



THE IMPACTS OF FAMILY SEPARATION AND DEPORTATION ON CHILDREN

HEALTH, DEVELOPMENT, MENTAL HEALTH,
EDUCATION & ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

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**CHILDREN'S EQUITY
PROJECT**

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INTRODUCTION

Immigrant children and families are part of the fabric of the United States, and it is critical to recognize and affirm their human and civil rights. Over one in four (26%) of all children in the United States lived in an immigrant family in 2023, with the majority of these 17.9 million children (86%) being U.S. born. The share of children in immigrant families has grown in recent decades across almost all fifty states.¹ As of 2022, approximately 4.4 million U.S. born children were living in “mixed status” families with at least one undocumented parent. Additionally, an estimated 850,000 children lacked documentation, illustrating the large number of families that stand to be impacted by federal immigration enforcement actions, including potentially, deportation and family separation.³

Well documented research finds that deportation and resulting family separation can have wide ranging and long lasting consequences for children.⁴ This brief reviews the latest research on the mental health of immigrant children and families, with an emphasis on the deleterious impacts of deportation and family separation. We review impacts on healthy development, stress (including toxic stress) and mental health, economic security, and education.

While much rhetoric surrounds immigration policy, the cost to children is rarely centered, even though research is wide ranging, consistent, and well-established. It is critical to consider the safety, health, and well-being of children in immigration policy. The following brief provides key data points to consider.

- 1** Family separations result in severe short and long term stress and contribute to mental health challenges for children and adults.
- 2** Family separations cause financial hardship for family members who remain, contributing to housing and food insecurity.
- 3** Family separations often disrupt children’s primary attachment relationships and have deep impacts on their development. This is particularly salient for young children whose brain development and social and emotional foundations are formed in the context of, and dependent on, these critically important caregiving relationships.
- 4** Family separations impact educational experiences and outcomes, with family deportations being associated with lower school performance, grade retention, absenteeism, and high school dropout.

MENTAL HEALTH & PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACTS ON CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Immigration enforcement policies, which include the forced separations of children and their caregivers, can directly and indirectly pose risks to the physical and mental health of children and families.⁵ Immigrant families, especially those who have mixed or undocumented status, are likely to experience higher levels of stress, disproportionately low incomes and poorer working conditions, language barriers, and lack of health insurance and healthcare access, all of which place them at higher risk for mental and physical health challenges.⁶ Layered on these challenges, immigration rhetoric can lead to or exacerbate experiences of discrimination for families, which can also have negative implications for the well-being of children and parents.⁷

Family separations due to deportation exacerbate adverse health and mental health outcomes for children and their caregivers, often leading to profound and long-lasting effects.⁸ These experiences can be considered Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and involve toxic stress, both of which have been documented to have negative implications on the well-being of children.⁹ Below are some key research findings on the impact of family separations, including toxic stress, on the physical and mental health of children and families who are undocumented or have undocumented family members.



ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can be defined as negative experiences during childhood that involve experiences of abuse and neglect, such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse or neglect, as well as household dysfunction such as divorce/family separation, domestic violence, or living with an adult experiencing a mental health condition, substance use/misuse, or incarceration.¹⁰ ACEs have been widely used as a framework for assessing the degree of adversity present in an individual's childhood and have been strongly associated with negative long-term health and mental health outcomes in adults, such as chronic diseases, substance abuse problems, increased mortality, etc.¹¹ While ACEs involve a range of adverse experiences, they are not necessarily all encompassing and inclusive of adversities that historically marginalized people may experience due to the impact of structural and societal inequities.¹² Increasingly, researchers are recognizing that adversities created by oppressive socio-structural conditions can also affect children and families' well-being, which include immigrant families.¹³ For instance, in addition to experiencing family separation due to deportation which is a well-documented ACE in itself, children from immigrant families with an undocumented immigration status or mixed-status families are more likely to experience constant fear, hypervigilance, and social isolation due to fear of deportation and anti-immigrant policies, which can have negative short and long-term repercussions on the health and mental health status of children and their caregivers.¹⁴ Experiencing discrimination due to racial profiling and anti-immigrant rhetoric is also an adversity that many immigrant families experience and that has chronically impacted historically and contemporarily marginalized people.¹⁵ Last but not least, the food, housing, and economic insecurity resulting from or exacerbated by the deportation of a parent can have direct and indirect negative effects on the physical and mental health and overall well-being of children.¹⁶ These immigration-related stressors represent Adverse Childhood Experiences created by systems and policies that can result in short and long-term negative consequences for children and families.¹⁷



FORCED FAMILY SEPARATIONS NEGATIVELY IMPACT CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH, INCREASING BOTH INTERNALIZING AND EXTERNALIZING SYMPTOMS, WITH LONG-LASTING EFFECTS.

Children of undocumented immigrants who experience separation from their caregivers tend to experience greater mental health problems compared to children who have not been separated from their caregivers,¹⁸ such as (1) higher levels of externalizing behaviors, such as hyperactivity,¹⁹ (2) higher levels of internalizing symptoms, such as feelings of unhappiness, anxiety, withdrawal, crying, and fear,²⁰ and (3) greater regressive symptoms, such as inability to sleep independently, clinging to caregivers, altered eating patterns, and/or loss of bladder control.²¹

Witnessing a parent being arrested can be a traumatic experience for children that can manifest in a variety of ways. For instance, one study found that children from immigrant backgrounds who witnessed their parent/s being arrested due to deportation tended to experience changes in sleeping, eating, and higher levels of fear and anxiety compared to children who had not witnessed this event.²²

In addition to grief and loss, the deportation of a parent can result in increased psychological stress as children, particularly older children, assume new family responsibilities. For instance, studies have found that older children who have experienced the deportation of a parent often become responsible for taking care of younger siblings or start working to help their families make ends meet. This can sometimes have negative effects on their emotional well-being and lead to family tensions.²³



The negative effects of parent-child separations on children's mental health have been documented to persist even well after parent-child reunification,²⁴ with longer separations having greater negative repercussions on children's psychological well-being.²⁵



THE IMPACT OF DEPORTATION & FAMILY SEPARATION ON CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH



INCREASED RISK OF DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND PTSD.



REGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES.



HIGH CHRONIC STRESS LEVELS



INTERNALIZING SYMPTOMS: FEELINGS OF UNHAPPINESS, ANXIETY, WITHDRAWAL, CRYING, AND FEAR.



EXTERNALIZING SYMPTOMS: AGGRESSION, NON-COMPLIANT, AND HYPERACTIVITY.



POOR OVERALL PHYSICAL HEALTH

FORCED SEPARATIONS ALSO IMPACT PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH, WHICH HAS NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS ON PARENT-CHILD INTERACTIONS AND CHILDREN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING.

Parent-child separations raise risks for mental health symptoms among adults, often leaving parents who have been separated from their children experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression symptoms, and even thoughts of suicide.²⁶ These effects seem to be exacerbated in parents who are asylum seekers as many of these caregivers have gone through traumatic experiences prior to migrating to the US.²⁷

The negative mental health effects of family separations are also experienced by the partners who are left to care for their children on their own. These parents tend to experience high levels of stress, depression and anxiety due to the loss of a loved one, and increased financial and family responsibilities.²⁸

Parents who are left on their own often note that this heightened psychological load negatively impacts how they interact with their children, such as being less emotionally available or more emotionally reactive.²⁹ This is consistent with what research has documented on the relationship between maternal mental health status, mother-child relationships, and children's psychological well-being.³⁰ For instance, poor maternal mental health has been associated with low parental emotional sensitivity and harsher parenting practices,³¹ as well as disorganized attachment, internalizing symptoms, and self-regulation difficulties in children.³²



Due to inability to secure work authorization, healthcare, nutritional supports, and fear of immigration enforcement, undocumented families face increased barriers to health supports in the U.S. As a result, both adults and children in families with undocumented individuals are at increased risk for physical health problems, which is often exacerbated by deportation and forced family separations.

