

Family Separation at the Border

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History/ Background

- (1997) Flores Settlement Agreement set national standards for the detention & treatment of minors detained in U.S. This agreement helped to create a divide between protection of children and lawful persecution of adults.
- (2005) President G.W. Bush's newly created Department of Homeland Security decided instead of routinely releasing border crossers through the civil immigration process, they would route many to criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Increasing disconnect between process for children & adults.
- (2014) Dramatic increase with more than 95% of undocumented children emigrated from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, mostly through the southern border & mostly seeking asylum which meant they had a right to a civil immigration hearing of their claim. Asylum becomes a sticking point. Rather than separate families, the Obama administration opted to parole parents and children together.
- (2017) For a pilot program implemented in El Paso in mid-2017, adults who crossed the border without permission were detained and criminally charged. No exceptions were made for parents arriving with young children. A statement drafted by American Academy of Pediatrics called for limited exposure of any child to Department of Homeland Security facilities (i.e., Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities).
- (April 2018) Trump appointed Attorney General Jeff Sessions notified all U.S. Attorney's Offices along the Southwest Border of a new "zero-tolerance" policy.
- (December 2018) Trump administration implemented "Remain in Mexico" program to force asylum seekers to wait for their hearings outside of the U.S.
- (March 2020) Trump administration asked CDC to invoke an obscure public health order, Title 42, which gives the executive the power to close the border in a time of health emergency turning away thousands that would normally have been able to make cases for asylum.
- (2021) Biden kept Title 42 policy largely in place but began to admit *unaccompanied* minors even while continuing to expel both adults and children with families.
- Trump-era zero-tolerance policy on illegal border crossings resulted in the separation of more than 5,000 children from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border between 2017 and 2021

Risk Factors

- **Psychological Trauma:** Family separation can lead to severe emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD, especially in children.
- **Health Issues:** Lack of access to medical care during detention and post-separation can result in untreated illnesses and deteriorating health.
- **Economic Hardship:** Families often face financial instability due to loss of employment and the costs associated with legal proceedings and reunification efforts.
- **Educational Disruption:** Children separated from their families may experience interruptions in their education, affecting their academic progress and future opportunities.
- **Social Isolation:** Families may struggle with isolation in a new environment without their usual support systems, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and helplessness.

Protective Factors

Self Identity

Resilience and Coping:

Understanding their own values, beliefs, and cultural background can provide a sense of continuity and strength.

Emotional Stability:

Can contribute to emotional stability, helping to manage stress, anxiety, and trauma more effectively.

Empowerment:

Can empower individuals to advocate for their needs and rights.

Community Support

Cultural Continuity:

Community groups that share the same cultural background can offer familiar cultural practices, language, and traditions.

Safety & Security

Knowing that others are looking out for their well-being and are available in times of need.

Advocacy

Community support can also mean collective advocacy for the rights and needs of separated families.

Ecobiodevelopmental Framework

- Considers how biological, psychological, and environmental factors interact to influence development and well-being.
- This approach helps in understanding the full impact of family separation on individuals.

Core Concepts

Core Concept #3 – Traumatic events often generate secondary adversities, life changes, and distressing reminders in children's daily lives

- Research shows that being separated at the border from parents can cause children to develop "toxic stress"
- Children may constantly be in a "fight or flight" state
- Younger children need "serve and return" interactions for brain development

(McCarthy, 2018)

- Being separated from parents can lead to increased emotional and behavioral distress

(de la Peña et al., 2019)

- Understanding the physiological changes that develop for children separated from their families can help social workers understand how children may differ developmentally from their peers
- can help create trauma-informed practices and interventions for children who develop mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD in the future

Core Concepts

Core Concept #6 – Traumatic experiences affect the family and broader caregiving systems

- Children reconnected with family are likely to fear being re-separated, may have trouble coping even with brief separations from family
- Children may avoid parents' efforts to comfort them after being reunited
- Reintegrating family is a complex process

(Riley, 2018)

- In a study of migrant parents from Angola and Nigeria living in the Netherlands, those separated from their children reported lower well-being and mental health
- Mothers exposed to trauma were found to be less responsive to their children's distress neurobiologically
- Refugee-related trauma such as war or involuntary separation disrupts caregiving tasks and can complicate trauma resolution from pre-migration events
- Parents may avoid interacting with US healthcare system for themselves and their children

(de la Peña et al., 2019)

- Understanding how the whole family is impacted can help social workers develop interventions that enhance parental responsiveness and help to rebuild trust and relationships for family members

Core Concepts

Core Concept #10~Culture is closely interwoven with traumatic experiences, response, and recovery.

Culture significantly influences how individuals and communities experience, understand, react to, and heal from trauma.

Acknowledging culture ensures that support provided is respectful and effective.

Tailored Interventions: Recognizing and utilizing cultural strengths and practices can enhance coping strategies and healing processes. (Cultural humility)

Competency 2- Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice

Building Trust: Understanding and honoring cultural contexts can build trust and offer more meaningful assistance.

Core Concepts

#11. Challenges to the social contract, including legal and ethical issues, affect trauma response and recovery

- Citizens have certain rights protected by the Constitution and in return, they have responsibilities to obey laws, pay taxes, and participate in civic life.
- At stake with family separation as US policy is the sense of responsibility we have as a nation to protect human beings from mental and physical harm regardless of their citizenship status.
- Asylum seekers typically suffered considerable trauma in their country of origin, viewing us a safe space both pragmatically and historically.
- Border Patrol officers, Immigration lawyers, and Detention Center personnel are figures of authority and the legal representation of America. How they approach and react to immigrants forms early and lasting impressions.
- Countries of origin have different histories and government policies which need consideration. Not every family left their origin country by choice and sometimes US government's policies have shaped the policies of their origin countries.
- Isolation can hinder trauma recovery. The journey itself is traumatic for families. Separation creates unnecessary isolation during a difficult experience. Legal or ethical missteps can revictimize survivors.

Questions?



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