COVER STORY

Two Sisters, Two Americas

The fate of these siblings—and millions of other 'mixed-status' families like theirs—could depend on who wins the 2016 election

BY BROOKE ROSS

Diana Saravia, 14, was born in Maryland, so she's an American citizen.

ELI MEIR KAPLAN/WONDERFUL MACHINE

Diana Saravia, 14, and her older sister, Veronica Saravia, 21, aren't just siblings—they're best friends. They share many interests, including art and current events. Plus, Diana knows she can count on Veronica for things like rides to school and help with her math homework.

But there are some big differences between the sisters. Diana will be eligible to vote in elections after her 18th birthday. Veronica doesn't get a say in this year's presidential election, even though she's already old enough to cast a ballot. When Diana graduates from high school, she'll be able to apply for federal financial aid to go to college. Veronica isn't in college because she can't afford it—and she can't ask the federal government for a loan.

How can this be? Diana is a U.S. citizen, born in Maryland, where she's lived her whole life. Veronica, however, was born in El Salvador and was brought to the United States illegally by her parents when she was 10.

The Saravia sisters, along with their parents and brother, are part of what is often referred to as a "mixed-status

Watch a video on immigration at upfrontmagazine.com

Veronica Saravia, 21, was born in El Salvador and brought to the U.S. illegally as a child.

family"—a family whose members include people with different citizenship or immigration statuses. Almost 17 million people in the U.S. live in mixed-status households that include at least one undocumented immigrant. About a quarter of those people are children born in the U.S. and, like Diana, are citizens who live with at least one undocumented parent.

Members of mixed-status families face constant challenges, including getting and keeping jobs, discrimination, and—their greatest fear of all—being split up if one or more of them are deported.

Now, in a presidential election year, that worry is more real than ever. While President Obama has implemented policies intended to help some undocumented immigrants—even bypassing Congress at times to do so—his term is almost up. Some Republican candidates say they'll undo Obama's policies if elected, meaning many undocumented immigrants would be at risk of deportation.

That's Diana's biggest worry. "I don't want to be here all alone, separated from my family," she explains. "They're my family. I love them."

Fleeing Gang Violence

The family has been separated before. In the late 1990s, as poverty and gangs were taking over the streets of El Salvador, Diana's parents, Maria* and Miguel*, made a drastic decision. Temporarily leaving their two young children, Veronica, then 4, and Tony*, then 2, with relatives, the young couple fled their home in Intipucá, El Salvador, to build a better life in the U.S.

They slipped across the U.S.-Mexico border and settled in Maryland. Miguel found a job as a welder. Maria worked seven days a week at a dry cleaner. After they had been in the U.S. for about four years, Diana was born—with citizenship. (The 14th Amendment to the Constitution grants automatic citizenship to anyone born in the U.S.)

By 2005, the violence in El Salvador had escalated. Gang members—who believed Veronica and Tony's parents

*First name has been changed for privacy.

must be rich since they were living in the U.S.—started threatening the siblings. Maria and Miguel scrounged every penny they had to hire smugglers to bring the children to the U.S. Veronica remembers the journey vividly: "We were forced to walk for days," she says. "We couldn't eat. There were a few times I thought we weren't going to make it."

Along the way, the siblings, then 10 and 8, were split up. Tony made it into the U.S. undetected, but Veronica was detained by immigration officers at the border. After two weeks in a Texas detention center, she was turned over to her parents. Veronica had to appear in court, and soon after, she received a deportation letter. But she and her family never left the U.S.

An estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the U.S. The majority come from Mexico and Central America *(see map, facing page)*. Although the overall number of undocumented immigrants hasn't increased since 2009, in part because of beefed-up security at the border and a weaker economy in the U.S., most lawmakers agree that illegal immigration must be addressed.

But Democrats and Republicans have very different ideas for immigration reform. Democrats generally focus on creating a path to legalization for people already here illegally. They argue that such immigrants do jobs that few Americans want, like working on farms and cleaning homes.

The Saravia family: Diana *(left)* and Veronica *(right)* with their mother

Republicans tend to favor measures such as tightening border security to prevent more immigrants from coming here illegally; some support stepping up deportations because, they say, undocumented immigrants take jobs from Americans, commit crimes, and drain the country's resources.

Life in the Shadows

The Saravias' fear of being deported was constant. Veronica and Tony were able to attend public school—something that undocumented immigrants are allowed to do under a 1982 Supreme Court ruling. But the family had to move frequently (and the kids had to change schools) to avoid being discovered. It was a lonely childhood.

"I was scared to make friends, because I thought that if they found out I was undocumented, somebody would tell," Veronica explains.

The stress of the family's situation put a strain on Maria and Miguel's relationship, and they separated. During that time, Veronica admits she resented Diana, who, as a citizen, seemed to have far fewer worries than the rest of the family.

"I remember thinking: Why does Diana have this special treatment, and I don't?" she says.