Undocumented families tend to report lower overall physical health among their children, compared to families who are U.S. citizens or who are permanent residents.³³ Children of undocumented immigrants are also more likely to experience higher chronic stress levels compared to children of families with legal immigration status, which is linked to higher cortisol levels in their bodies.³⁴ This is concerning given that increased cortisol levels have been associated with a high body-mass index, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and even neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease in adults.³⁵

Adults with undocumented immigration status tend to be more likely than individuals with legal status to experience at least one chronic medical condition, such as diabetes.³⁶ Often forced family separations make physical health worse. For instance, one study found that parents who had a partner deported were likely to report problems eating and sleeping as well as stomachaches and headaches. Many also reported that chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension were intensified due to increased stress and anxiety.³⁷

FORCED FAMILY SEPARATIONS AND FEAR OF DEPORTATION OFTEN EXACERBATE LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES, INCLUDING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.

Fear of deportation, often combined with health care costs and fear of discrimination, tend to make individuals and families with undocumented status less likely to seek medical care services in their communities.³⁸ Even undocumented pregnant women tend to be reluctant to seek care because of their immigration status,³⁹ which poses risks for the physical health of both mother and child.⁴⁰

While the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that all young children be regularly screened for developmental health concerns and have regular well care visits,⁴¹ children in families with undocumented individuals are less likely to access well-child visits.⁴²

Fear of deportation also makes families less likely to seek or access mental health services. For instance, one study found that among families who had experienced the deportation of a parent, parents reported lack of mental health support for their children. Consequently, many families sought informal or non-clinical mental health support through churches and trusted community organizations.⁴³





DEPORTATION AND FORCED FAMILY SEPARATIONS LEAD TO INCREASED FEAR, SOCIAL ISOLATION, AND HYPERVIGILANCE AMONG CHILDREN AND PARENTS.

Due to the constant fear and worry of deportation and family separation, undocumented families are more likely to isolate and experience feelings of mistrust, which can negatively impact their mental health.⁴⁴ For instance, in one study, early childhood educators reported observing children of undocumented parents express constant fear about the possibility of being separated from their caregivers.⁴⁵ Hypervigilance was also observed, with some children suddenly going silent or eating lunch rapidly, which were often the result of behaviors learned at home- needing to be cautious and finishing meals quickly in anticipation of the possible appearance of immigration officials.⁴⁶

These effects are even greater for families who have experienced the deportation of a family member. For instance, studies have documented that children who have a parent deported tend to be more withdrawn and isolated.⁴⁷ Families also tend not to feel safe going out after the deportation of a family member, which often results in not seeking services in the community due to fear of being stopped by immigration enforcement and being deported.⁴⁸

TOXIC STRESS

Neuroscience has documented that in-utero exposure to maternal stress, as well as stress experienced in the early years of life, may elicit not only an acute stress response, but also impact a child's future response and processing of stress. The current science suggests that exposure to stress during these sensitive periods may contribute to epigenetic changes that alter the development of the neural pathways that activate a stress response.⁴⁹ While some amount of stress is needed for healthy development, prolonged exposure to stress or particularly extreme stressors can contribute to dysregulation (i.e., over- or under-activity) of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical (HPA) axis, which can result in lasting physiological and psychological damage.⁵⁰ In young children in particular, this toxic stress may alter the developing brain's architecture in ways that are associated with long-term consequences, such as increases in anxiety, impairments in memory and executive functioning, learning difficulties, and problems in the development of language, cognitive, and social-emotional skills.⁵¹ Exposure to toxic stress during the early childhood years can also have negative physical health effects in the long-term, such as increased risk for cardiovascular diseases in young adults.⁵²

The detention and separation of children and parents, even briefly, may trigger toxic stress, due to the intensity of the stressor and the possible absence of a trusted, supportive, emotionally regulated caregiver to help a child cope with the circumstances.⁵³ This toxic stress can have profound negative effects on the psychological well-being and healthy development of young children from immigrant families who experience separation from their caregivers, with concerning short and long-term implications, such as emotional and behavioral problems.⁵⁴



PARENT-CHILD ATTACHMENT & DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACTS ON CHILDREN

Immigration enforcement and rhetoric around deportations and immigrants can have profound and lasting damage on children and their loved ones, contributing to long-term emotional and psychological harm. Longitudinal studies have documented the effects of child trauma, parental separation, and institutionalization on adult health, psychopathology, and relationship skills.⁵⁶ Yet, there is limited research specifically on the experiences and developmental outcomes of children separated from their parents or family members as a result of immigration policies.

