

Policy Podcast

Transcripts

Migration Policy and Hunger

Participants:

Ryan Cumming, program director for hunger education, ELCA World Hunger

Giovana Oaxaca, program director for migration policy, ELCA

R: Greetings from ELCA World Hunger, and welcome to another video blog on policy. These short videos are meant to highlight current relevant federal policy issues that impact hunger and poverty, especially in the United States. At the root, we know that hunger is an issue of policy and political will.

This is true of every aspect of hunger and food security, but today, we will be talking about one critical area of policy that intersects with hunger, poverty and justice, and that is immigration policy. The latest data we have on hunger and poverty in the US confirms what we had guessed. Hunger is on the rise, poverty is on the rise, and yet neither is quite as high nationally as we thought they would be, due largely to the unprecedented federal legislation that expanded this country's safety net. While that is true nationally, though, that's not the case for every community and every family here in the US or around the world, and that makes immigration a key conversation we need to be having.

Now, as we will hear in this conversation, when we refer to immigration policy, we're not just talking about who is able to enter the United States, but also about who has access to public benefits, what it means to be a "non-citizen" and how policy changes can impact individuals and communities. We will also hear about how the COVID-19 pandemic specifically impacted immigration in the United States. And along the way, we will confront some of the prevailing myths about immigrants and migration.

To help us do that, I am grateful to welcome Giovana Oaxaca, the program director for migration policy for the ELCA.

Giovana, welcome and thanks for joining me.

G: Thanks for having me Ryan. As you said, this is a fitting time to examine how trends in wellbeing track with global migration patterns, especially leading into the UN International Migrant Day, December 18. As you said, national hunger and poverty trends have changed quite dramatically over the course of the pandemic with those who are marginalized in our society like immigrants and refugees faring worse than others. But if you broaden that picture, the consequences of the pandemic reveal themselves to be even more severe, impacting global migration in quite telling ways. I'm glad to shine a light on those realities today and to help illuminate all the ways migration should be seen as a response to a complex array of factors, such as a lack of necessities like food. When compounded by a health crisis like a global pandemic, it's not so hard to imagine why a person or family might make the decision to leave their home and leave everything they know behind.

R: So, I know we want to talk about some specific policies and priorities now, but I'm hoping we can back up just a bit to talk about immigration into the US more broadly. One of the more common ways to talk about migration is the relationship between pushes and pulls – the circumstances or events that push us to leave our home countries and the pulls that draw us to seek opportunities in other countries. The push and the pull. What are you seeing now, in terms of migration to the US? What are

the pushes and pulls? What drives someone to leave the familiarity of their home to seek a new life in the US?

G: I appreciate that set up Ryan because it gives me the opportunity to talk about a surprising fact:

Yes, today's migration movements are the result of a complex and interrelated push and pull of social, economic, political, and environmental factors—no single reason stands alone. But many will be surprised to know that most migration occurs within country—as people move from one side of the country to another, perhaps for family and other opportunities. Think of the last time you moved across the country because you were offered a job? This stands in contrast with people who were forcibly displaced and have not crossed an international border. People who have not found a durable solution after a natural disaster are an example. According to the UN Refugee Agency, the number of internally displaced people stood at 48 million at the end of 2020.

There has also been a steady growth in international migrants across most regions of the world. Most of the world's 281 million international migrants—or 3.6% of the global population—migrate for reasons having to do with work, family, and study. The world's biggest economies like the U.S., Germany, and Saudi Arabia are top destinations. Most migrants come from regions and nations well connected to trade and opportunities for economic growth. But, at the same time with the pandemic, there was a reduction in that growth. The UN International Organization on Migration (IOM) reports that number of international migrants grew 27 percent slower than expected because of mobility restrictions, stranding hundreds of thousands. This will no doubt have long lasting consequences on labor since there are fewer people filling jobs where there is demand.

