

Collateral Damage

How Immigration Policy Harms U.S. Citizens in Mixed-Status Marriages

A Report Based on the Results of the 2025 AFU National Survey of Mixed-Status Couples

American Families United

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A Message from the Executive Director

American Families United (AFU) is a grassroots, membership-based organization made up of U.S. citizens whose spouses are facing, or could face, permanent separation because our immigration system offers them no realistic path to legal status in the United States. Despite what many people believe, marrying a U.S. citizen does not automatically lead to a green card.

For some families, that means living every day with the fear of deportation. For others, it means something just as devastating: being forced to live apart across borders because a spouse was denied a visa or barred from entering the United States altogether. Many U.S. citizens have never been able to live in this country with their spouse at all. Together, an estimated 1.5 million U.S. citizens are separated, or live with the constant threat of separation, from the person or country they love because of the law.

Despite their numbers, mixed-status couples remain one of the most invisible and least understood groups in the immigration debate. The federal government does not collect or publish comprehensive data on U.S. citizens in mixed-status marriages, and until recently, these stories were rarely covered by the media. As a result, U.S. citizens, and their U.S. citizen children, are left feeling isolated, unheard, and overlooked, while policymakers at all levels of government lack the information they need to understand the real human consequences of our laws.

That is why we launched the 2025 AFU National Mixed-Status Couples Survey, the first effort of its kind focused on U.S. citizens in mixed-status marriages. This survey captures the economic, emotional, and medical hardships these families face, the toll on U.S. citizen children, and the lived reality of both families living under threat of deportation and those forced into long-term separation or exile abroad. The findings confirm what I hear from our members every day: immigration enforcement without meaningful pathways to legal status for the spouses of U.S. citizens is tearing American families apart.

Data alone will not fix this crisis, but it is a necessary starting point. I hope this report helps elected leaders understand the real cost of inaction. I hope it gives journalists the tools they need to tell these stories accurately and with depth. I hope it will reach everyday Americans who deserve to understand what their fellow citizens are going through. Most of all, I hope that U.S. citizens in mixed-status relationships, whether living in fear at home or separated from their spouse abroad, see this report and know they are not alone. I am deeply grateful to the more than two hundred individuals who trusted us with their stories through this survey, as well as to our AFU leaders and volunteers who helped share it nationwide.

If you or someone you love is in a mixed-status relationship, we invite you to reach out to American Families United and become an active member. This is the time for you to use your power and privilege as a U.S. citizen. There's an entire community waiting for you to support you in telling your stories and reforming the immigration system through education and advocacy so U.S. citizens and their immigrant spouses can stay together and raise their children with security in the country they all love.

In solidarity,

Ashley DeAzevedo

Executive Director

American Families United

Introduction: About the Study

The goal of this report is to provide a first look at data on mixed-status couples in the United States and to lay the foundation for further research on this population. For too long, mixed-status families have been largely invisible in both public discourse and policy research, in part because the federal government does not collect or maintain systematic data on U.S. citizens who are married to undocumented spouses. This report is an effort to begin filling that gap.

Survey responses were collected through an online survey between October 15 and November 15, 2025. The survey was distributed through the membership and contact lists of American Families United and shared more broadly through social media, listservs, and email communications from AFU leadership, volunteers, and the organization's broader national network. In total, 237 qualifying responses were submitted, and all respondents completed the full survey.

The survey began with two screening questions that required potential participants to affirm that they are a U.S. citizen and that they are married to a noncitizen who does not have legal status in the United States. One lesson learned during the design phase of the survey was that there are really three distinct subgroups within this population: couples where both spouses are living together in the United States, couples where the noncitizen spouse is living outside the United States, and couples where both spouses are living abroad. Each of these groups faces a somewhat different set of circumstances, so immediately following the screening questions, a third question asked participants to identify which of these three situations described their family. Based on their answer, respondents were routed to a tailored series of questions, some of which were common across all three groups and some of which were specific to their situation.

It is worth noting that we intentionally excluded many questions from the survey that we would have liked to ask in order to ensure that the survey was not overly burdensome on participants. The data presented in this report also does not represent the full scope of what the survey collected. Some fields have been withheld because they contain personally identifiable information, open text responses with unstructured feedback, or data that, when examined at very small numbers, could make it possible to infer or identify individuals. Protecting the privacy and safety of respondents was a priority throughout this process.

Because the survey was distributed primarily through AFU networks, it should be understood as a convenience sample rather than a truly representative one. This is a common limitation for research on hard-to-reach populations, and while the findings offer valuable insight into the experiences of mixed-status couples, they may not reflect the full diversity of all such families across the country.

The survey design and analysis was completed in partnership with Relevant Research.¹ The results were first presented publicly at a virtual briefing hosted by American Families United on December 11, 2025.² For further questions about the data or methods, please email contact@americanfamiliesunited.org.

¹relevant-research.com

²The video of the briefing is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIVnILEhEKQ>

Results of Survey on U.S. Citizens in Mixed-Status Marriages

Mixed-status couples remain a significantly understudied population in immigration research, and as a result, we have remarkably little systematic information about the U.S. citizens who find themselves in these relationships. Because the survey was completed by United States citizens, all of the questions are tailored to capture the perspective of the U.S. citizen spouse, whose experiences and circumstances are often overlooked in broader debates about immigration enforcement and reform.

Current Living Arrangement of Mixed-Status Couples. As mentioned above, the survey was segmented based on three groups of respondents: those where both spouses live in the United States, those where the U.S. citizen lives in the country while their spouse lives abroad, and those where both spouses are living outside the United States. Of the 237 respondents to the survey, the majority (190) reported that both they and their spouse currently live in the United States.

