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How Family Separation Harmed Children and Families

Perhaps ironically – because it is the national holiday of family togetherness – Thanksgiving 2021 marked the fourth anniversary of public knowledge of the U.S. government’s family separation policy. On November 25, 2017, the Houston Chronicle reported that the prior administration had been separating parents who crossed the border with children, as part of its “zero tolerance” policy [12]. The Chronicle reported evidence of 22 separations. Now we know that more than 5,000 children were separated from their parents in 2017 and 2018, typically without a plan for reunification. At least 279 remain separated today.

The policy of family 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” [6]. 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 effects of the Family Separation Policy on Children and Parents

In two papers, Sarah MacLean and her colleagues [15] 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 verifies that children are unnecessarily traumatized by separation and by placement in family detention centers with or without parents:

- Detained children have twice the rate of severe emotional or behavior difficulties, when compared to the baseline U.S. child population
- Separated children have three times the rate of severe emotional or behavior difficulties, when compared to the baseline U.S. child population
- Detained adolescents have 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 traumatizes the child, regardless of how long a child is kept from a parent

A second paper, led by Kathryn Hampton [10], 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.” 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 [7]. 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 the degree of her functional impairment." They note that the child benefits from a loving relationship with her mother.

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 [6]. Family separation interrupts attachments, in some cases for years [18]. These effects go beyond the effects of trauma in home country or in the migration journey [5]. 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 [9].

Consistent evidence documents the negative impacts of separating families, and in particular the harms to children when separated from parents [3]. 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 [6]. Some key findings include:

- A separation from a parent is a "major traumatic exposure" for a child [4].
- The effects of separation are durable, even years after reunification [3].
- Child-parent separation has negative consequences for children of all ages, not only younger children [3].
- Separation from a parent is particularly damaging to a child's emotional attachment to a parent, and effects on attachment specifically persist after reunification [21].
- Children separated from parents perform worse in school [8].
- Family separations negatively affect the parents, and are associated with PTSD and major depressive disorder [13].

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 [3].

The direct harms to children caused by the family separation policy were foreseeable, as the research base shows. Medical experts [22], scientific associations [2], and advocacy organizations [9] all condemned the practice of family separation as soon as it became public. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called family separation "abuse" and the policy of family separation "unconscionable" [1].

Reporting from inside the Department of Health and Human Services also shows that federal child-welfare experts opposed the policy, but were overruled [20].

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 [19].

At What Cost?

Family separation was initially justified as a deterrent [11]. 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 attempts to model the potential economic impact of child–parent separation. Following appropriate academic practice, the analysis left out the later consequences of childhood trauma exposure 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” [17]. 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 a way to include later consequences resulting from trauma could be modeled.

The policy choice to separate migrant families inflicted “significant mental distress” on children [16] and is near certain to have detrimental consequences for the rest of the lives of the children and parents. 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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United States Issue Updates

Biden Administration Restarts and Expands Controversial 'Remain in Mexico' Program

On December 2nd, the Biden administration announced the reimplementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the 'Remain in Mexico' program. A Trump era immigration policy, MPP was responsible for sending nearly 70,000 asylum seekers, primarily from Spanish speaking countries in Latin America, back across the Southern U.S. border into dangerous areas in Mexico to await their immigration hearings. The reinstatement came as a result of a Texas district court injunction ordering the Biden administration to restart the program 'in good faith', despite widespread criticism about its devastating effects on migrants. While the Biden administration has expressed its opposition to the program, its reimplementation beginning as early as December 6th contradicts this position, as the lower court's injunction did not specify a date on which the program must go into effect. Additionally, this iteration of the program has expanded protocols to "nationals of any country in the Western Hemisphere other than Mexico," including non-Spanish speaking migrants from Haiti, Jamaica, and Brazil. The administration has issued statements outlining safeguards to protect asylum seekers enrolled in MPP, but has not yet provided details about how these will be implemented. To read the announcement, [click here](#).

DHS Launches Implementation of New Immigration Enforcement Priorities

On November 29th, the Department of Homeland Security began to implement the Guidelines for the Enforcement of Civil Immigration Law, a memorandum signed by Secretary Mayorkas on September 30th. The memo outlines new guidelines that seek to refocus enforcement efforts onto those who pose a direct threat to national security, public safety, and border security, meaning no undocumented persons may be deported for simply not having legal papers. Under this guidance, border patrol and ICE officers must obtain and review entire criminal and administrative records, and should not rely on the fact of a single conviction, or a data base search, alone as grounds for deportation. Officers are undergoing extensive training on the new guidelines, and the agency will be imminently putting forth a case review process.

Biden Administration Reinstates Administrative Closure for Immigration Judges

In light of a decision issued by Attorney General Garland in July, the authority of Immigration Judges (IJ) and the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) to administratively close cases was restored, and practical implications were laid out in a memo released on November 22nd. Administrative Closure enables IJs and the BIA to close cases prior to a formal decision on one's case being made, which enables a temporary pause on removal cases in appropriate circumstances. The decision to reinstate Administrative Closure is a welcome one for immigration lawyers and advocates. To read the full memo, [click here](#).

