

Adoptee Reactions: Immigration and Citizenship 2025

Susan Rodriguez Branco

Good afternoon and welcome. Thank you both so much for being here. In a few seconds, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourselves, but I want to start with a little bit of context for why we're all here together today. In January 2025 of this year, obviously renewed anxiety has happened, to include many questions for the thousands of intercountry adoptees in the United States. Specifically, while the Citizenship Act of 2000 ensured that adoptees who entered the United States were automatic citizens, this has been little comfort and confidence for adoptees who were naturalized before 2000, or for adoptees who never obtain their citizenship, as well as for adoptees who have lost or never received their paperwork from their adoptive families. Even for those adoptees who have all their documentation, there remains a collective concern that nothing is for sure or stable about their place in the United States. So that's kind of a context in which we're going to be having the discussion today.

I'll start by introducing myself briefly, and then I'll turn it to the both of you to share who you are. I am Susan Rodriguez Branco, and I'm a licensed professional counselor. I'm also an associate professor at Palo Alto University in their clinical mental health counseling program. And I am a transracial and transnational adoptee from Colombia, South America. I'm also a proud board member of Alianza of Colombian Adoptees, a nonprofit group created by and for members of the Global Colombian Adoptee Diaspora. So I'll turn it to either one of you to get started to share a bit about who you are.

CS Wright

So yes, I'm happy to hop in here. Thank you so much for having me. My name is CS Wright. I'm a South Korean born adoptee. Currently my full time job is, I work for a national nonprofit, overseeing their operations and finances, called Worth Rises. And then, outside of that, I'm an active working board member with an organization called Adoptees United. We really raise awareness around the complexities around international adoption, citizenship issues. We also work at the intersection of domestic and former foster youth and adoptees. Outside of that, I'm also really engaged in the, trans advocacy movement, making sure that we are getting access to, gender affirming care and different resources. So thank you so much for having me here.

Elena Di Giovanna Serrato

Excited to have this conversation. Welcome, thanks everyone for the invitation to share today on this topic. My name is Elena Di Giovanna Serrano, calling in from Bogota, Colombia. I'm a transracial adoptee from South America. In Colombia, I'm a social worker and also, am now Director of Healing Puentes, a 501c3 organization that seeks to support adoptees on their first adoption journey, facilitating searches, first reunion encounters and also securing their Colombian citizenship, by way of gaining the Colombian ID and passport. And thanks again for having me.

Susan

Wonderful. Well, welcome again to you both. To get things started, I'm aware that many webinars have happened, and there's been lots of communication about what's going on in the United States. So from your respective organizations and positions in the community, what is the general pulse of how our community collectively is feeling? And can you name some of the questions and worries you've been fielding.

CS

I'm happy to get us started. At Adoptees United, we have a free legal clinic, which is primarily focused on helping intercountry adoptees specifically with their citizenship issues. I would say for intercountry adoptees, there's definitely a heightened sense of uncertainty and concern, particularly around their citizenship status and filling those documentation gaps.

I think there's a lot of different documentation that everyday folks don't think about. Adoptees, intercountry adoptees do have to carry and worry about. And I would say, I don't think I'm naming anything that isn't already known here, but, I think that the general pulse is definitely just a mix of fear, confusion, anxiety. Just a need for clarity. And then I would say some of the questions that we're getting is, there's a lot of confusion about the Child Citizenship Act. So folks are asking, if they were adopted before 2000, are they a citizen? We then have some folks that are saying that my parents never got a certificate of citizenship, but I have my US passport, is that enough? So those are just a few of the things that we're hearing, at least on our side of things. Definitely. I think the bottom line is that there's just a deep feeling of concern, fear and confusion.

Elena

Thank you. I would echo that and share in monthly calls that we have for our community. There are also a lot of feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and confusion, especially around just the legal parts. So someone who's coming right into our community and starting off and coming into consciousness may not even see themselves as immigrants, but we are immigrants coming into the United States. So starting just from that baseline and then going into all states, I think the other webinars have been very helpful.

I think it's important for all of us to stay grounded. Beyond the legal part, I think what's really activating, whether people know it or not, is there's a threat to one's belonging. And also, just knowing which documents to carry, just like CS was saying. So I would have to say very similar parallels between our communities.

Susan

So I appreciate hearing about the overall kind of community mood is one of heightened anxiety, hypervigilance, uncertainty, clarity seeking. And, I'm hearing from both of you that this is stemming from just not knowing, particularly now that there's so many legal elements that maybe weren't part of our thinking or some people's thinking prior to now.

I can speak, in regard to what ACA was doing, even before the administration changed in December. Elena, you were so helpful to share with Colombian adoptees how they could seek

Colombian citizenship (or dual citizenship) in addition to the U.S. citizenship. That seemed to provide great comfort to many people since the administration changed. We've hosted another community, charla, as we call them, and all the emotions you're both describing are echoed, particularly in response to racial and ethnic profiling as well. Even if you have all these documents, the fear of being somehow caught up in some of the deportation proceedings, even if that may sound irrational, it's a very real fear that many people possess.

And then you also mentioned consciousness, which I appreciate. Elena. We're starting to look at this time period for many people as a rupture into what they knew about themselves, how they viewed their sense of belonging in the United States and the reality that many are not considered true Americans right now, given that we're all from somewhere else, despite our documentation. So I appreciate just hearing kind of the broad view that you're all experiencing.

So some of the next questions are going to be for you, specifically CS. I've been fortunate to attend some of the Adoptees United webinars, and they're really helpful and reassuring to hear some of the actual facts about the situation. But can you speak to the essential pieces of information all intercountry adoptees need in their possession to ensure their citizenship status is clear and secure?

CS

Yeah, sure. That's a great question. You know, like a lot of folks, I think there's confusion around birth certificates and adoption decrees and certificates of citizenship and naturalization certificates. There are definitely several different pathways to securing that. But some of the things, the 3 or 4 essential documents, which I think are a lot of documents to keep track of.

So the first one would be that **certificate of citizenship**. I mean, that is the most definitive proof of citizenship that you're going to have. It should be prioritized, even if you already have a passport. You know, we have folks asking, if I have a passport, am I okay? The certificate of citizenship is going to be the most definitive proof that you are a citizen. So that is number one.

If you can't get that, obviously there are some legal things. And I couldn't get all into the depths of what is going to be determined as a certificate of citizenship over a naturalization certificate. But there are some folks that are not eligible for that certificate of citizenship. And so in that regard, I would say prioritize that **naturalization certificate**.

Beyond that, you're going to want that **U.S. passport**. That'll also be proof of citizenship. It is not always accepted in certain legal situations, like if there are Social Security or state documentation issues, they might not accept the US passport, which is why it's really important to get one of those other certificates first and/or, if you don't have it, secure it now, or make sure you're working on that process.

The third thing is sort of an either/or/and. I guess I should say some folks might have multiple of these. So, the last piece of documentation that I suggest that they should have is, your

adoption decree and/or **the birth certificate**, whether that be a foreign or a US version available.

Now, there are some nuances around the US birth certificate that some intercountry adoptees get. It is not a legal form of verification. Typically in the states where that was provided, that specific US birth certificate is only valid within that state. So, for example, I was adopted into Colorado when I was a child from South Korea. My wonderful mother R.I.P to my mom, she was great, but she was so on top of things that she got like, I don't know, 50 copies of this birth certificate thinking that this is going to be just in case. But that birth certificate was only valid in Colorado. I couldn't use it when I decided to apply for college, and they asked for that verification stuff, that became invalid.

So those are the four things - one of the certificates, either a certificate of citizenship or a naturalization certificate prior to those first, your U.S passport and then the adoption decree and or birth certificate if you have it. Those are the ones that I would suggest.

Susan

Thank you very much. And also for offering kind of that personal piece about your own story, about making sure we check what we have, and checking laws because what we might think applies may not in other states. So that's important.

Another question towards you CS is, and also you, Elana, as well, for adoptees who were not initially aware of their citizenship status, how can they begin to address their concerns under the new administration, especially if they have missed critical documentation steps first?

CS

Well, my first suggestion would be not not to plug our legal clinic, but reach out to our free legal clinic. Greg (Luce) can help you to navigate some of these. But one of the things that you can do is that you can request a copy of your A-file, which almost every single person that comes through the United States Immigration Service who's an adoptee is going to have an A- file. And you can request that through the Freedom of Information Act, you can do a FOIA request. I, personally, haven't done it. I've heard sort of mixed reviews on how easy or how difficult it is. That's why I definitely suggest, if you do have questions about it, reach out to a legal clinic or reach out to somebody, some sort of legal person who can give you that advice.

Verifying all your documents? Look there over the years, there have been multiple different versions of certificates of citizenship as well as naturalization forms. Some folks are going to have naturalization forms. It's been a lot of questions about copies being able to make copies. Are those valid or not valid? Older versions. I can give you another example. My very first version of my naturalization form, my naturalization certificate had a note on it saying that copies were not legal. You could not make copies of it, that the only thing that was legal was that actual form, no copies of it. That has since changed. And so now you can make copies of them, but I would just check those, make sure, see what kind you have, see what kind you don't have. If you have the kind you can have copies of, make copies. Store copies in other places.

Obviously. I mean, I've kind of already mentioned this, but seeking out legal advice is a way that you can confirm citizenship status or figuring out how to gain those papers and figuring out what documentation you still need.

And then finally, the other way that you can just sort of start to piece things together. You know, I know legal advice isn't always the route for people. I think some people just have generalized questions about checking in on things. And I would say reaching out to the different advocacy groups, Adoptees United is one, NAKASEC, Adoptees For Justice are the three main ones that are really putting out really great information on how to check your status and making sure that you have all the right paperwork in.

Susan

Thank you. Yes. I'll add, I would endorse the plugs to Adoptees United because they're so helpful. On the website, I believe, there are... at least there used to be information about how one can go about seeking a FOIA request. So if you're not sure how to do that, the website offers a really nice walk through that is pretty user friendly.

Elena

Yeah, just to add on. So being that there's a lot of uncertainty, and sometimes people can get stuck in fear is to go out to like, acknowledge the fear, and reach out to, for example, Adoptees United. Before even reaching out, people might be getting stuck. But being informed about your own case, I think is key. And empowering yourself to know, and then you won't have to live as much in that uncertainty of what is my actual status. That's the only thing I wanted to add.

Susan

I really appreciate that, kind of moving past the fear that can feel paralyzing sometimes to getting facts about your own situation, taking a step back, looking at what you have, maybe getting a trusted friend or family member to go through that with you to really help you figure out what are the questions that I should be asking in the first place.

Okay, so IAMAdoptee received a question, and it is for adoptees whose parents never obtain the actual certificate of citizenship. Is this of concern? How essential is having the actual document even if one has a U.S. passport? And I know this was answered a little bit earlier, but what might we want to reemphasize?

CS

Yeah, I would just you know, again, the short answer is yes, the certificate, the citizenship is still essential. You know, here's sort of a very clear answer to that. A passport serves as proof of citizenship for folks, but it doesn't carry the same sort of legal weight as your certificate of citizenship. Like in cases of Social Security benefits or certain federal processes, your passport is kind of going to be irrelevant.

Now, the other really important thing to note is that passports expire. You've got to get those renewed. And there's an expiration date on it where your certificate of citizenship and the same

thing with your naturalization certificate are permanent documents. There is no question at all that you're a citizen or not. Once that passport expires, if you don't have any backup then there's no way to prove that.

So if your parents never obtained that certificate of citizenship, it's highly recommended that, yes, you apply for one, especially now for intercountry adoptees, it's free. So, you know, now is the time to do it. I hear it's a fairly semi-easy online process. I guess, the only time that it might be a little bit more difficult is if there are situations, there are some legal situations that can pop up where they're like, oh, you need to do this or whatever. And in that case, definitely reach out for legal advice. And we can get that squared away.

Susan

Thank you. Okay. While none of the issues facing intercountry adoptees are new. What is making this moment in time so fear inducing and anxiety provoking? And how would you want our community to think about this current moment in time in history?

Elena

I could start with this one. You know, for whatever reason, we were already taken from our birth countries without us having any say in it. And I think, like I mentioned before, it's triggering our sense of belonging and who we are and identity as citizens in the United States. On a deeper level, what I've been observing is there's, whether it's real or not, a threat to it, like taking away our home, the home that we created for ourselves that we had to in the United States.

And I think that's very overwhelming and scary. To be questioned again of who we are. Just like when we come back to our birth countries, if we don't speak the language or, we don't know completely everything about the culture, it's like, are you sure you're Colombian? You know? So it's like on another level we're being questioned again and it's out of our control. We didn't do anything to deserve this or have this happened to us. So on an identity, culture and sense of belonging and home, I think that's where it's really hitting. And, the other thing is, and CS can correct me if I'm wrong, I think where people are getting things confused is with the birthright citizenship thing. If I'm not mistaken, it doesn't really apply to us because we weren't born in the United States. So I feel like there's a lot of crossover, of confusion, of all the things that are being thrown at us. And my hope is that I would love our community to move eventually, and each person has their own process, to ground themselves and their selves, in their own home and their own family homes and focus in on that part. I think that might help with the anxiety and really staying close to the community and other people who are in the same position right now, I think can help buffer a little bit, the collective anxiety and narrative that is happening around this paperwork business.