However, a significant number of respondents, 47 in total, do not fall within this group. For 27 couples, the family is separated because the U.S. citizen remains in the country while their spouse lives abroad; for another 20 U.S. citizens, both they and their spouse are living outside the United States in what is often referred to, and experienced, as exile. Most discussions of mixed-status couples tend to focus on protecting couples who are still together in the United States, and understandably so, given the urgency of preventing further family separations. Yet these two other groups are an important part of understanding the full picture of how the immigration system impacts mixed-status families. Their experiences speak to the long-term consequences of an un-forgiving system and to the importance of not allowing these families to remain invisible in policy discussions.

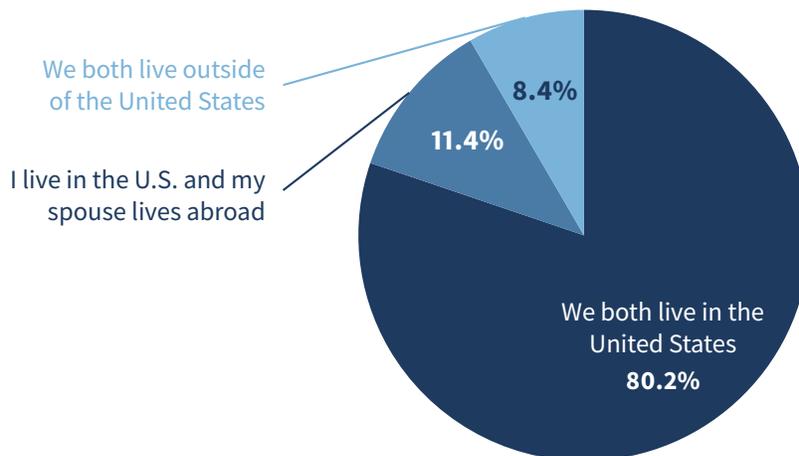


Figure 1: Current Living Situation of Survey Respondents

Gender of U.S. Citizens. The majority of respondents, approximately four out of five, identified as female, with the remainder identifying as male. The survey gave respondents the option of identifying their gender in other terms, but no one selected this option. The gender distribution

among survey respondents is reflected throughout the first-person stories included in this report, which predominantly capture the experiences of U.S. citizen wives whose husbands face the threat of deportation or are already living abroad.

Age of U.S. Citizens. The average age of U.S. citizen respondents was 44.1 years old, reflecting a population that is largely in the middle stages of life and, as later sections will show, often raising children while simultaneously navigating the immigration system. Very few respondents were under the age of 30, comprising just 3.8% of the sample, which suggests that mixed-status couples who engage with advocacy organizations like American Families United tend to be those who have been together for many years and have had time to confront the limitations of the immigration system.

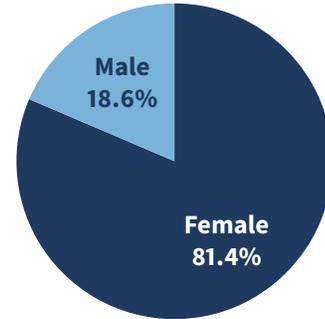


Figure 2: Survey Respondents' Gender

The largest group of respondents were in their 40s, accounting for more than 40% of the sample, followed by those in their 30s (29.5%) and 50s (18.4%). A smaller but notable share of respondents were 60 years of age or older (7.7%), a reminder that the challenges facing mixed-status couples do not diminish with age and that some families have been living with this uncertainty for decades.

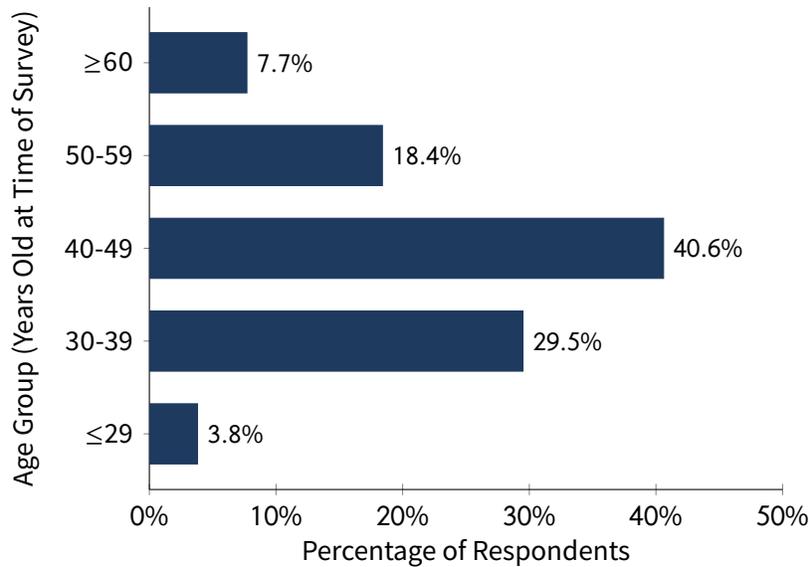


Figure 3: Age Group of U.S. Citizen Respondents

Mixed-Status Marriages Reflect Long-Term Commitment. One of the persistent misperceptions that circulates widely, sometimes as deliberate misinformation, is that noncitizens in mixed-status marriages are attempting to find shortcuts to legal status. The data collected in this survey demonstrates that nothing could be further from the truth. On average, mixed-status

couples in this study have been married for 13.1 years, and the vast majority have been married for well over a decade. Nearly all respondents (96.8%) have been married for more than five years, three-quarters have been married for more than ten years, and one in five have been married for twenty years or more. These figures reinforce what American Families United has long maintained: these are committed, lasting relationships between U.S. citizens and noncitizens, grounded in a deep sense of partnership that bears no resemblance to the stereotype of marriages of convenience or people looking for a quick fix. When combined with the data on age presented above, we find that many couples have not only built lives together and, as we will discuss below, raised children together, but are now moving into their later years with grandchildren of their own, yet still have no viable path to legal status for their spouse.