Migration is also a symptom of deeper social, economic, political, and environmental problems. Children and families flee for reasons related to violence and human insecurity, economic hardship, and environmental disasters caused by climate change. But, risk and instability, not generalized lack of opportunity, give rise to sudden spikes in migration. Understanding and addressing the principal reasons people migrate entails a much deeper and complex analysis than people realize. There are also structural factors for these conditions rooted in systems of oppression such as inequality and economic exploitation, gender discrimination and racism which contribute to the deeper social ills that might influence someone's choice to migrate.

Take many central American migrants for example. According to the UN World Food Programme Hunger and food insecurity levels in the region have been rising steadily since 2014 but registered a 30% increase in 2020. A poll released in November 2021, found that poverty, food insecurity, climate shocks, and violence pushed the number of people considering migration from 8% in 2019 to 43% in 2021. An interlocking set of political, economic, and social challenges gave rise to pervasive insecurity and desperation —it was not as some would believe, just because of the pull factor of a new president in office in the United States.

Let me further illustrate with the story of Muhammad. *Muhammad is an asylum-seeker from East Africa who arrived in Tijuana, Mexico with his family in March 2020 and was granted entry into the U.S. He described what it is like to be a Black asylum-seeker in a foreign city where violent and extortionist targeting of migrants is entrenched. "Apart from the racism of the society, the police extortion was also a very huge challenge to us," he said, adding that he was extorted by police on three separate occasions. Earlier this year, Muhammed began volunteering at [a camp for asylum-seekers](#) hoping for an opportunity to make their case in the U.S. "These people are not criminals," he said. "They are migrants. They are*

human beings who are sleeping on the streets under the sun and rain, just to fulfill their dream of seeking asylum in the United States of America.

The U.S. stands a beacon of hope and opportunity for people—not because our immigration policies are especially friendly, but because it's a very human impulse to seek stability and security wherever one can find it, at whatever the cost. East Africa is just one region but especially the West and Central regions of Africa have seen some of the fastest growth in displaced people because of deepening humanitarian crises, compounded by environmental disasters and violent conflict. Muhammad travelled thousands of miles to find stability and security here. If we have more regular pathways to migrate for safety, like a stronger refugee program, we can avoid some of the risks Muhammad doubtlessly experienced. There is also a strong argument to be made that addressing the root causes, especially in Central America, which has seen most of the migration to the U.S. over the past few decades can help mitigate irregular migration flows and improve how migration is managed by governments.

R: From what you are saying, there are lots of different ways that people enter the United States. Earlier, I used the term “non-citizen.” Sometimes, it seems like we have a simplified view of what it means to be a resident of the United States, and all too often, that simplified picture seems to suggest that there’s only three categories of resident – undocumented, legal resident, and citizen. What do you think we miss in that simplified picture of what it means to be an immigrant or a resident?

G: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with Dr. King in Selma was known to say the phrase, "words create worlds." His daughter Susannah Herschel adds that ““Words, he often wrote, are themselves sacred, God’s tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness — or evil — into the world.” It is the faithful call of people of faith to lovingly seek to frame issues of oppression in a way that puts the dignity and humanity of marginalized communities at the center. The terms we use to refer to others really matter. There are dizzying number of definitions for immigrants, all informed by things like legal context, geography, and much more. Even if the legal terms remain static, lets agree that the words we use to describe each other should embrace the dignity and humanity of those named.

R: Coming as utterly no surprise, the US Census Bureau found that income and earnings in the US dropped last year. But the drop was much more significant for noncitizens. When it comes to income, they were harder hit during the pandemic. Why do you think this was the case? How did noncitizens’ experience of the pandemic differ from that of citizens in the US?

G: First, I want to sympathize with everyone who has struggled during this pandemic or lost a loved one (800,000). It's been an extremely challenging couple of months. People lost jobs in nearly every sector of the U.S. economy. Around 18 million people were temporarily unemployed at the height of the recession, between February-April 2020. Relatively speaking, more foreign-born people were unemployed in November 2020 than among the citizen population. Comparatively, foreign born women were unemployed in higher numbers than native-born women by more than 30%. You would think, that with the unemployment rate back down to 4.2 percent, these gains would be spread out—but no. Slightly more noncitizen women continue to be unemployed than citizen women. As a whole, the pandemic has had a disparate effect on women's employment, which effects their wages, opportunities, and empowerment in society. It's harder to know these statistics for undocumented noncitizens who are more likely to be employed in construction and the informal economy, in low-wage jobs like childcare and housekeeping.