Susan

Thank you, Elena.

CS

Yeah. I mean, I would just add, I think, you hit on a key piece with the birthright announcement. I think what we can determine from the current administration and from folks that are who are actively trying to take not just the rights away from immigrants, but from other communities as well, is that the goal is to create chaos and confusion. And, the more sort of headline inducing things that they can put out, the more confusion and anxiety it's going to cause. Because your head is on a swivel. You know, one day it's immigration and the next day it's abortion rights, and the next day it's taking away DEI, and the next day we're back on an immigration thing.

I think we also talked about staying grounded within our own home and saying, these are the things that I need to be focused on. It's like, what are the things that I can actively control? What are the things that I can actually take care of right now? Because that's going to continue. I mean, I don't see that chaos and confusion stopping for the next four years. I see it continuing. And so how do we continue to figure out collectively as a community and as a society, figure out how we ground ourselves so we can actually focus on the things that matter?

You know, and we're going to continue to see crazy legislation things on a federal and on a local level. So, one way we can continue to fight that some of that anxiety is continuing to have adoptees come forward and talking about their stories, continuing to share these things that are happening within our communities, because that's the only way that we can also get activated and help one another. And I think especially for the organizations that are providing direct resources to adoptees and to their communities, that's also one way that we can figure out where the gaps are and how can we actually provide the services that you guys need to do the things that you need to do?

Susan

Excellent guidance. This next question is kind of building off of what you've already started to speak about in terms of how we can take care of ourselves and stay grounded. So what are ways, in addition to what's already been shared, our fellow adoptees can stay informed with grounded information?

Elena

I don't have too much to add, but I would say to be very selective of where you're getting your information, even from within the adoptive community. If you're reading a post that's causing maybe, like CS said, that chaos, maybe that's not the type of communication, that would be the most helpful, in terms of stirring up fear and such and also limiting how much you can take in in a day or a week. In my opinion, from what I've been reading and seeing, a lot of the information is the same. And so if you feel like you, you've got what you need, then maybe that's good for that week. And, and then you move forward in that and limit the rest.

CS

Yeah. I mean, I would just reiterate following reputable organizations. Again, there's Adoptees for Justice. There's y'all, I AM Adoptee, who are putting out great information as well. The National Korean American services, NAKASEC, and Adoptees United, all putting out really

useful information; continuing to engage in community conversations, attending webinars, join online adoptee networks, participate in advocacy efforts.

I know that there's a lot of folks really actively working for the adoptee citizenship act to try and close that loophole. That's a great place to put some of that energy if you're like, how do I get activated, engaged? And then again just reiterating too be mindful of the misinformation, especially on social media, there are going to be things that are going to be put out there specifically to induce anxiety and fear and just be checking in with those reputable organizations and doing your research, so that way you're not continuing to add to that anxiety and fear in the community.

Susan

Very helpful guidance. The next question is a bit personal. So, feel comfortable to share what you'd like. But as members of the community, how are you digesting your personal narratives in response to all that's going on right now?

Elena

I think for me, it's a little bit different. I'm not currently living in the United States, and I haven't for a while. However, if I was living there and I placed myself in that situation, I would be really remembering that I decided at the end of the day, who I am doesn't represent any government, whether it's Colombia or the United States. I decide who I am and where I belong. For me, I'm from here, from Colombia, and I'm from the United States. And, I know that's easier said than done when you're when if you're seeing people and ICE walking out on the street and you wonder if you have the correct paperwork on you and, yeah, those are some of the self affirmations and that I would be telling myself and just being strong in myself and, on purpose, not falling into the narrative of the chaos and fear, even if on the outside, even if I'm feeling it on the inside, maybe, like if I'm walking on the street, especially if there happens to be an authority there. They don't have to know about what's great or not. So yeah, that's what I would say. And I'm. And I'm just a proud dual citizen of both countries. I mean, and I would always encourage Colombian adoptees to really, I know a lot are already thinking about it, but securing their Colombian citizenship, just in case.