Length of Marriage	Total	Percent
Married over 5 years	210	96.8%
Married over 10 years	164	75.6%
Married over 15 years	93	42.9%
Married over 20 years	43	19.8%
Married over 25 years	10	4.6%
Total respondents	217	

Table 1: Length of Marriage of Respondents at Time of Survey

Noncitizen Spouses Have Built Deep Ties to America. In addition to these marriages being long-term and committed, the noncitizen spouses themselves have been present in the United States for a remarkably long time. Almost every noncitizen in the study (99.0%) has lived in the country for more than a decade, and nearly half (47.1%) have been here for a quarter century or longer. On average, noncitizen spouses in this study have been in the United States for 23.9 years, with the typical spouse having first entered the country in 2001. To frame this in historical terms, some noncitizen spouses first arrived in the United States during the 1980s, more than a third arrived during the 1990s, and over half arrived during the 2000s. This means that not only are the marriages in this study long-lasting and durable, but the noncitizen spouses are themselves long-standing members of their communities, with deep roots in the neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and social networks that define American civic life.

Years Since Entry	Total	Percent
10 years or more	206	99.0%
15 years or more	193	92.8%
20 years or more	163	78.4%
25 years or more	98	47.1%
30 years or more	38	18.3%
Total respondents	208	100%

Table 2: Years Since Spouse First Entered United States

U.S. Citizen Children of Mixed-Status Parents. The harm to American families caused by the lack of legal pathways to status for spouses of U.S. citizens extends beyond the couples themselves to their U.S. citizen children, who also shoulder the burden of our current immigration system. Three-quarters of the couples in this survey have biological children together, and half have two or more children. Among those couples who have children, the average number is 2.1, a figure that exceeds the current national birth rate of fewer than 2.0 children per family.

The most common family size is two children (31.6%), followed by one child (22.4%) and three children (13.1%), though a notable share of families have four or more children (7.2%). These are not abstract statistics; they represent U.S. citizen children who face the possibility of growing up without a parent, or who must choose between their country of citizenship and their family’s unity. To understand more about how children of mixed-status couples are affected, American Families United member Jenni Rivera and her family were featured on *This American Life* in 2025 in an in-depth report examining how U.S. citizen children are forced to navigate childhood under the shadow of potential family separation.³

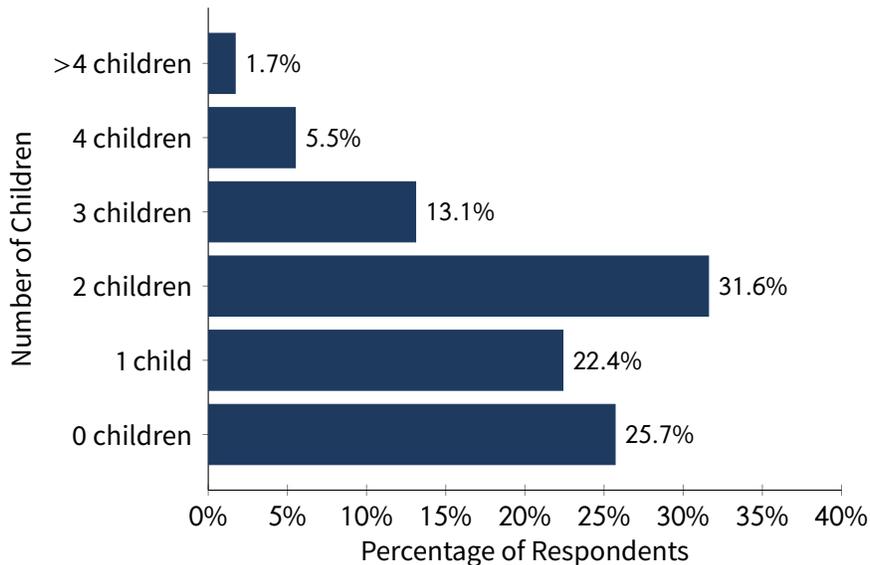


Figure 4: Number of Children of Mixed-Status Parents

Noncitizen Spouses Care for U.S. Citizen Families. The contributions that immigrant spouses make to American families extend far beyond their own biological children and include care for stepchildren, extended family members, and other relatives with a variety of needs. To capture this complexity, we invited survey participants to describe other children or adults for whom they provide direct care as part of their family. Of the 237 respondents, 138 (58.2%) included information in this optional field, revealing the extent to which immigrant spouses are engaged in caregiving that reaches well beyond the nuclear family. This data helps to illuminate the often invisible care work that immigrant spouses perform within American families, and underscores the

³To learn more about the Rivera family’s story and other AFU members featured in the news, visit https://www.americanfamiliesunited.org/afu_in_the_news.

profound consequences that would follow if these individuals were detained, deported, or forced to self-deport. The loss of an immigrant spouse is not merely the loss of a partner; it is often the loss of a primary caregiver for children, aging parents, and other vulnerable family members who depend on their presence and support.

Category	Respondents	Percent
Step-children	42	30.4%
Aging parents/in-laws	35	25.4%
Children from previous relationships	14	10.1%
Grandchildren	8	5.8%
Adult children requiring support	8	5.8%
Special needs family members	7	5.1%
Other relatives	6	4.3%
Total respondents	138	100%

Table 3: Family Support Beyond Biological Children⁴

Family Care—In Their Own Words. Many respondents provided firsthand narratives describing the important role that their spouses play in broader networks of family care. These accounts reveal the depth of interdependence that characterizes mixed-status families, where noncitizen spouses often serve as essential caregivers not only for their own children but for aging parents, relatives with medical needs, and stepchildren from previous relationships. The following voices, presented in their own words, illustrate the far-reaching caregiving responsibilities that would be disrupted if these families were torn apart.