These jobs might be considered essential in our society, but unfortunately, undocumented immigrants did not have equitable access to help during the pandemic from the government. First, undocumented

immigrants already have very limited access to healthcare, unless they pay out of pocket or receive care through community health centers. And second, many undocumented immigrants may fear seeking care out of fear of deportation. One study from American University finds that undocumented immigrants living in states or cities that have more anti-immigrant policies are less likely to access health services. This is coupled with fear of negative consequences when seeking care for their families. This might be related to a change to the public charge rule promulgated by the Trump Administration in 2019. Federal immigration officials use the public charge test for individuals seeking immigrant visas and for individuals seeking lawful permanent resident (LPR) (“green card” holder) status. The [Kaiser Family Foundation reported](#) that one in five adults from low-income immigrant families expressed fear of enrolling in public benefit programs because it could put at risk their chances of getting a green card. The public charge went through a rigmarole of different lawsuits by different states and nonprofit organizations, before it briefly went into effect—then, because of the pandemic it was halted. The Biden administration issued an early memo essentially agreeing not to continue court challenges pursued by the Trump Administration, which brought to the 2019 public charge rule to an end. Bottom line: the Department of Homeland Security public charge reverts to a 1999 policy guidance and the new guidance is not in effect.

I find this all really confusing, personally, so imagine a family that does not have access to this information. It can differ between states, but generally, at the federal level undocumented individuals are excluded from most access to essential social safety net programs. Navigating what they can’t and can’t access is hard enough—add to that the complexity of an opaque policy like public charge having a freezing effect.

R: So, when we hear that common mantra about how immigrants are coming to the US and collecting all these lucrative benefits, that’s not really the case, then?

G: No, generally speaking, no, that does not reflect reality. But let’s break it down into two groups because for most federal assistance you need to have an eligible immigration status. So, there’s those with immigration status and those without. Someone who has just arrived at the southern border and requests asylum is not generally eligible for federal benefits until they receive asylum, which involves extensive preparation, sometimes immigration court, and reliving trauma for months if not years. Immigrants in the U.S. who have been victims of crimes or witness crimes and collaborate with the investigation, too, may be eligible for a kind of special visa, opening up access to limited benefits. The Biden Administration also lately issued a guidance that agencies should work to grant immigration status to undocumented immigrants who were victims of workplace exploitation.

Humanitarian categories of immigration status are generally eligible for some kinds of federal assistance, under some conditions and stipulations which vary by status, and by state. This also includes refugees. Refugees are also eligible for some benefits and in a way, they have the most protected access to public and private benefits because of the longevity of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), which faith-based organizations and the American public have long-infused with support. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services is one of the nation’s faith-based non-profit organizations that help coordinate their resettlement and integration between the federal government and local communities.

For undocumented noncitizens, or those without status, at the federal level they are mostly excluded from most access to essential social safety net programs but there are variances by state. Citizen children of undocumented immigrants oftentimes fare negative consequences in this regard because

their parents are excluded from benefits that help the whole family.

I think what you will find is that most undocumented people want to be able to adjust their status, which enables to have access to things like affordable healthcare, food assistance, and more—but for a lot of people, that is simply out of reach. Maybe because of a lack of information on how to, but also because there are statutory barriers preventing undocumented immigrants from adjusting their status by applying for lawful permanent residency, and eventually naturalizing to become citizens.

So, In fact, in the United States, undocumented immigrants are taxpayers and collectively contribute an estimated \$11.74 billion in state and local taxes. They pay a higher share of their income in state and local taxes than the richest 1-percent of Americans, who contribute only 5.4 percent compared to their 8 percent, according to a 2017 Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy study. Undocumented immigrants also tend to work in low-wage jobs, which means a share of every dollar made contributes to federal means-tested federal programs for low-income Americans that they are excluded from.

R: What policy changes are we seeing now that might help to address these different levels of access to public benefits?

