

How the “Zero Tolerance” Family Separation Policy Harmed Children and Families

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Perhaps ironically – because it is the national holiday of family togetherness – Thanksgiving 2021 marked the fourth anniversary of public knowledge that the U.S. government’s “zero tolerance” policy that separated children from their families. On November 25, 2017, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that the prior administration had been separating parents who crossed the border with children.¹ Initially, the *Chronicle* reported evidence of 22 separations. We now know that more than 5,000 children were separated from their parents in 2017 and 2018 – typically without a plan for reuniting with parents or other family. 1727 children remained separated from family as of September 30, 2021.²

The family-separation separation hurt children. Family separation hurt parents and extended family members. **This brief summarizes the current research on the specific harm and costs of family separation to those affected.** The brief then contextualizes the specific harms within a broader research base. Family separations produce long-lasting trauma – potentially lifelong – in both migrant children and their parents, aptly encapsulated by Kelly Edyburn and Shantel Meek:

“Even short experiences of detention, particularly when children are separated from parent and caregivers, are associated with serious, lasting negative effects across every domain of functioning.”³

Finally, the brief recaps a new paper that quantifies the cost to each child and each family of the family separation policy: at minimum, tens of thousands of dollars per child, but likely much higher.

Direct Harmful Effects of the Family-Separation Policy on Children and Parents

In two papers, Sarah MacLean and her colleagues⁴ interviewed 73 mothers of separated children and 425 mothers detained with children in family detention centers. The research team used two standardized instruments – essentially, surveys with associated procedures that allow comparison across many different populations – to assess the behaviors of children and to determine the prevalence of trauma. Their research

¹ Kriel 2017

² Interagency Task Force 2021

³ Edyburn and Meek 2021

⁴ MacLean et al. 2020; MacLean et al. 2019

verifies that **under the family-separation policy, children were unnecessarily traumatized by separation and by placement in family detention centers with or without parents:**

- Detained children had twice the rate of severe emotional or behavior difficulties, when compared to the baseline U.S. child population
- Separated children had three times the rate of severe emotional or behavior difficulties, when compared to the baseline U.S. child population
- Detained adolescents had a rate of post-traumatic stress disorder that is three and a half times higher than the baseline U.S. child population
- Separating children from parents traumatized the child, regardless of how long a child is kept from a parent

A second paper, led by Kathryn Hampton,⁵ analyzed clinical assessments for 31 individuals subject to family separation, made as part of their asylum cases. In a typical case, they report, children were separated from parents without “any explanation as to why they were being separated, where their family members were being sent, and if / how they would be reunited.” **Children separated by the U.S. government regularly displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The negative effects of separation for children and parents persisted for years.** In Hampton’s study:

- 88% of parents subject to family separation showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); the remainder exhibited features of trauma but that did not reach the level prescribed by DSM-V
- 100% of children exhibited symptoms of PTSD, major depressive disorder, or generalized anxiety disorder
- Children and parents continued to experience “significant distress and ongoing functional impairment” due to separation—even years later

Readers should note that MacLean’s studies and Hampton’s study measured different things – prevalence criteria for a survey and diagnostic criteria for a clinician, respectively – and aggregating their results into one mathematical statement would be incorrect.

A case study from the *New England Journal of Medicine* substantiates these population-wide findings.⁶ The case concerns a seven-year-old girl who arrived at the US-Mexico border with her mother, from whom she was separated for two months. **The seven-year-old’s trauma manifested in the textbook symptoms of PTSD: lack of interest in activities she had previously enjoyed; trouble concentrating; alternately fear of and aggression towards her schoolmates; and food aversion, only eating soup from a cup.** The child also was troubled by catastrophic thinking, separation anxiety, and irritability. In confirming the PTSD diagnosis, the clinicians added the following note: **“this diagnosis does not convey the intensity of her symptoms or**

⁵ Hampton et al. 2021

⁶ Gartland, Hidalgo and Danaher 2020

the degree of her functional impairment.” They note that the child benefits from a loving relationship with her mother.