“My undocumented spouse and I take my uncle to chemo once per month, when I travel, my spouse does this by himself, and we visit a couple times a month to spend time and my spouse fixes or helps with maintenance in and outside their home.” — *Age 47, married 8 years, spouse lives abroad*

“My husband and I provide daily care for our two children, both of whom have neurological and learning differences that require ongoing therapy and school support. We also help care for my aging parents. My father recently suffered a brain hemorrhage and needs significant assistance, and my mother has her own health challenges. Our family’s responsibilities extend well beyond our immediate household — we are the central caregivers for multiple generations.” — *Age 50, married 14 years, 2 kids, both live in the United States*

“He raised my daughter from a prior relationship as his own. Helped her through college and we are now her support system as she is an adult and we have a grandchild.” — *Age 41, married 14 years, 2 kids, both live in the United States*

⁴Categories are not mutually exclusive; respondents may appear in more than one category.

agriculture, and cleaning services are occupied almost exclusively by noncitizen spouses, while fields such as administrative work and legal services are occupied almost exclusively by U.S. citizens. This occupational complementarity underscores the extent to which mixed-status couples function as economic units, with each partner contributing to the household and to the broader economy in distinct but interdependent ways.

Industry/Field	Spouse	Percent	U.S. Citizen	Percent
Construction/Trades	95	41.9%	15	7.8%
Business Owner/Self-Employed	28	12.3%	14	7.3%
Food Service/Hospitality	26	11.5%	6	3.1%
Stay at Home/Homemaker	25	11.0%	18	9.3%
Landscaping/Agriculture	22	9.7%	0	0.0%
Cleaning Services	8	3.5%	0	0.0%
Transportation/Logistics	5	2.2%	5	2.6%
Technology	4	1.8%	5	2.6%
Other	3	1.3%	2	1.0%
Healthcare/Medical	2	0.9%	42	21.8%
Education	2	0.9%	24	12.4%
Retail/Customer Service	2	0.9%	12	6.2%
Social Services/Nonprofit	2	0.9%	7	3.6%
Government/Public Sector	1	0.4%	13	6.7%
Sales/Marketing	1	0.4%	6	3.1%
Finance/Banking/Accounting	1	0.4%	6	3.1%
Administrative/Office Work	0	0.0%	11	5.7%
Legal	0	0.0%	7	3.6%
Total	227	100%	193	100%

Table 4: Industry of Employment for U.S. Citizens and Spouses⁶

U.S. Citizens in Their Own Words—What Does Your Spouse Mean to You? Beyond the specific data points and categories explored throughout this report, the survey offered U.S. citizens an opportunity to describe, in an open-ended way, what their spouse means to them and their family. The responses to this question defy easy categorization; they speak to love, partnership, faith, sacrifice, and the irreplaceable role that a spouse plays in the daily fabric of family life. Rather than attempt to summarize or analyze these reflections, we present a selection of them here and allow these voices to stand on their own. In ways that no statistic can fully capture, these words convey what is at stake when we talk about mixed-status families and the threat of separation.

⁶Includes last industry in the U.S. for citizens and spouses who are living abroad.

“My spouse is a loving husband and a devoted father. This separation has caused so many hardships on everyone in my family. I miss my husband and thinking about all the things we are missing out on as a family breaks my heart. My husband and I have such a great relationship, and it’s really a shame that we had to separate to give our kids a chance at a quality education and to feel safe in the place we live.” — *Age 39, married 18 years, more than 4 children, spouse lives abroad*

“My spouse is my best friend, my partner and a great dad. When we’re together, he is the rock and peace of our family that holds things together and makes sure we are cared for.” — *Age 42, married 8 years, 1 child, spouse lives abroad*

“She means everything to me, I love her, she is the mother of my son and we’ve been together since 2005 and we were married in 2010. It’s a burden to my U.S. family, especially holidays and some of my family are afraid to travel to Mexico and haven’t met her.” — *Age 71, married 15 years, 1 child, spouse lives abroad*

“My spouse has been my longtime partner and best friend nearly 20 years. I am disabled and my spouse provides a lot of assistance with household activities, acquiring/preparing food, transportation to medical appointments, etc. Without him, it would be very difficult to live independently and get my needs met.” — *Age 41, married 11 years, both live in the United States*

“My husband is my whole life! We are truly life and business partners. Our entire lives revolve around both my husband and myself being able to provide for ourselves and our children by running and working our business. I would not be able to handle our business or personal life without him.” — *Age 42, married 16 years, 2 children, both live in the United States*

“He is our support system. He is our security. As a Christian, he is the spiritual leader of our home.” — *Age 41, married 14 years, 2 children, both live in the United States*

“My spouse represents God’s covenant that He has for a marriage. Matthew 19:6, ‘So they are no longer two, but one flesh.’ Mark 10:9, ‘Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’” — *Age 37, married 9 years, 4 children, both live in the United States*

“My husband is the best man that I could’ve ever married and chose to be the father of my kids. He is the most hardworking man that we as a family know. He has always found a way to be a provider and caretaker and at the same time always finds time to be present for us.” — *Age 32, married 14 years, 1 child, both live in the United States*

“My wife plays a vital role in our daily care and routines. She ensures our daughter’s well-being and stability. Her presence keeps our household united and functioning. My wife supports me emotionally, mentally, and practically. Her absence would deeply affect our family’s stability. She is irreplaceable in both her caregiving and emotional role.” — *Age 43, married 14 years, 2 children, both live outside of the United States*

Mixed-Status Couples Experience Unique Hardships. The survey asked respondents to indicate whether their family had experienced hardship in five areas as a result of the immigration system: emotional, financial, medical, spiritual, and educational. Respondents could select all categories that applied to their situation. As shown in the figure below, emotional hardship was nearly universal, with 97.5% of U.S. citizen respondents reporting that they had experienced emotional hardship related to their family’s immigration situation. Financial hardship was the second most common, reported by more than three-quarters of respondents (78.1%), a figure that reflects not only the limited employment opportunities available to noncitizen spouses but also the substantial legal fees and immigration costs that families incur while attempting to navigate the system.

