumane detention conditions.

Commissioned by the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States and the Kino Border Initiative (KBI), a bi-national organization in Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, which works to promote humane U.S.-Mexico border and immigration policies, the report details the results of an in-depth survey of 358 Mexican migrants deported from the United States to the border city of Nogales, Mexico. The survey was conducted between July 2014 and March 2015, and the chief findings were corroborated by a short-form survey of 7,507 migrants. Both surveys were conducted in Nogales, Mexico, at the Kino Border Initiative.

The report offers data-driven analysis of some of the hardships regularly faced by migrants and their families and documents the negative humanitarian consequences of the increased focus on punitive border enforcement and criminal prosecutions of people for unauthorized entry at the Southwest border. “The church recognizes the urgency of this issue and the suffering that men, women and children go through because they’re forced to leave their places of origin, either because of economic need, violence
or family separation,” said Jesuit Father Sean Carroll, executive director of the KBI. “These experiences really harm and undermine their God-given human dignity, and so the church recognizes the need to be present to these people and to change the structures that cause their deep suffering and pain. Our study found that Border Patrol is increasingly using their discretionary powers through a so-called ‘Consequence Delivery System’ in a way intended to cause hardship and suffering, rather than positively using their discretion to preserve family unity and to ensure humane treatment of apprehended migrants.”

Pope Francis has decried these conditions that migrants face, and he recognized the KBI’s work in a letter to Fr. Carroll in 2014 (https://www.kinoborderinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/PopesLetter.English.pdf).

In addition to abuse, the study showed that family members apprehended together by the Border Patrol were systematically separated from each other and were deported to different ports of entry or were deported days, weeks or months apart. Two out of three migrants surveyed who crossed into the U.S. with immediate family members were separated from at least one of those family members by the Border Patrol during the process of detention and deportation.

The report also found that the practice of nighttime deportation is common: 28 percent of migrants surveyed were deported at night, and one of every seven women (15.8 percent) was placed in this vulnerable position.

Although the study found that abuse and mistreatment of migrants by Border Patrol agents is a common occurrence, migrants alleging abuse were unlikely to file a formal complaint. Less than one out of every 12 deported migrants who reported some type of abuse filed a complaint with U.S. immigration authorities.

The analysis points to several key areas for reform to help limit abuse by Border Patrol Agents, including stronger independent and internal oversight mechanisms to tackle misconduct and abuse at Customs and Border Protection (CBP); an accessible and accountable complaint process; an overhaul of CBP agent and officer training; equipping CBP agents with body-worn cameras; and improving CBP short-term detention conditions.

Additionally, the study recommends that deportations to Mexican border towns occur only during daylight hours and that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security put in place a process to identify familial relationships and preserve family unity upon deportation.

If implemented, these reforms would begin to address the most pressing problems faced by migrants and their families and help CBP to do its job more humanely, more efficiently and with greater accountability.

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About the Society of Jesus in Canada and the United States

Founded in 1540 by Saint Ignatius Loyola, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) is the largest order of priests and brothers in the Roman Catholic Church. Jesuit priests and brothers are involved in educational, pastoral and spiritual ministries around the world, practicing a faith that promotes justice. In Canada and the
United States, there are 30 Jesuit colleges and 80 pre-secondary and secondary schools with a shared goal of developing competent, compassionate and committed leaders in the service of the Church and society. Jesuits minister in parishes and at retreat houses and serve as chaplains at prisons, hospitals, nursing homes and in the military. In Canada and the U.S., the Jesuits are represented by the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States, headquartered in Washington, D.C. For more information on the Society of Jesus, visit www.jesuits.org.

About the Kino Border Initiative

The Kino Border Initiative (KBI) is a bi-national organization located in Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, which works to promote U.S.-Mexico border and immigration policies that affirm the dignity of the human person and a spirit of bi-national solidarity. The organization promotes humane U.S.-Mexico border and immigration policies through direct humanitarian assistance and accompaniment with migrants; social and pastoral education with communities on both sides of the border; and participation in collaborative networks that engage in research and advocacy to transform local, regional and national immigration policies. For more information, visit www.kinoborderinitiative.org