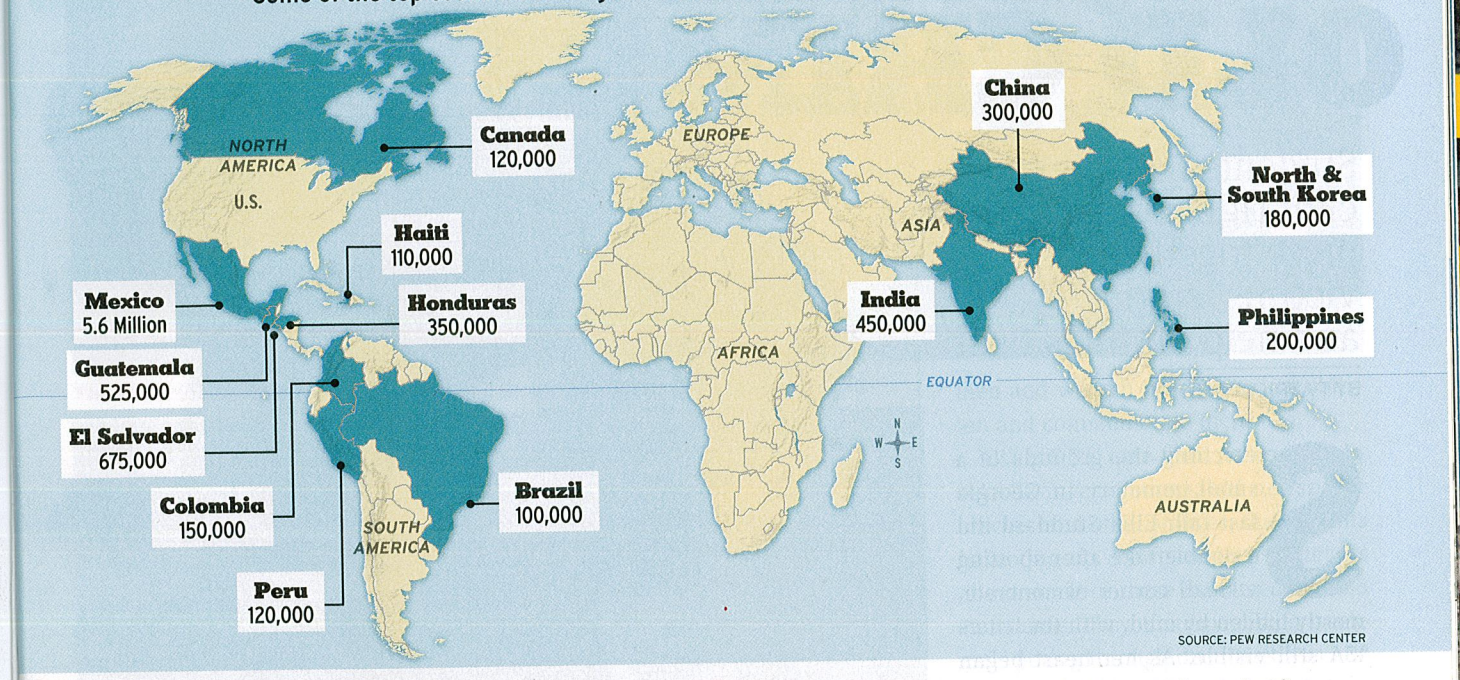
ELI MEIR KAPLAN/WONDERFUL MACHINE (SARAVIA FAMILY); TOM PENNINGTON/FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM/MCT VIA GETTY IMAGES (U.S. BORDER)

A Mexican woman climbs the fence at the U.S. border.

ELI MEIR KAPLAN/WONDERFUL MACHINE

Where Are Undocumented Immigrants From?

Some of the top countries of origin of undocumented immigrants currently in the U.S.



SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Life changed dramatically in the summer of 2012. With Congress unable to pass immigration reform, President Obama took matters into his own hands. He issued an executive order temporarily protecting from deportation up to 1.7 million young people who'd been brought to the U.S. illegally as children.

Veronica, who had just graduated from high school, applied for protection along with Tony, and both received it. Under the new program, called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the siblings didn't get a path to citizenship, but life was better: They no longer had to fear deportation, and they received Social Security numbers and permits to work in the U.S. legally.

"It was like a boulder had been lifted from my shoulders," Veronica says. "I started dreaming of all these possibilities—being able to have a job and not hide anymore."

For a short time in November 2014, it seemed as if Maria and Miguel might qualify for protection as well. After further attempts to enact immigration reform in Congress failed, Obama issued another executive order. This one would have temporarily protected approximately 5 million additional undocumented immigrants from deportation, including the parents of U.S. citizens.

Almost 17 million people live in 'mixed-status' households.

But conservative lawmakers accused the president of abusing his power. Within a month, 26 states filed a joint lawsuit against the Obama administration. Last fall, a federal appeals court in Louisiana ruled in the states' favor, preventing Obama's order from being carried out.

An Uncertain Road

The Obama administration appealed to the Supreme Court to overturn that ruling. Even though the Court has agreed to hear the case this term, the next president is almost certain to inherit the issue.

Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Clinton strongly supports Obama's immigration policies and has said she'll continue them if elected. But the Republican front-runner, businessman Donald Trump, says he'll undo Obama's executive orders on immigration. (A new president has the power to override a past president's executive orders.)

The road ahead remains uncertain for the Saravias, but in many ways, this mixed-status family is doing better than ever. Tony, 19, works as a cashier. Maria has found a new position—and better hours—as a nanny. And in 2013, Veronica got a job as a receptionist for a flower wholesaler. Since then, she has been promoted—twice—and today works in the company's sales department. With earnings she saved, Veronica recently was able to help her mother make a down payment on a four-bedroom house in District Heights, Maryland, where they now live with Tony and Diana.

Veronica says these positive changes have helped her stop resenting Diana for being a citizen: "I realized that it wasn't her fault. I just had to support her and help her take advantage of all the opportunities she has in this country that I unfortunately don't."

Meanwhile, Diana knows she carries the weight of her family's hopes on her shoulders. She plans to go to college and wants to become a lawmaker so she can fight for immigrants' rights.

"I think I might go into politics," she says. "Maybe I'll become the president one day." ●

JIM MCMAHON