Medical and spiritual hardships were each reported by more than half of respondents, at 57.0% and 54.9% respectively, suggesting that the strain of living in a mixed-status family extends to both physical health and deeply held beliefs. Educational hardship, while less prevalent, still affected more than a third of families (37.6%), encompassing both children who struggle to focus in school and adults who have delayed or abandoned their own educational pursuits. Taken together, these findings underscore that the consequences of the immigration system extend far beyond legal status and touch nearly every dimension of family life.

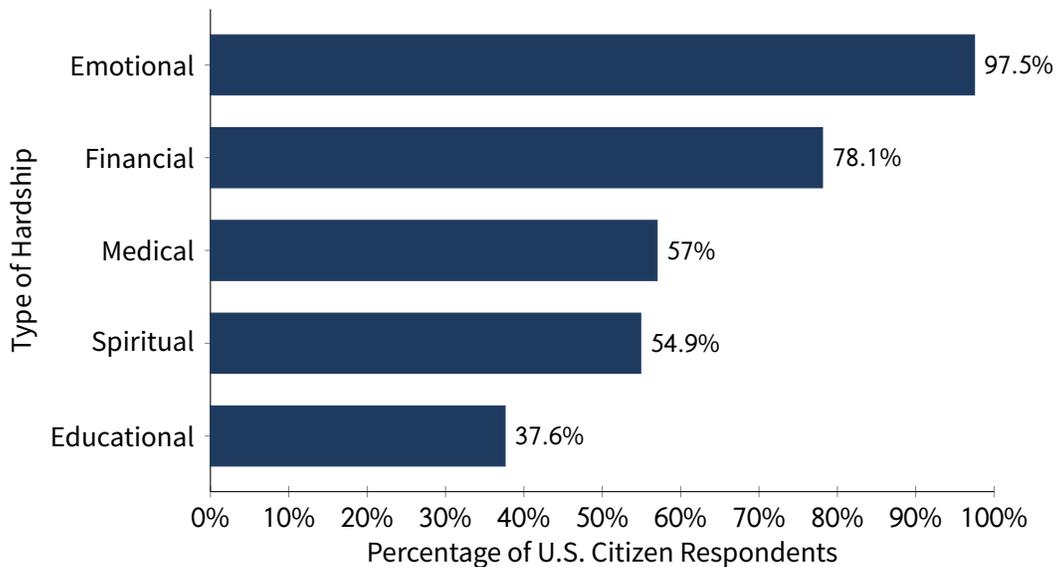


Figure 6: Hardships Endured by U.S. Citizens as a Result of the Immigration System

Hardship—In Their Own Words. The statistics presented above capture the prevalence of hardship among mixed-status families, but they cannot fully convey the weight of what these families carry on a daily basis. To understand the human toll of the immigration system, we invited respondents to describe their hardships in their own words. The responses we received speak to sleepless nights, panic attacks, children who have internalized fear of immigration officials, and families who save not for their future but for the emergency of detention or deportation. These accounts reveal the profound emotional, financial, and medical consequences that rip-

ple through American families when a spouse lacks legal status. The following quotes, selected from among the many we received, offer a window into experiences that no chart or table can adequately represent.

“As a result of my husband’s visa being denied, my son is having to live a life without a father. I am having a struggle financially to make ends meet, constant sadness, depression, my mental health is all over the place. There’s not a day that goes by where I don’t think about ending it; the only thing that holds me back is my husband’s words that he loves me and that one day we’ll be a family again. My child just cries because he’s just seven and he sees all his classmates with their parents yet he only has his mom because his dad’s in Mexico. Anytime we go see my husband, my son is terrified of immigration officials because to him those people are the ones not allowing his dad back in.” — *Age 39, married 14 years, 1 child, spouse lives abroad*

“My hair has thinned so much while dealing with all of the stress of this. Before we departed the U.S. I had panic attacks often because of my anxiety about the immigration situation and trying to prepare myself and my family for the move out of the country. I still haven’t been able to have a good night’s rest. I honestly don’t remember the last time I slept peacefully without having all of these extra stressors.” — *Age 29, married 6 years, 1 child, both live outside of the United States*

“Our family has been living in limbo since 2014. I didn’t realize a path to legal presence was so complicated, time consuming, and expensive for someone that came here as a minor. Nor did I expect it to be this difficult for someone that came here to work and has always worked and paid taxes through his ITIN. I never thought my children would face hateful comments from other children and even adults calling them wall hoppers, anchor babies, and illegals at school.” — *Age 35, married 11 years, 2 children, both live in the United States*

“We are saving not for our future but for an emergency if she gets detained or we have to move abroad. My wife suffers from recurring kidney stones, depression, and anxiety, and has had to get many surgeries. The recent shift in enforcement priorities has been extremely scary and led to a lot of emotional distress. Because of everything happening my wife cannot pursue an associate’s degree or bachelor’s, and I cannot go to grad school like I dream of doing some day.” — *Age 26, married 1 year, both live in the United States*

“When my husband was detained I suffered tremendously. I cannot begin to explain how stressful it was and how unprepared I was for the ramifications of being married to an undocumented person. It’s not for the faint of heart, and it goes to show how strong our love has to be to endure the crazy, nonsensical immigration process.” — *Age 56, married 11 years, both live in the United States*

The quotes above represent only a small selection of the responses we received. To capture the full range of hardships described by respondents, we coded all open-ended responses into thematic categories, identifying specific manifestations of hardship within each of the five survey

categories, as well as a category for relational hardship that emerged organically from the data. The table below summarizes the most commonly reported experiences across all responses. These themes are not meant to be statistically representative; rather, they illustrate the breadth of challenges that mixed-status families face as a direct result of the immigration system.