CS

Yeah, thanks for that. For me, my entire life, from my work life to my personal life is wrapped up in advocacy work. And I think sometimes, I do get very hyper focused on issue spaces, and it's sometimes really hard for me to get separated from it. I'm very lucky that I have a very, very good community support here where I live. I live in the Pacific Northwest. And I've been very grateful to have a strong community of adoptees here in the Portland area, as well as also just a really great partner and family support in that way. And that's one way that I'm trying to stay grounded.

I think my issues span beyond just adoptees. I'm also worried about trans issues. And that really concerns me. And I'm also worried about, beyond just adoptee immigration issues. I'm worried about citizenship for everybody. I'm worried about this increased focus on corporations profiting

off of jailing folks. And it's something that, for me, I think I do struggle. It's overwhelming. And so I can only imagine how some other folks are feeling sometimes in this community. And I, not to plug and force people, but I very much lean into my therapy practice very heavily. I think that's really important, especially in times like this, is making sure that you have a good therapist in your back pocket so you can have a place to put some of that energy so you're not affecting others in that way. And, so that's kind of what I'm doing now is I'm trying to find those little moments of joy, whether it be watching some stupid reality show or blocking out some time to go on a walk with my dog. Those are really the things that I've been leaning into these days.

Susan

Thank you both for sharing some of your strategies and what you're doing right now. And as a professional counselor, I'm always going to endorse leaning into counseling and therapy, especially in times of significant need, like now.

So as we close out this conversation and we acknowledge the anxiety, confusion and distress cycle that seems to be part of our community again, but heightened, I'm hopeful that you might share, you've already started to share this, but any other strategies that you are engaging in for wellness and self-care at this moment? Now, I know that's a term we talk about frequently, but love to hear more if you have any additional things you'd like to share.

Elena

I'd like to add. I'd like to be very mindful of who you're discussing this with. I know many adoptees are in contact and do have good relationships with their adoptive parents. However, they may have a different view and understanding of what's going on. So if you're looking - like the normal support you will be looking for them, just to rethink and be mindful. They might not be able to, if they're not at a spot in consciousness that this is an actual, real issue in the daily life of many adoptees walking on the street. Because most of our adoptive parents are white and do not, are not connecting to this. And so to not have another loss of support or grief of what's going on - some of the adoptees in our collective, there's like another separation happening even within their family and friends because they can't speak to. So speak to people who actually understand, so you can maintain that sense of belonging, at least in your social circle, if that makes sense.

CS

Yeah, I would just I would just add to that, I recently took a training not that long ago, and we really talked about accountability pods and building an accountability pod of people that not only hold you accountable, but are able to hold that space for you when things are tough, when things are, you know, very, very difficult. And I feel like without realizing it, I already have a couple of accountability pods that I, we are constantly checking in with one another. And we have a text message thread is just a whole novel because we are constantly making sure that each other is doing okay and that we are in good head spaces and that we are getting our needs met in the way that we need in that space. So I would just really encourage that really find those 2 to 3 people that you can really, really count on always and hold each other accountable. The other thing is that people get confused about accountability. This is also just

making sure, like holding someone accountable for being like, hey, I haven't heard from you in 4 to 5 days. Like, what is going on? How are you doing? So not just like, hey, did you take the trash out? It's not that. It's like really just making sure that people are taking care of themselves and holding people accountable in that space. And so I really, really encourage that for folks.

Susan

I really like those ideas, particularly accountability of care. And continuity. I can add that, something a wise person is with us. Elena, once shared with me as a suggestion, is to be in nature or feel the grass under your feet. Remember, we are part of the earth in this world, and for me, it's helpful to think about my ancestors, who, despite a lot of odds, are still, we're still around from that time, so that helps me greatly.

As well as movement and moving my body in some kind of way can be very healing. So all these are really helpful ideas and really the through line is community and how we stay connected with a community that's affirming, knowing our boundaries to know when maybe these are not the groups of people that we can turn to for validation and support, and really using that to hold ourselves accountable to being okay during this time.

I want to thank you both so much for spending some time today to answer some questions and share your wisdom and guidance with our community. I AM Adoptee seeks to curate mental health and wellness resources to help intercountry adoptees, supporters like Side by Side Project and the Choi-Sargent Family enable our work at I AM Adoptee to provide programs like the Therapeutic and Wellness Subsidy Program and to facilitate conversations like we had today. For questions or queries, connect with us at connect@iamadoptee.org and find us on Facebook and Instagram at IAMAdoptee and visit our website at IAMADOPTEE.org.

Thank you again both of you for being here today. Take good care of yourselves and we will wish good care for our community as well.