



Addressing Health Consequences of Immigration Policies

Introduction

The potential for increased enforcement of federal immigration regulations has raised concerns among health care providers and their patients about individual rights and responsibilities. It is essential that all physicians, but especially family physicians and other primary care physicians, know their rights and responsibilities before responding to enforcement actions by immigration officials and interactions with law enforcement that could result in immigration consequences.

What are the key health implications of family separation and detention?

Family separation and detention can complicate and exacerbate existing trauma among vulnerable populations. As noted by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), separating children from their parents exposes them to “toxic stress” that can disrupt healthy development and lead to lifelong negative impacts on their mental and physical wellbeing. In the short term, toxic stress can increase the risk and frequency of infections in children as high levels of stress hormones suppress the body’s immune system. It can also result in developmental issues due to reduced neural connections to important areas of the brain. Toxic stress is associated with damage to areas of the brain responsible for learning and memory. Over the long term, toxic stress may manifest as poor coping skills and stress management, unhealthy lifestyles, adoption of risky health behaviors, and mental health issues, such as depression. Toxic stress is also associated with increased rates of physical conditions into adulthood, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, obesity, ischemic heart disease, diabetes, asthma, cancer, and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹

Children in families where a parent has been detained and deported exhibit significant changes in behavior that can include “changes in eating and sleeping, frequent crying, increased fear and anxiety, and/or withdrawal or anger.”² Some children experience “speech and developmental difficulties, including regression and reversal of developmental milestones.”³ Studies show high levels of psychiatric distress, including depression and post-traumatic stress, among detained asylum seekers, even after short detention periods, and that symptoms worsen over time.⁴ Global studies also show significant effects for children held in detention, including depression, post-traumatic stress, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, developmental delays, and behavioral issues.

⁵ AAP also notes negative impacts on the parent-child relationship.⁶

What can family physicians do to respond to family separation?

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) opposes the forced separation of children from family members or caregivers crossing the United States border unless the child's immediate physical or emotional health or safety is at risk, as such separation poses great physical and mental health risks in terms of emotional trauma, safety, and diminished overall well-being.⁷ Family physicians and their team members are encouraged to engage with either the AAFP or the CAFP to join in existing efforts to oppose policies and regulations that enable separation of families at the US border. Furthermore, family physicians who come into contact with those who have crossed the US border to reside in the US should inquire into whether they have experienced family separation in the course of health assessment. The children of those who have experienced family separation should be screened for signs of childhood trauma using tools associated with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

- "Screening and Assessment" – The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (<https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/screening-and-assessment>)
- "Screening and Assessment of Child Trauma" – Child Welfare Information Gateway (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/assessment/family-assess/childneeds/trauma/>)
- Mental Health Care Services by Family Physicians (position paper) – AAFP (<https://www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/mental-services.html>)
- Centers for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/>

The six Healthy Harbors partners in this project are implementing a multi-pronged information strategy, including identifying champions to speak at live events and to the media; a series of position papers and patient education pieces; webinars or podcasts on a variety of topics and a web resource center for California physicians, culminating with a live panel presentation at CAFP's All Member Advocacy Meeting, March 2019. Watch your inbox for more information. And our thanks to the California Health Care Foundation for its support of this important project.

1. Kaiser Family Foundation. "Key Health Implications of Separation of Families at the Border" (Accessed November 2018) <https://www.kff.org/disparities-policy/fact-sheet/key-health-implications-of-separation-of-families-at-the-border/>
2. Ajay Chaudry, et al., *Facing Our Future Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement*, (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, February 2010), <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/28331/412020-Facing-Our-Future.PDF>
3. Ibid
4. Janet Cleveland, Cecile Rousseau, and Rachel Kronick, *The harmful effects of detention and family separation on asylum seekers' mental health in the context of Bill C-31*, April 2012, https://csssdelamontagne.qc.ca/fileadmin/csss_dlm/Publications/Publications_CRF/brief_c31_final.pdf; Julie M. Linton, Marsha Griffin, Alan J. Shapiro, and Council on Community Pediatrics, "Detention of Immigrant Children," *Pediatrics*, March 13, 2017,; <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2017/03/09/peds.2017-0483>, Wendy Cervantes, *Family Detention: The Harmful Impact on Children*, (Washington, DC: First Focus, December 8, 2015), <https://firstfocus.org/resources/fact-sheet/family-detention-the-harmful-impact-on-children>.

5. Ibid
6. Julie M. Linton, Marsha Griffin, Alan J. Shapiro, and Council on Community Pediatrics, “Detention of Immigrant Children,” *Pediatrics*, March 13, 2017, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2017/03/09/peds.2017-0483>.
7. <https://www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/separationof-families.html>



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