

Is This Moral?

by Felipe Vaquerano

Even when we're in the U.S. legally, immigrants have a strained relationship with authorities. When I hear stories about an official coming to somebody's house to take people away, I immediately wonder if those people are indeed immigration officers or simply **fugitive recovery agents or bounty hunters**.

On a chilly evening in December 2002, about six men dressed in dark blue uniforms, accompanied by a local police officer, showed up at the apartment where my nephew lived. They said that they were there looking for him and that they would not leave without him. My nephew, who was not at home at the time, called me and told me that he was scared. I offered to go and find out what was going on. At his house, I found myself held hostage until my nephew showed up. I was threatened with deportation even though I was in the U.S. legally.

I explained that my nephew was not a fugitive, that he had been granted **temporary protected status** and that he had the right documents to work in the United States. When the men heard that, they told me to convince my nephew to sign some papers and they'd leave him alone. I fell into their trap and called my nephew telling him to come to the house. Instead of going free, my nephew was handcuffed and taken to San Antonio, Texas where he had failed to show up at an immigration court to sign some papers. The papers instructing him to do this had been in English, which he didn't understand at the time. I was shocked. I could not believe that this was happening in the U.S.

One part of me said that he was going to be okay. The other part thought that he was going to be deported. He was driven by the bounty hunters from Massachusetts to San Antonio and was taken into the immigration department there. As soon as he saw the immigration officer,

he was asked if he had temporary protection. When he affirmed that he did, the officer told him that he could go back home. The officer told him that immigration could not deport him. Three days went by from the time they took him away until he came back. He was tired, had a backache, but was happy to be back with his family.

My nephew was lucky. He was not deported because he had been granted temporary protection. Otherwise, he would have been sent back to El Salvador. I am happy that the system finally worked for him, yet, I am still angry. Is what these bounty hunters do moral? Whose action is worse, those of the bounty hunter who uses force, intimidation, and manipulation to turn people into immigration custody for money or those of an immigrant who is looking for an opportunity to offer a better future to his family?

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Definitions:

bounty hunter - A bounty hunter is an individual who, in return for money, seeks out people who do not show up in court as required by the conditions of their release. Most are employed by a bail bondsman.

temporary protected status - is a temporary immigration status granted to eligible nationals of designated countries who are temporarily unable to safely return to their home country because of ongoing armed conflict, the temporary effects of an environmental disaster, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions.