

Revelations in Iowa: When immigrants are sent away

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For the past several months the debate over U.S. immigration policy has centered on the tiny town of Postville, Iowa. In May, government officials descended on the town and arrested almost 400 immigrants who worked at a kosher meat processing plant. Close to 300 of the workers, most of whom are from Guatemala, were convicted of fraud. Also arrested were two employees of the company, Agriprocessors, who were charged with harboring illegal immigrants.

The raid was an apocalyptic event for Postville. The plant had been the economic backbone of the town of 2,300. After the raid, about half the town's workforce was unemployed. Hundreds of families lost their primary source of income. Many of them turned to St. Bridget's Catholic Church for food and for legal, moral and spiritual support.

The raid was apocalyptic not only for the town and its residents but for the rest of us, in the deepest meaning of *apocalyptic*: it offered a revelation, an unveiling, of the immigration crisis.

It revealed, first of all, how deeply undocumented immigrants are woven into American life, even in places like northeast Iowa. Many of these immigrants had lived in Postville for a decade. Their work bolstered the local economy. Their children attended local schools. Many of them were married at St. Bridget's and had their children baptized there, and they assisted at worship and sang in the choir. The Postville raid vividly demonstrated the human cost of arresting and deporting illegal workers. That draconian measure means separating children from parents and ripping apart schools, churches and communities.

Something else came to light with the raid: workers came forward to say that they had been forced to work long hours in unsafe conditions. According to news reports, Agriprocessors had earlier been cited for having unsafe working conditions and for failing to pay overtime. One of the major problems with illegal immigration is the

dangers it poses to the immigrant workers themselves, who work without legal benefits and protection and are ripe for exploitation. A July 28 rally to protest conditions at the plant drew several rabbis, including Harold Kravitz of Minnesota, who saw the irony of a kosher processing plant operating with unethical principles. “Proper business conduct and treatment of workers also are important Jewish values,” Kravitz told the *New York Times*.

Almost everyone agrees that with over 10 million undocumented people living in the U.S., the country’s immigration system is broken. The question is not whether it needs to be fixed but how to fix it in a humane way. The raid in Postville showed that the fix must be one that keeps families together, protects workers’ rights, and allows those who have contributed to our economy and our communities—and want to keep on doing so—to come out of the shadows and become citizens.