

Personal experience with immigration influences studies on migrant experience

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When Professor Emily Ryo was 11, she and her sister were separated from their parents for two years when the parents immigrated to the U.S. from South Korea. The experience influenced Ryo's scholarly research

toward immigration law and policy.

"My main motivation going to law school was to see if I could help my family," Ryo says. "I went on to get a Ph.D. because I wanted to explore the migrant experience, not just for people living in the U.S. but for people living abroad dreaming of coming to the U.S. and establishing new lives here."

This year, Ryo published two research studies aimed at affecting [immigration policy](#). "The Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Enforcement Policies" was published in May in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. In July, the UCLA Law Review published "Children in Custody: A Study of Detained Migrant Children in the United States."

Research examines how migrant children fare in immigration system

The latter study in UCLA Law Review presents the first systematic empirical investigation of [children](#) in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Reed Humphrey, a research associate at USC Gould, worked with Ryo on the paper.

Unaccompanied minors traveling to the U.S. enter the ORR's custody at the U.S. border. Analyzing data on all [migrant children](#) in ORR custody between November 2017 and August 2019, Ryo and Humphrey found that these children are in the most vulnerable positions in their own countries.

"I think this study gives us a lot of food for thought in terms of considering what is in the best interests of these children, many of whom win asylum cases and end up settling permanently in the United States,"

Ryo said.

Ryo accessed ORR shelters as a volunteer attorney and saw firsthand the effects of the Trump administration's family separation [policy](#).

"Visiting those facilities really had a tremendous impact on my desire and interest to find out more about who these children were and what happened to them after they entered the system," Ryo said.

Punitive immigration policies and 'unintended consequences'

Ryo's research published in *PNAS* analyzes the effects of U.S. deterrence policies on individuals' migration intentions and attitudes toward the U.S. immigration system.

Working in collaboration with the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, Ryo obtained survey results from more than 6,000 individuals in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, the four countries with the largest unauthorized flow of [immigrants](#) into the United States.

The study found that punitive policies didn't change people's desires and willingness to try to enter the U.S., and that immigration detention may foster beliefs that the U.S. immigration system isn't fair.

"The reason the article is titled the 'unintended consequences' is that these harsh punitive policies don't have the effect that our policymakers want," Ryo said. "Instead, they have the unintended consequence of spreading a deep distrust of our country abroad."

Ryo's studies could guide long-term solutions to the ongoing immigration

crisis.

"I'm hoping my studies help educate lawmakers in what direction they ought to be going and also what issues are at stake in terms of the kind of care we should be providing, especially to these vulnerable populations," she said.

More information: Emily Ryo, The unintended consequences of US immigration enforcement policies, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2103000118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2103000118)

Children in Custody: A Study of Detained Migrant Children in the United States, www.uclalawreview.org/children...n-the-united-states/

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