Category	Specific Hardships Reported
Emotional	Anxiety and depression Fear of separation and deportation Panic attacks Suicidal ideation PTSD Constant stress and uncertainty Grief from missing family events abroad
Financial	Single-income households Limited job opportunities for spouse Legal fees and immigration costs Inability to qualify for mortgages or loans Working multiple jobs Unable to save for retirement
Medical	Stress-induced health conditions Delayed or avoided medical care Lack of health insurance for spouse Chronic illness management alone Caregiver burden during illness
Spiritual	Fear of attending religious services Loss of faith Inability to participate in church activities
Educational	Children unable to focus in school Spouse unable to pursue higher education U.S. citizen delaying or abandoning education
Relational	Family separation Missed funerals, weddings, and milestones Strain on marriage Children’s trauma and anxiety Isolation from friends and community

Table 5: Categories of Hardship Reported by U.S. Citizens in Mixed-Status Families

Mixed-Status Couples Make Great Effort to Fix Their Immigration Situation. A common misconception about mixed-status couples is that they have failed to take the necessary steps to regularize their situation, that if they had simply filed the right paperwork or followed the proper procedures, their problems would be resolved. The data from this survey tells a very different story. The overwhelming majority of respondents have actively engaged with the immigration system in multiple ways over many years, often at considerable financial and emotional cost. Nearly nine in ten respondents (88.6%) have met with an immigration attorney to explore their options, and more than seven in ten (71.3%) have filed paperwork directly with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services or Immigration and Customs Enforcement. More than a quarter of respondents (26.2%) have gone so far as to meet with elected officials to advocate on their behalf, and nearly a quarter (23.6%) have filed paperwork with the immigration courts. These are not families who have been sitting on the sidelines waiting for a solution to appear; they are families who have been actively and persistently seeking a legal pathway to remain together.

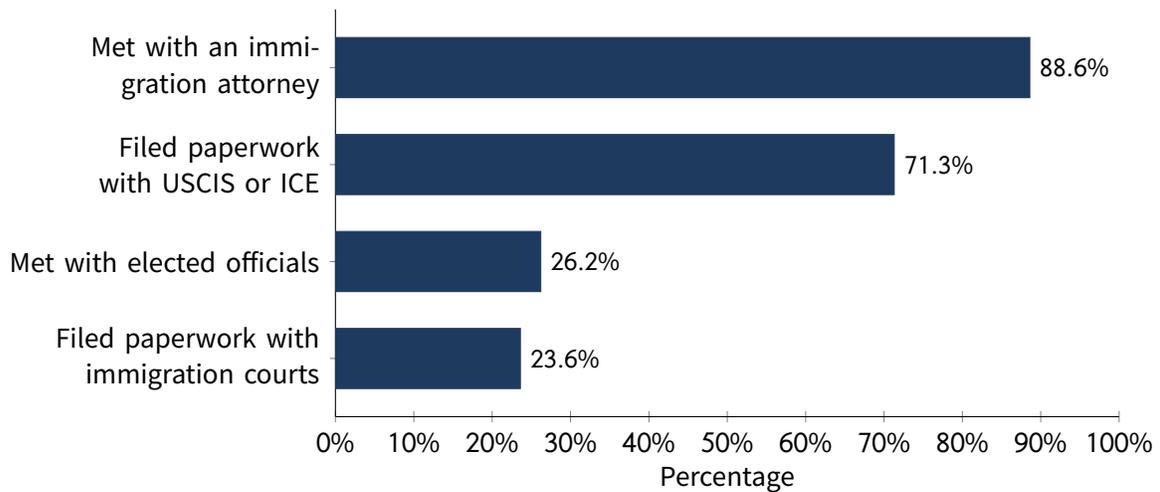


Figure 7: Actions Taken to Address Immigration Situation⁷

In addition to the broad categories of action shown above, respondents described a wide range of specific legal steps they have taken in their efforts to secure lawful status for their spouse. The table below summarizes the types of filings, applications, and advocacy efforts that respondents reported. These include petitions for alien relatives, provisional unlawful presence waivers, applications for humanitarian relief such as U Visas and T Visas, and direct engagement with members of Congress. Many respondents described consulting with multiple attorneys over the course of many years, only to be told repeatedly that no viable pathway exists under current law. Others recounted spending thousands of dollars on legal fees with little to show for it.

The breadth and persistence of these efforts underscores a painful truth: for many mixed-status couples, the problem is not a lack of effort or willingness to comply with the law, but rather the absence of any legal pathway that would allow them to remain together. Until elected leaders

⁷ Many respondents reported taking multiple steps; percentages do not sum to 100%.

take action to create such pathways, these families will remain in limbo, no matter how many forms they file or attorneys they consult.

Steps Taken to Fix Spouse's Immigration Status
Filed I-130 (Petition for Alien Relative)
Filed I-601A (Provisional Unlawful Presence Waiver)
Consulted with multiple attorneys
Applied for Parole in Place / Keeping Families Together
Went through consular processing / interview
Advocated with elected officials / traveled to DC
Filed I-212 (Permission to Reapply for Admission)
Applied for U Visa
Applied for VAWA petition
Applied for DACA or TPS
Applied for T Visa

Table 6: Types of Steps Taken to Fix Spouse's Immigration Status

American Families are Becoming Collateral Damage in Enforcement Surge. The data presented thus far captures the experiences of mixed-status couples who have spent years, often decades, building lives together in the United States. But the landscape facing these families has shifted dramatically in recent months. Since the start of 2025, immigration enforcement has intensified in ways that have made no meaningful distinction between those with deep ties to American families and communities and those without.

