**Impact of Forced Family Separation and Detention**

**on Immigrant Communities**

California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists

The California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (CAMFT) recognizes the detrimental impact of forced family separation and detention on immigrant individuals, their families, and communities. Beginning in the 21st century, the immigration policy of the United States (U.S.) has focused on enforcement, leading to forced and involuntary separation of families and practices that promote migration restrictions (Dreby, 2015). The U.S. has a long history of changing immigration policies contingent on the current presidential administration and sociopolitical events of the time. The implementation of the Consequence Delivery System in 2011 created a new approach to immigration that focused on deterrence to entry, and increased persecution and detention of undocumented immigrants at the U.S. and Mexico border (Slack et al., 2015). The practice of family separations is another deterrence method and was enforced through the Zero Tolerance policy begun during President’s Trump administration. Over the six weeks in which the Zero Tolerance policy was active, thousands of children and adolescents were separated from their parents or primary caregivers (Stange & Stark, 2019). The Department of Homeland Security later reported that many children and adolescents had also been separated prior to the official enforcement of the Zero Tolerance Policy. In total, it is estimated that between 5,300 – 5,500 children and adolescents were separated from their families (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

Forced and involuntary family separations are traumatic and have lasting impacts on the physical and mental health of children, parents, and communities. As a result of forced family separations, children and adolescents often experience multiple and chronic emotional, behavioral, and cognitive challenges that are detrimental to their development and physical and mental health (Rojas-Flores, et al., 2017; Zhao & Egger, 2020). Mounting evidence shows that the toxic stress from family separation translates into neurobiological and epigenetic alterations that increase risk for psychopathology and ill health in later life (Society for Research in Child Development, 2018). Among parents, family separation is associated with diminished mental and physical health outcomes, as well as disruption of interpersonal support networks and family relationships (Muñiz de la Peña et al., 2019; Ojeda et al., 2020). Even if families are reunited, the negative consequences of forced family separation remain (Stange & Stark, 2019). Indeed, migration-related family separations challenge attachment bonds and can fuel feelings of abandonment, guilt, and shame that are long-lasting (Conway et al., 2020).

Forced family separations are disruptive to vital family dynamics and give way to disturbing social and community environments that place families at risk of harmful sequelae. Although the concept of family may be understood differently across cultural contexts, forced family separations tend to have similar effects on people regardless of geographic background (Rousseau et al., 2011). Forced family separations often lead to economic hardship, housing instability, food insecurity, and family dissolution, along with their harmful consequences to the health and social functioning of immigrant families (Yoshikawa, 2011). On a community level, forced family separations are harmful in that they increase fear and mistrust of law enforcement, institutions, and organizations in positions of power, contributing to isolation, marginalization, inequities, and loss of opportunity for social advancement in immigrant communities (Dreby, 2012). The aforementioned fear and mistrust also deter families experiencing separation or detainment from seeking needed health services or resources out of concerns of retaliation (Garcini et al., 2016).

Efforts to address and mitigate the detrimental impacts of forced family separations and detainment requires action on both governmental and community fronts. We recommend greater focus on the following areas:

* Developing consistent policies that prevent forced family separations and detainment. Congressional committees should provide direct and concise oversight related to immigration procedures, detention of immigrants, and treatment of undocumented immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers– particularly children and adolescents. We recommend that any oversight committee at the federal and local level is staffed with significant representation from individuals who identify as immigrants themselves and who are members of immigrant communities in the U.S. It is imperative that the community that is impacted has a voice at the table.
* Delivering trauma-informed training to mental health and medical providers, law enforcement, and other professionals that come into contact with children, adolescents and parents experiencing family separation and/or detention. Specifically, professionals should be trained on the developmental, psychological, and physical impacts of forced separation on the family system. Mental health resources and interventions should be culturally and contextually tailored to meet the needs of families. Recent innovations have been developed to assist mental health providers to increase their cultural competencies to deliver more effective services to immigrant families (Cadenas et al., in press; Torres Fernandez et al., 2015).
* Partnering with community organizations and non-traditional sources of service delivery such as schools, faith-based organizations, and advocacy groups as part of a coordinated effort to provide counseling, basic necessities, and health services and resources to families facing forced separations and/or detention. Schools may take steps to offer a safe place for immigrant youth to discuss their fears and be connected to social and health services and resources as needed. Churches can provide a safe space for parents and families to access mental health services (Parra-Cardona et al., 2021). Nonprofit community organizations can help immigrant families obtain legal and social services. In these ways, local institutions can help immigrant families to heal and develop trust in their new communities. Specific recommendations for how school and community organizations may begin to make structural changes in collaboration with mental health professionals have been outlined in recent publications (Cadenas et al., 2019; Cadenas et al., 2021).
* Creating opportunities for policymakers and providers to engage in respectful dialogue about immigration that can help identify practical and proactive solutions based on evidence, rather than reinforce anti-immigrant rhetoric and practices that support forced family separations and detention. Opening avenues for communication to talk about controversial immigration issues in a way that facilitates understanding of different perspectives must be a priority. This requires building avenues for learning about immigrant communities and disseminating information to destigmatize immigrant families.
* Prioritizing trauma informed care for immigrant children, families, and adults upon entering the U.S. asylum seeking system and coordinating care with social service entities to assure the delivery and continuity of appropriate medical and mental health services. Recent scholarship has expanded the framework of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to include immigration processes and experiences (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Mental health providers and others serving immigrant families may benefit from becoming cognizant of these evolving frameworks.
* Staying informed about immigration laws and policies when providing direct care to immigrant families, as well as facilitating access to critical resources for immigrants to build community, engage in advocacy, and increase connectedness and empowerment. A strong therapeutic relationship offers mental health providers the opportunity to dispel myths, promote a positive healing experience, elicit strengths, and cultivate resilience.

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