# Migration governance and undocumented migrant children

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**Guest:** Dr Nando Sigona
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**Sam: Today we are with Dr Nando Sigona who's a Birmingham Fellow at the School of Social Policy, here at the University of Birmingham. Hello Nando.**

Nando: Hello.

**Sam: So can you tell us a bit about what you do here at the university?**

Nando: I do work on migration and diversity. I'm particularly interested on the impact of legal status and immigration regimes on the way that people cope with life, what they do in their everyday experiences of the country. So, for example, looking at the way that immigration enforcement operates, how this changes the experiences of migrants, but not only those who are 'illegal', but also regular migrants that really feel the pressure when the debate on migration tends to get polarised and there is an undertone that is xenophobic, as you can see now these days in the UK.

**Sam: So it's really their legal status, how that affects them socially.**

Nando: Yeah, that's the starting point but also to look at the way that we treat undocumented migrants, or migrants in general, what that tells us about the meaning of citizenship, to be a citizen in our society. If you look for example at the case of families with mixed legal status, for example one person with citizenship and the other one as a migrant, you can really see the effect that a recent immigration regulation introduced in the last year, arriving on the family relations: The home office introduced an income threshold of about £19,000 for a British citizen who wants to marry someone from outside the EU. Well it may seem reasonable if you think just on a superficial level, but if you think that about 40% of the British citizens don't have an income of £19,000 what does it mean? Does it mean that we are not allowed to fall in love with someone because we are poor? I feel it's deeply unfair. And also if you look again to this threshold, this affects much more women than men because women as we know in society tend to have lower salaries, and particularly women living in the north of England. The way that these regulations are implemented produces very unfair and unjust outcomes, not totally for the migrants but also for British citizens. So I'm really interested in this intersection, why when you're talking about migration you're not only talking about the aliens but also about the citizens.

**Sam: So recently we had a case with the Advertising Standards Authority who actually criticised the Home Office for their controversial 'Go Home' campaign where they'd been driving vans around neighbourhoods in London saying 'go home', targeted at people that were illegally living in the UK. It seems quite a hostile approach.**

Nando: I think you're right in the sense that sending a billboard around neighbourhoods of London with a highly diverse population doesn't really produce immigration enforcement. It's telling us something else, as many people have pointed out, you are not really doing much in terms of fighting undocumented migration I think, what you are doing is sending a message to voters about your anti-immigration credentials and so in a sense this is much more of a response to the last local election, then a serious tool for addressing the issues on undocumented migration. The point is not saying that the country, the Government, is not entitled to regulate migration and address the issues of those who stay without status in the country, that's not the point. The point is that I don't think that these initiatives produce that kind of result and the side effects are much worse than the Home Office seems to understand. I think that if you look at neighbourhoods where they have targeted this campaign in London in particular, it tells us also something else. It tells us that not all undocumented migrants are the same but it seems like the Government is targeting specific kinds of undocumented migrants, the ones that are not white in particular. So they target areas where there are no migrant groups but they're not targeting areas where there are Australian or American citizens, which are also among the undocumented migrants. Just to give you an example, if you look at the statistic about forced removal from the country, there is a very strong line, you know, at the top of the countries which are more affected, where migrants are more affected by deportation or forced removal – Nigeria, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, China. Now our country has a significant number of migrants, among them there are also undocumented migrants, but there are other countries that have undocumented migrants and they're not in these statistics. So it tells us when we look at these initiatives, we also have to look at them critically and really say what it tells us about who the Government sees as undocumented or illegal and also what are the side effects of these kind of initiatives.

**Sam: So over in the USA since Barrack Obama's re-election they're really tackling immigration in a completely different way aren't they?**

Nando: Last summer, just a few weeks before the election, Barrack Obama issues an executive order called 'DACA' which stands for '**Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (https://www.dhs.gov/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals)** ', which basically enabled young migrants who had arrived in the US before 16 and they were residing in the country without a legal document, to apply for a deferral of their deportation order. So on one hand they were basically allowed to stay for two years but also the other important thing, they were allowed to work legally and they also allowed to re-apply at the end of the two years for a further term of regularly residing in the country. So it's a big thing from the point of view of what is possibly one million young people in the US that are in this situation. Since then, on the 15th of August last year, they started to accept applications for DACA and in the first nine months they had received over half a million applications and the success rate is about 90%. So about 90% of those who applied have received the deferred action decision. So they are now living in a much better life. Young people, even if they are undocumented, have access to, for example, higher education and they also are able to speak out. So there is a very strong social movement of young undocumented migrants called 'the dreamers' which has been very vocal, both before the election and afterwards, trying to promote a more fully immigration reform. These days there is what seems to be a proposal of immigration reform under consideration by the House of Representatives in the US. It went already through the Senate and it's very progressive and a medium/long term way of thinking about immigration, which seems the opposite to what is happening in the UK at the moment.

**Sam: We've got this different approach in the US and this quite controversial approach in the UK at the moment. Are we going to see a positive change long term?**

Nando: What I can tell you, there is a need to think about the situation of the undocumented migrant children and young people in this country. This group of migrants is completely absent from the debate at the moment. In research I conducted last year I estimated 120,000 young undocumented migrants under 18 in the country at the moment and they are completely absent from any discussion. What this number tells us, it's not a huge number, we're talking about the 1% of the total under 18 population in the country. At the same time we're also talking about young people that were born in the UK, about 50% of them, or they arrived here when they were very young. So these young people, they are growing up in the country. They're learning English almost as their first language, they feel British, if not English, and they have no future. So there is really a need to think about what to do with these young people. The idea of sending them back home is not feasible and actually if you look at the statistic about forced removal, you will see that the number of young people that are sent back, it's minimal compared to the other population because there is an understanding that where are you going to send these young people back if they are born in the UK or they spend most of their time – they have no idea of the country of origin of their parents. They shouldn't be blamed for the decision of their parents or criminalised because of the decision their parents took. So there is an idea that we need to think about the future for these young people and there is groups of young undocumented and documented migrants that start to mobilise and campaign around these issues through various kinds of cultural initiatives, social movements like of action, which may bring the necessary shift in the debates that we need in order to create the space for any immigration reform also in this country.

**Sam: Well thanks for sharing that with us, Nando. Dr Nando Sigona, thanks very much.**

Nando: Thank you.

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