

American Orthopsychiatric Association

The Impact of Immigration Enforcement on Children and Families

Adoption:

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Introduction

There is little doubt that the U.S. immigration system is broken. A lack of comprehensive legislative reform at the federal level has resulted in the use of enforcement-only policies. Such policies have not only been ineffective in enhancing national security and curbing unauthorized immigration, but have also been costly and had severe consequences for unauthorized workers and their families. Particularly harmed by current enforcement operations (e.g., worksite and home enforcement raids) are the approximately 5.5 million children with at least one unauthorized parent, about three-fourths of which are U.S. citizens (Passel & Cohn, 2009). These children are at risk in part because they live with the fear that their parents can be arrested at any time, separated from them, and eventually deported.

Their fears are not unfounded. On any given day, the federal government holds more than 32,000 detainees, with an average of 380,000 detainees held each year (Schriro, 2009). Most detention centers are located in remote areas, and detainees may be placed in or transferred to a center that is far away from their homes. Meaningful contact with family members is difficult if not impossible.

Purpose/Problem Statement

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has not collected information on the number of children that detained parents have or whether both parents were detained, which makes it difficult to estimate the number of children who have been affected. Using data from the Urban Institute, which estimates that for every two adults detained during a raid, at least one child is impacted, the number of children affected by parental detention in immigration cases appears to be well into six figures each year.

Given the large number of children involved, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to the effects detention can have. Two studies have been conducted by the Urban Institute on the effects of immigrant enforcement practices on children. The first study (Capps, Castaneda, Chaudry & Santos, 2007) described how fear, isolation, and economic hardship resulted in depression, separation anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal thoughts. The study found that few affected immigrants sought mental health care for themselves or their children due to fear of the possible consequences and difficulties in accessing help.

A follow up study examined the consequences of parental arrest, detention, and deportation on 190 children in 85 families in six locations across the country (Chaudry et al., 2010). In addition to experiencing economic hardship, in the short term, six months or less after

an arrest, about two-thirds of children experienced changes in eating and sleeping habits. More than half of children in the study cried more often and were more afraid, and more than a third were more anxious, withdrawn, clingy, angry, or aggressive. A majority of children experienced four or more of these behavior changes. Children who witnessed their parents arrested at home had even greater changes in sleeping and eating patterns, much higher degrees of fear and anxiety, and multiple behavioral changes.

These studies suggest that children and youth who experience sudden separation from their primary caregivers face a variety of serious risks that can threaten their overall well-being. Because there is no systematic approach to study the consequences of immigration enforcement practices on children, most of what is known remains anecdotal. Congressional testimony provided in 2008 indicated that children who had been affected by a raid experienced sleep disturbance, loss of appetite, depression, fearfulness, mood swings, and feelings of abandonment. An elementary school principal described how a raid affected children from her school as follows: “They shined bright flashlights in the faces of young children who were still asleep. They handcuffed parents in front of their children and took them away, threatening that they would soon be back for others. They left behind them a trail of fear.”

A growing body of research has filled some gaps in ICE-related issues by demonstrating wide-ranging consequences of sudden caregiver-child separation, one of the most damaging outcomes of raids (Rodriguez & Hagan, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). Additionally, an increasing number of studies have begun to investigate children’s experiences as they specifically relate to immigration raids, cases of detention or deportation and other stressful events. Some documented outcomes include fear of discovery and anxiety, depressive, and post-traumatic stress symptoms and reactions (Capps et al., 2007; Chaudry et al., 2010; Pumariega & Rothe, 2010).

Policy/Position Statement

Ortho is gravely concerned about the conflict between child welfare and current immigration enforcement practices. Under the current system, families are torn apart and caregivers detained and deported. Immigration enforcement has gone against every value we place on protecting vulnerable children from harm. Protecting children is a core American value and is enshrined in international human rights instruments. Such protection is to be afforded regardless of parental actions and legal status; yet, there is no consistent standard to ensure that children are cared for during and after immigration enforcement proceedings.

Ortho encourages an interdisciplinary dialogue among mental health professionals, child advocates, policymakers, and other stakeholders in order to address gaps in existing immigration enforcement practices and prevent to the greatest extent possible the separation of families. Given what is known about the effects of detention and related enforcement mechanisms currently being employed by ICE, Ortho supports the development of a comprehensive immigration reform that incorporates family-centered policies and promotes family unity. To achieve this goal, it is critical that the United States develop a consistent unified strategy that ensures the best interest of the child. Respect and protection of the rights of the child is the key to changing harmful practices that currently define the immigration enforcement system.

References

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