

“Living in Legal Limbo”: Family Health After Detention and Separation

Luis H. Zayas, PhD

Discussant to Professor Cecilia Menjivar

CCF Meeting

Austin, Texas

February 7, 2020




Acknowledgements

- NICHD grant: *Psychosocial Wellbeing of Refugee Children after Release from Family Immigration Detention*
- Team
 - Tatiana Londoño, MSSW, PhD student
 - Alice Villatoro, PhD, Latino Research Institute
 - Rocío Morín, Research Assistant
 - Hilda Torres, Research Assistant
 - Jamie Turcio-Villalta, Research Assistant

(No other disclosures)

Pre-Migration Trauma

Witnessing death, dead body, or serious injury

- Largest part of PTSD burden; long symptom-duration
- Affects memory & helplessness in PTSD etiology
- Adds to memory formation  intrusive & vivid recall
- More distressing with multiple other traumas



Danny's pre-migration violence hits home

For details, go to [TED.com](https://www.ted.com)



In-transit: Migrating through Mexico

- Who to trust?
 - Fear, danger, and depravity
- Witnessing violence and death
- Victimization by *coyotes*, criminals, and gangs
 - Imprisonment/deprivation, intimidation, physical and sexual assault

Post-migration trauma

Hieleras (ICE boxes)



Perreras (kennels)



Detention centers



3-year-old locked up 2 years

Mom: “He learned how to talk and walk there. That’s where he learned everything.”



Source: HuffPost; WHYY; August 8, 2017



Determinants of Detention Trauma

- Deprivation
 - Absence of expected developmentally appropriate environmental inputs and complexity
- Threat
 - Presence of immediate, ongoing experiences that threaten child's sense of physical integrity and psychological security

(McLaughlin, Sheridan, & Lambert, 2014)

Family Separation: A Brief Timeline

2017

- Gov't considers Zero Tolerance Policy; is quietly separating kids & parents

2018

- June 15: DHS admits separating 2,000 kids (April-May) and 2,342 (May-June)
- June 20: Under pressure, president ends family separation
- June 26: Federal judge: “reunite families in 30 days & kids <5 in 2 wks”
- **Nov 17: Families still being separated at the border**

2019

- Jan 17: “1000s more separated than known.” Exact number? No tracking system! List to be reunified “still being revised” ~ 6 mos after court order
- Aug 21: Gov't threatens indefinite family detention

Separation Damages Attachment

- The fundamental human bond between child and parent (or primary caregiver)
- Secure attachment is best
 - Child shows confident, joyful reunion & interaction with parent after period of separation
 - Results in good emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social outcomes



Attachment Reactions by Young Children After Traumatic Separation

- **Insecure-avoidant attachment**
 - Expects rejection from parent on reunion
 - Avoids proximity to parent to reduce anticipated conflict or rejection
- **Insecure-ambivalent attachment**
 - Child is uncertain of parent's response on reunion
 - Displays passive, angry resistant behavior that establishes (wary) proximity to parent
 - Ambivalent about and not comforted by parent



Reactive Attachment Disorder (313.89)

- Inhibited, emotionally withdrawn behavior toward parent
 - Limited positive affect
 - Episodes of unexplained irritability, sadness, or fearfulness (in non-threatening situations)
- Experienced: neglect, deprivation, sudden/repeated changes of caregivers, or time in unusual setting

Detention and Separation as Childhood ACE

- Disrupts neural trajectories, brain development
 - Health, social, emotional, cognitive, language development
- Dysregulation of child's stress response
 - Symptoms and behaviors; disturbing memories & nightmares
 - Internalized negative attributions; poor self-esteem; hopelessness
 - Weakened immune system and chronic illness into adulthood

Long-Term Effects of Trauma and Detention

- Childhood detention  high maladjustment risk (Dallaire et al., 2014)
- Substance use (Abram et al., 2014)
 - Detention as teen  “co-morbid” psychiatric disorders
 - 27% males: MDD & anti-social behaviors (ODD) with alcohol abuse
 - 14% females: PTSD, anxiety, anti-social personality disorder with SUD
 - Even having friend/family in immigration detention or deported raises odds of hazardous drug use (Piñedo, 2020)
 - Poly-victimization: more likely PTSD, depression, suicide/self-harm ideation, & problematic substance use (McNair et al., 2019)

Family Integrity & Functioning

- Separation damages parent-child relationship
- Parental tension, distress, anxiety, depression
- Disrupted family structures and interaction
 - Parents disempowered
 - Parental roles in discipline, monitoring, teaching, socialization
 - Family routines & rituals suspended



dean-ssw@austin.utexas.edu