U.S. citizens married to noncitizens have watched as their spouses, regardless of their years of presence in the country, their contributions to the economy, their lack of any criminal history, and their marriages to American citizens, have become potential targets for arrest and deportation. This shift has forced many mixed-status couples to confront questions that were once hypothetical: whether to remain together in the United States and face the risk of sudden separation, or whether to leave the country voluntarily as a family before that choice is made for them.

The survey asked respondents whether they had ever discussed the possibility of one or both spouses leaving the United States due to deportation concerns, both prior to 2025 and since the start of the year. The results reveal a striking escalation. Before 2025, fewer than half of respondents (45%) had ever discussed the possibility of leaving the country; since January, that figure has risen to 81%. For the majority of mixed-status couples in this survey, the question of leaving the United States is no longer abstract.

Did you and your spouse ever discuss the possibility of one or both of you leaving the United States due to deportation concerns?

Prior to January 2025

Since January 2025

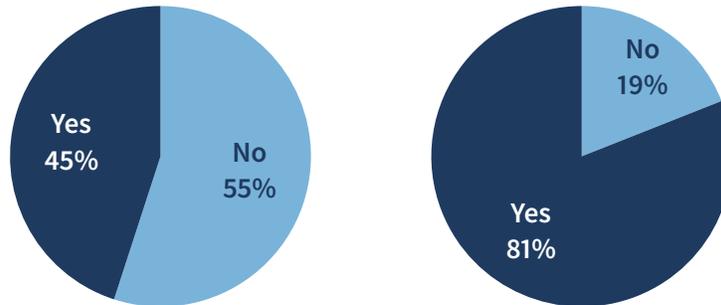


Figure 8: Discussed Possibility of Leaving the United States

Some Families Forced into Separation and Exile, Others Fighting to Stay Together. Despite this escalation in fear and uncertainty, most mixed-status couples are not yet actively planning to leave the country. When asked whether their spouse is currently making concrete plans to depart, nearly three-quarters of respondents (74.7%) said no, reflecting a determination among many families to stay together in the United States for as long as possible. Yet the picture is more complicated than a simple yes or no. Nearly one in five respondents (18.4%) indicated that they were unsure whether their spouse was planning to leave, a response that speaks to the profound uncertainty that now characterizes daily life for these families, where plans can change overnight depending on the news, a knock at the door, or a traffic stop.

A smaller but significant share of respondents (6.8%) reported that their spouse is actively planning to leave the United States. For these families, the calculus has already shifted: the risk of remaining has come to outweigh the cost of departure. Taken together, these figures reveal a population caught between fear and resilience, between the desire to preserve the life they have built and the recognition that the ground beneath them has become increasingly unstable. Many are choosing family over fear, but that choice grows harder with each passing day.

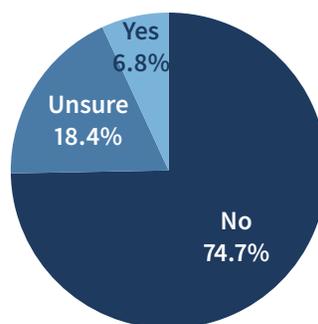


Figure 9: Is Your Spouse Actively Planning to Leave the United States?

Hardships Continue Abroad for U.S. Citizens Living in Exile. For U.S. citizens who have relocated abroad to remain with their noncitizen spouse, leaving the country does not bring an end to hardship; in many cases, it intensifies the challenges they face. The previous section documented the widespread emotional, financial, and medical hardships experienced by mixed-status couples living in the United States. For those who have left, these hardships do not simply disappear. The survey asked U.S. citizens living abroad whether their situation in each of these areas had improved, stayed the same, or worsened since leaving the United States.

The results, shown in the figure below, reveal that for the majority of the 19 respondents living in exile, leaving the country has made things worse, not better. Nearly 58% of respondents reported that their emotional hardship had worsened since leaving, and an identical share reported worsening financial hardship. Medical hardship showed a more mixed pattern, with roughly equal proportions reporting that their situation had improved, stayed the same, or worsened, though more than a third (36.8%) still reported that their medical situation had deteriorated. Only a minority of respondents in any category reported that their circumstances had improved. These findings challenge any assumption that departure represents a resolution to the difficulties facing mixed-status families; for many, it is simply an exchange of one set of hardships for another, compounded by the loss of proximity to family, community, and the resources of their home country.

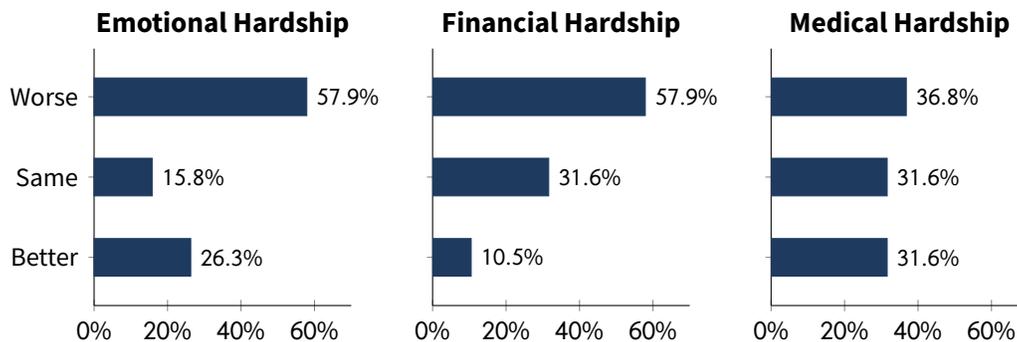


Figure 10: Change in U.S. Citizen Hardship After Leaving the United States

Professional Consequences for U.S. Citizens Living in Exile. The professional and economic consequences of relocating abroad are similarly significant. The survey asked U.S. citizens who had left the country to describe their work situation following their departure. As shown in the table below, only a small fraction of respondents (15.8%) were able to remain in their job with no substantial changes to their income or position, a figure that likely reflects the small number who are able to work remotely or who were already employed by international organizations.

The remainder faced considerable disruption. More than one in five respondents (21.1%) lost or left their job but were able to find new employment in their field, while an equal share experienced substantial changes in income or position even while remaining nominally employed.

Perhaps most concerning, 15.8% of respondents reported that they had lost or left their job and had been unable to find new employment at all. Another 15.8% indicated that they were disabled or otherwise not working. Taken together, these figures illustrate that for U.S. citizens who leave the country to keep their families intact, the decision often comes at a steep professional cost, one that compounds the emotional and financial strain of living in exile from the country they call home.

Work Situation After Leaving the Country	Total	Percent
Lost/left job, obtained new one in field	4	21.1%
Stayed in job with substantial changes in income/position	4	21.1%
Lost/left job, unable to find new employment	3	15.8%
Stayed in job with no substantial changes	3	15.8%
Disabled/do not work	3	15.8%
Lost/left job, obtained new one outside of field	1	5.3%
Other (commutes internationally)	1	5.3%
Total respondents	19	100%

Table 7: Work Situation of U.S. Citizens After Leaving the Country

Conclusion

This report represents the first systematic effort to document the experiences of U.S. citizens in mixed-status marriages, a population that has long remained invisible in both public discourse and policy research. The data collected through the 2025 AFU National Mixed-Status Couples Survey reveals a portrait of American families that defies the stereotypes and misconceptions that too often dominate the immigration debate. These are not marriages of convenience or recent arrangements; they are long-term, committed partnerships averaging more than 13 years, with noncitizen spouses who have been present in the United States for nearly a quarter century. These families are raising U.S. citizen children, caring for aging parents, contributing to their communities, and working in industries that are essential to the American economy.

The findings of this survey make clear that the current immigration system is failing American citizens. Nearly all respondents reported experiencing emotional hardship as a result of their family’s immigration situation, and the majority reported financial, medical, and spiritual hardships as well. The escalation of immigration enforcement in 2025 has dramatically intensified the fear and uncertainty that these families live with every day; before January of this year, fewer than half of respondents had discussed the possibility of leaving the country, but since then, that figure has risen to more than 80%. For families who have already been separated or who have chosen to leave the United States together, the hardships do not diminish; they often worsen. U.S. citizens living abroad report deteriorating emotional and financial circumstances, disrupted careers, and the painful experience of exile from the country they call home.

Perhaps most importantly, this report demonstrates that the challenges facing mixed-status families are not the result of inaction or unwillingness to engage with the immigration system. The overwhelming majority of respondents have consulted with attorneys, filed paperwork with the government, and in many cases traveled to Washington to advocate for their families. They have done everything within their power to find a legal pathway to keep their families together, only to be told repeatedly that no such pathway exists under current law. The problem is not a lack of effort on the part of these families; the problem is a legal framework that offers no meaningful solution for U.S. citizens who are married to long-term residents in the United States or spouses living abroad who want to come to the country lawfully.

Recommendations

The data presented in this report point toward several urgent priorities for policymakers, journalists, and advocates:

For Elected Officials and Policymakers: Congress has the ability to establish legal pathways to status for the spouses of U.S. citizens who have demonstrated long-term presence in the country, and deep family and community ties. Legislative solutions such as the American Families United Act and the Dignity Act would provide a framework for these families to come out of the shadows and regularize their status without the threat of prolonged separation. In the absence of congressional action, the executive branch has the power to exercise its discretionary authority to protect mixed-status families from enforcement actions that serve no public safety purpose and cause profound harm to American citizens and their children. State and local policymakers also have a role to play: they should do everything in their power to protect their U.S. citizen constituents by elevating the stories of mixed-status families, enacting policies that shield these families from unnecessary harm, and advocating for humane immigration reform with their federal counterparts.

For Journalists and the Media: This report offers a resource for reporters seeking to tell the stories of mixed-status families with accuracy, nuance, and depth. The data presented here can help contextualize individual stories within broader patterns and challenge narratives that misrepresent who these families are and what they have done to try to fix their situation. We encourage journalists to reach out to American Families United for access to members who are willing to share their stories and to use the findings of this survey to inform their reporting.

For Researchers: This survey represents a first step toward understanding a population that has been largely absent from immigration research. We encourage scholars to build on this work by conducting additional studies that explore the experiences of mixed-status families in greater depth, examine variation across different subpopulations, and track changes over time. The convenience sample methodology employed here was appropriate for an initial exploratory study, but future research would benefit from probability-based sampling and longitudinal designs.

For Mixed-Status Families: If you are a U.S. citizen in a mixed-status marriage, we hope this report helps you understand that you are not alone. The experiences documented here, the fear,

the hardship, the relentless effort to find a solution, are shared by hundreds of thousands of American families across the country. American Families United exists to support families like yours and to ensure that your voices are heard in the halls of Congress and in the media. We encourage you to visit our website, join our community, and add your voice to the movement for change.

A Final Word

The 237 respondents who participated in this survey trusted American Families United with their stories, many of which are deeply personal and painful. They did so because they believe that their experiences matter, that data can inform better policy, and that visibility is a necessary step toward justice. We are grateful for their trust and committed to honoring it by using this data to advocate for the protection of American families.

The United States has long held itself out as a nation that values family unity. The data in this report reveals the distance between that ideal and the reality facing mixed-status families today. Closing that gap will require action from elected leaders, attention from the media, and continued advocacy from organizations like American Families United and the families we represent. We hope this report contributes to that effort and moves us closer to a future in which no American citizen must choose between their country and their family.

For more information or to get involved, please visit:

American Families United

<https://www.americanfamiliesunited.org>

contact@americanfamiliesunited.org