G: At the administrative level, I want to remind that the public charge test of inadmissibility reverts back to an earlier version. Yet, a Protecting Immigrant Families (PIF) poll found that 3/4 of immigrant families are unaware that the Trump public charge rule has been rescinded. The kind of oversimplistic thinking that led to the promulgation of a harsher public charge rule in 2019 is still having adverse effects on families during arguably, the worst time to be fearful of seeking care. In 2016, there were 10.4 million citizen children with at least one noncitizen parent. One Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) study estimated that disenrollment rate from Medicaid/CHIP could be between 15% to 35% as parents declined coverage for their citizen children on account of the potential negative consequences on their ability to adjust their status. I think the public charge rule is one of the most insidious policies to date and I've very glad it is no longer in effect.

Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic made us realize how important it was to take care of our neighbor. The later recovery packages recognized this and expanded access to pandemic economic recovery checks to mixed status families, who were previously excluded because just one family member is an undocumented noncitizen. Some of this tax justice reflects on our ability to help families in need and work towards the common good.

In November, the House of Representatives passed the Build Back Better Act (H.R. 5376), legislation that makes progress on multiple advocacy priorities including transformational investments in anti-poverty programs, advancements in racial equity, measures to address the climate crisis, and temporary protections for immigrant neighbors. While many of the details of the bill are still being negotiated in the Senate, members have expressed the desire to pass this bill before they recess for the holidays. That remains to be seen.

A legalization program, or even temporary protections for the nations undocumented immigrants would make a major difference in the lives of millions. But, in solidarity with undocumented immigrants, we also recognize the need for permanent and equitable solutions. We were proud to send a letter from 20+ Bishops of the ELCA to Congress sharing this desire for permanent protections and pathway to citizenship, that among the other priorities, will lead to a transformational recovery for our country. Flexible and humane ways to adjust status are a way to alleviate hunger and fight poverty.

R: Walking with people who are forced to flee their countries is part of the history of the church. Indeed, we can look back to biblical history of the people of God as refugees fleeing Egypt in the exodus or the story of Mary and Joseph fleeing the violence of Herod with the baby Jesus as, essentially, asylum seekers back in Egypt. In modern times, we can look at the role of immigrants in making the Lutheran church what it is today, or to the Lutheran church's support for refugees fleeing Europe in World War II. This is part of our history through and through. How has the church been involved in working with immigrants today? How is this work finding expression in the 21st century?

G: Accompaniment is defined by the ELCA as walking together in a solidarity that practices mutuality and interdependence in mission. In a video shared in late August, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton invoked some of these values when she shared these words for the people of Afghanistan following the withdrawal from Kabul after the US' 20-year presence in Afghanistan: "We stand in solidarity with all those living in fear," and "our Afghan neighbors will, "need support for months, not just for days." She finishes by saying that we should work towards "the long welcome for these families." This message is indicative of where the ELCA is today, as a current and relevant partner in mission responding to the global forced migration crisis. It's a message imbued with the Lutheran tradition of acting as God's instruments in the world in the pursuit of earthly peace and the common good. The ELCA' is a church that believes God is calling us into the 21st century.

A hard look around us reveals a brokenness in our world. Destabilizing conflict, roaring structural and systemic inequality and racism, an encroaching climate crisis, endemic poverty, and corruption—it's all around us. The core conviction of the ELCA social message on immigration reflects that "hospitality for the uprooted is a way to live out the biblical call to love the neighbor in response to God's love in Jesus Christ. That is how I find the this work expressed today.

R: Now, your team works in advocacy on these issues, and when people hear the word "advocacy," I think we picture people visiting with lawmakers and walking up the steps of capitol buildings and such for meetings and hearings. But there is another kind of advocacy, what we might have once called "water cooler advocacy," the kind of advocacy that happens in conversations with coworkers, neighbors and family members. How important is correcting myths about immigrants and immigration through this kind of advocacy?