CBP Issues New Guidance for Treatment of Pregnant and Infant Detainees

Customs and Border Protection (CBP) released on November 29th new guidelines for the treatment of pregnant, postpartum, breastfeeding, and infant detainees, after reports about the agency's lack of care infrastructure for this population. Acting Commissioner Troy Miller outlined measures for Field Offices and Border Patrol stations, such as installing changing stations and accessible private spaces for breastfeeding and providing medical care and welfare checks at specific intervals to pregnant and postpartum individuals.

United States Issue Updates (cont.)

Notably, Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced **earlier this year** that it will suspend or delay immigration enforcement against pregnant women – this CBP memo, in contrast, is not intended to change the immigration status of detainees, but is focused on improving care.

Congress Approves New Continuing Resolution Without an Afghan Adjustment Act

Just a day ahead of the December 3rd deadline, Congress passed another short-term **Continuing Resolution (CR)** to keep the government funded. The CR is essentially an extension of the previous one approved in late September, yet with an inclusion of an additional \$7 billion of funding to the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Homeland Security to support Operation Allies Welcome, and other activities related to the resettlement of nearly 70,000 Afghan evacuees. Unfortunately, an Afghan Adjustment Act (AAA), which would enable many of the Afghan evacuees who do not have a pathway to citizenship to adjust their legal status, was not included in the Continuing Resolution. This exclusion was a blow to veterans groups, human rights organizations, and immigration and refugee advocates who have been working to ensure Afghan evacuees who entered the country on Humanitarian Parole will not be status-less when their parole expires. Advocates have now shifted focus to pushing for the inclusion of the AAA in either the next Continuing Resolution in February, or the full Budget Omnibus.

Around the World in International Migration

Rising Flood Waters Threaten Camp for Displaced Individuals in South Sudan

The Bentiu Camp in South Sudan, currently housing more than 100,000 internally displaced South Sudanese people, is at risk of massive flooding. Bentiu, whose population has grown by 30,000 over the last few months due to flooding in surrounding areas, has essentially become an island protected by dikes that aid workers fear are on the verge of breaking. Already, the local sewage plant has been cut off by the flooding, and the possibility for waterborne disease outbreaks is high. Unfortunately, weather forecasts indicate more rain in the future, and the prognosis is catastrophic. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recently allocated \$13 million for urgent response to large scale flooding in the country, and the government of South Sudan has also pumped millions into flood response efforts.

Urgent Humanitarian Assistance Needed for Forcibly Displaced Afghans

3.5 million displaced Afghans, including 700,000 that have been displaced this year alone, are in acute need of humanitarian aid, according to UNHCR, OCHA, and UNHCHR. Inadequate access to food, insufficient fuel for heating, and lack of insulated clothing are only a few of the catastrophes that displaced Afghans are facing. Recently, the World Food Programme reported that all 34 provinces in the country are facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. Corresponding crises of high displacement rates and humanitarian duress are due, in part, to Afghanistan's economic turmoil after the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's new position as de facto government. Multiple UN agencies and other INGOs are mobilizing to provide urgent aid, but are racing against the inclement winter weather.

U.S., UK, Canada, and EU Ramp Up Sanctions on Belarus Amid Illegal Migration Crisis

Sanctions against dozens of entities and individuals in Belarus were imposed on December 2nd by the U.S. and allies in a coordinated effort to take punitive action against President Alexander Lukashenko and his government. Lukashenko, whose governmental regime looks increasingly authoritarian, has been accused by EU countries of attempting to create a "migrant standoff" in the Eastern European bloc, by encouraging thousands of Middle Eastern and North African migrants to illegally cross borders into Poland and Lithuania. In response, Poland aggressively pushed these migrants back to the border, resulting in thousands of migrants stuck in between countries, unable to obtain their rightful asylum screenings, and navigating freezing temperatures, and dwindling access to supplies or medical care. While it is clear Poland bears responsibility for this crisis, the EU has alleged that Lukashenko initially manufactured it to enact revenge on Western Europe for previously imposed sanctions. The latest round of sanctions indicate big action from the U.S. and allies, yet there is more room to escalate if the need emerges.



USCRI's Action and Resources on Afghanistan

For more information about the crisis in Afghanistan, resources for Afghan allies, and updates, please check out the links below:

[Resources for Afghan Allies](#)

[Human Faces of the Crisis in Afghanistan](#)

[USCRI Statement Calling for Extension of Evacuations](#)

[USCRI Snapshot: Humanitarian Parole for Afghan Evacuees](#)

Upcoming Meetings & Events

Labor Trafficking Screening and Interviewing

This event will provide in-depth knowledge of labor trafficking screening and interviewing procedures. Topics include understanding the purpose of screening for trafficking, a review of existing screening tools, best practices, legal considerations, and common pitfalls. This training is tailored for anti-trafficking service providers with beginning understanding of survivor screening and interviewing. Learners will gain the ability to determine the best screening questions for crisis and intake situations. Register [here](#)

When: Live webinar, Tuesday, December 14, 2021 from 2:00pm-3:00pm EST

Join the Immigrant and Refugee Mental Health Project's monthly webinar series

This webinar speaks the story of separated refugee youth that experience numerous challenges in their settlement impacting their mental health and well-being, and our evidence informed call for action strategies for systemic uptake of those findings into practices. Social determinants of health including language barriers, discrimination, settlement process delay, limited access to education, challenges finding affordable accommodation and employment are key factors impacting the youth. Register [here](#).

When: Wednesday December 15, 2021
1:00 PM – 2:00 PM EST

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