The Research Base on Family Separation

Decades of research in child development have made clear that parent-child attachment is crucial to healthy cognitive, social, and emotional development.⁷ Family separation interrupts attachments, in some cases for years.⁸ These effects go beyond the effects of trauma in home country or in the migration journey.⁹ Separated children are doubly impacted by the removal of their parents because parents buffer children from the emotional and psychological effects of adverse events. In short, children are hurt in the first instance through the trauma effects from losing the parent, and in the second, by making the child less capable of emotional regulation in stressful situations and more susceptible to multiple traumas arising from outside.¹⁰

Consistent evidence documents the negative impacts of separating families, and in particular the harms to children when separated from parents.¹¹ For children, research finds that separations harm children’s physical health, hurt children’s mental health, slow children’s learning in schools, delay or regress child development, and damage families even beyond the immediate relationship of the separated parent and child.¹² Some key findings include:

- **A separation from a parent is a “major traumatic exposure” for a child¹³**
- **The effects of separation are durable, even years after reunification¹⁴**
- **Child-parent separation has negative consequences for children of all ages, not only younger children¹⁵**
- **Separation from a parent is particularly damaging to a child’s emotional attachment to a parent, and effects on attachment specifically persist after reunification¹⁶**
- **Children separated from parents perform worse in school¹⁷**
- **Family separations negatively affect the parents, and are associated with PTSD and major depressive disorder¹⁸**

⁷ Edyburn and Meek 2021

⁸ Miller et al. 2018; Cohodes et al. 2021

⁹ Dreby 2015; Bouza et al. 2018; MacLean et al. 2019; Cohodes et al. 2021

¹⁰ Cohodes et al. 2021

¹¹ Bouza et al. 2018

¹² Edyburn and Meek 2021

¹³ Cohodes et al. 2021

¹⁴ Bouza et al. 2018; Edyburn and Meek 2021; Lu, He and Brooks-Gunn 2018

¹⁵ Bouza et al. 2018

¹⁶ Suárez-Orozco, Todorova and Louie 2002; Miller et al. 2018; Wood 2018

¹⁷ Gonzalez and Patler 2020

¹⁸ Lorek et al. 2009

Interested readers should refer to the longer reviews by Johayra Bouza and colleagues as well as that of Edyburn and Meek for a more in-depth treatment of studies from around the world.¹⁹

The direct harms to children caused by the family separation policy were foreseeable, as the research base shows. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called family separation “abuse” and the policy of family separation “unconscionable.”²⁰ Medical experts,²¹ scientific associations,²² and advocacy organizations²³ all condemned the practice of family separation as soon as it became public. Reporting from inside the Department of Health and Human Services also shows that federal child-welfare experts opposed the policy but were overruled.²⁴ Preliminary research with staff at Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) providers during family separation also showed that child-welfare professionals immediately recognized that children subject to family separation showed more signs of acute distress than comparable populations of immigrant children in federal care.²⁵

At What Cost?

Family separation was initially justified as a deterrent.²⁶ This idea is, to echo the UN, indefensible: Children do not manage their parents’ behavior and cannot be held responsible for the consequences of their parents’ actions. Also relevant is that most of the separated families asked for asylum, which is legal, and so were made to endure deep psychological and emotional harm for following proper procedure.

A recent academic paper led by Joseph Mattingly II attempts to model the potential economic impact of child-parent separation. Following appropriate academic practice, the analysis excludes the later consequences of exposure to trauma in childhood because literature is lacking on how to quantify the exposures and consequences, which include “attempted suicide, illicit drug use, alcoholism, sleep disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, and overall mortality.”²⁷ Even without these, **the “conservative estimate” of the research is \$34,544 per child over five years and \$51,875 per child over a decade.** Costs to parents will add to this figure. Importantly, the **costs were modeled on health costs in the children’s home countries** – underestimating some costs because health care in the United States is dramatically more expensive. The researchers conclude that their estimates would be substantially higher if downstream consequences of the trauma of family separation could be modeled rigorously.

The policy choice to separate migrant families inflicted “significant mental distress” on children²⁸ and is near certain to have detrimental consequences for the rest of the lives of the children and parents.

¹⁹ Bouza et al. 2018, Edyburn and Meek 2021

²⁰ Al Hussein 2018

²¹ Teicher 2018

²² American Psychological Association 2019

²³ Habbach, Hampton and Mishori 2020

²⁴ Soboroff 2020

²⁵ Roth et al. 2019

²⁶ Hirschfeld Davis and Shear 2018

²⁷ Mattingly et al. 2020

²⁸ MacLean et al. 2019

The policy was created in direct conflict with available evidence on children’s wellbeing, on family wellbeing, on legal access to protection, and was created and continued against the advice of experts. Family separation represents a massive failing. The U.S. government must never again separate children and families, and must continue to provide mental health treatment for all affected by forced separation.

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