G: [mention AMMPARO here] The word "amparo" in Spanish means the protection of a living creature from suffering or damage. The biblical call to welcome the sojourner and love our neighbor lay at the heart of the ELCA's cross-cutting response to human mobility, AMMPARO which stands for Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation, and Opportunities. AMMPARO is a holistic, whole church commitment by the ELCA, as a church in the world, to accompany migrant children and families. The AMMPARO strategy was approved by the church wide assembly in 2016, following consultation and discernment to support migrant children fleeing a forced migration crisis in Central America. Today, in the Americas we work across congregations and synods, with secular and religious partners, and local migrant community organizations in the region to support youth, women, and families and to address the root causes of migration. The U.S. AMMPARO network includes hundreds of welcoming and sanctuary congregations, and sanctuary synods and immigration taskforces through the synods. These wide web of relationships gives us an advantage in coordination that helps articulate the AMMPARO strategy as a whole church body with all of its companions and partners so that we all benefit from shared learnings, experiences, and work. We translate the activities of

AMMPARO into four principles which are accompaniment, advocacy, awareness-building, and articulation. What you described in a lot like the work of awareness-building, which means raising awareness about the plight of migrants, whether through educational experiences, intentional conversations, or immersion experiences with migrant communities.

It's through awareness-building that those myths of about the character of immigrants begin to fall away. Most people who immerse themselves in learning about migrants come away with a deeper understanding of the realities for human journey. One of my favorite reflections about how to be active civic participants asks: how do we discern paths of justice? One place to start in scripture. Read I Kings 17:8-16 and II Kings 4:8-10 These stories of hospitality express a core value of God's people. Reflect on stories of hospitality, both given and received. Where have you or your ancestors received hospitality?

R: How can people become more involved or aware of the work the ELCA is doing to address issues related to immigration?

G: I invite people to

- Connect to AMMPARO as a welcoming congregation and engage with migrant community organizations
- Build awareness of issues facing migrants through educational events
- Plan an immersion either internationally to learn about root causes of migration or a border immersion experience
- Join or develop a Guardian Angel Program and be the physical presence of the court in immigration court
- Advocate for protections for migrants through ELCA Advocacy and AMMPARO
- Volunteer at migrant shelters
- Pray for justice for migrant children and families
- Give to support ELCA AMMPARO

Newsletters

- AMMPARO Blog: blogs.elca.org/ammparo/
- ELCA Advocacy Connections Monthly Newsletter: <http://elca.org/advocacy/signup>
- LIRS Daily Digest: <https://www.lirs.org/#gf>

Social Media

- AMMPARO Facebook: facebook.com/ELCAammparo
- ELCA Advocacy Twitter: [@ELCAadvocacy](https://twitter.com/ELCAadvocacy)

AMMPARO Resources – www.elca.org/ammparo

- Bible Studies
- Sanctuary
- Videos
- Words Create Worlds

ELCA and Peace Not Walls: Advocacy Summer School

- Session 5 - Let's talk: About Immigration - <https://vimeo.com/611934887>
 - Direct link to Session 5 Discussion Starter - <https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/AdvocacySummerSchoolSession5DiscussionStarter.pdf>
 - Discussion starters are linked from both the session video and at ELCA.org/advocacy/resources.

R: There is much to do, but there is much being done. Giovana, thank you for sharing your expertise and perspective. The issues you have raised are part of the reason ELCA World Hunger has been active in supporting work to address hunger, poverty and justice when it comes to immigration policy, but as we heard from you, too, the other reason our church is active is because we know that the work of God is revealed in and through our neighbors, regardless of their citizenship status or country of origin.

As ancestors in the faith of Moses, Jacob, Abraham, Ruth and Naomi, Mary and Joseph, we are the spiritual descendants of people who were relied on just laws and the blessings of God for their very lives. So may our prayer today be for the church to be reminded of where we come from and where God is calling us to be today.

To learn more about ELCA's advocacy work on immigration, hunger, and a host of other issues, please visit the ELCA Advocacy blog at elca.org/advocacy. And, of course, subscribe to the ELCA World Hunger blog at elca.org/worldhunger. You can also follow us on social media. [insert links]. Until then, please send any comments or questions to me at Ryan.Cumming@elca.org, and thank you for being part of the work God is doing to bring about a just world where all are fed – and all are welcome.