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF PARENT-CHILD ATTACHMENT

Decades of research indicate that the most foundational building blocks for cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral development are a child's attachment to primary caregivers in infancy and early childhood. This attachment is a cognitive framework that individuals develop based on the quality and timeliness of repeated interactions between infants and caregivers, such as feeding, soothing to sleep, and changing diapers.⁵⁶ The quality of this bond strongly predicts a child's development of a sense of safety, self-regulation, and cognitive and social skills.⁵⁷ Disruptions in parent-child routines, such as separation from a parent or primary caregiver, can interrupt or weaken existing attachments. These disruptions can lead to severe and lasting consequences from childhood into adulthood.⁵⁸ This section reviews literature regarding the impact of policies leading to the family separation and detention on the parent-child attachment and long term impact of development.



THE IMPACT OF DEPORTATION & FAMILY SEPARATION ON CHILDREN'S ATTACHMENT & DEVELOPMENT



DISRUPTS HEALTHY PARENT-CHILD BONDS



ELEVATED STRESS, EMOTIONAL INSTABILITY, & CHALLENGES IN ESTABLISHING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



ERODES CHILDREN'S ABILITY TO CULTIVATE HEALTHY TRUST IN PEERS, ADULTS, & THE SURROUNDING WORLD



INCREASED POTENTIAL FOR LASTING EMOTIONAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE



RISK OF ENDURING HARM TO THE PARENT-CHILD BOND, EVEN POST-REUNIFICATION



INCREASED ATTACHMENT ANXIETY, THE PERSISTENT FEAR OF ABANDONMENT



INCREASED NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE

FAMILY SEPARATION, & DETAINMENT ARE DISORGANIZING TO CHILDREN'S CRITICAL ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIPS, WITH NEGATIVE SHORT & LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES. FOR CHILDREN, SEPARATION CAN DISRUPT THEIR IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT, SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING, RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY, & OVERALL SENSE OF TRUST & SECURITY.

Deportation enforcement has led to children, including very young children like infants and toddlers, being separated from their parents. In some cases, families are kept together but detained in conditions that can disrupt healthy parenting, secure attachments, and adversely impact child health and development.⁵⁹

Immigration, family separation, and detainment are disorganizing to children's critical attachment relationships. For children, these practices disrupt their identity development, social and emotional wellbeing, relationships with family, and overall sense of trust and security. While there are several factors that impact the severity of attachment ruptures, research is clear: separating a child from their parent is detrimental to the parent child relationship as well as child's physical and mental well being and their overall development.⁶⁰ Studies indicate separation of any length from parents is detrimental to attachment relationships, with longer separations linked to lasting damage.⁶¹

Age at time of separation, duration of separation, and the identity of the substitute caregiver have all been found to contribute to the severity of the impact of separations.⁶²

In a study of Latine children, family separation was linked to increased attachment anxiety and constant fear of abandonment.⁶³ Increased attachment anxiety is associated with poor interpersonal relationships and mental health challenges including anxiety and depression.⁶⁴ In one study, children often expressed fear of abandonment and felt rejected within their close family relationships. A study of children separated from their parents at the border noted children exhibited attachment disorganization and traumatic reactions even when reunified with their parents. The children appeared distressed when they reunited with their parents, and some were unable to recognize them.⁶⁵ Children experience immediate and long-term consequences when separated from their parents. In a study of Latine immigrant youth, respondents who experienced migration-related separation from mothers were 4.7 times as likely to report poor relationship quality with their mothers; those reporting separation from fathers were 3.4 times as likely to report poor relationship quality with their fathers.⁶⁶

FACTORS THAT CAN MITIGATE THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF SEPARATIONS FOR CHILDREN

For children of any age, and 0–5 years olds in particular, having a secure stable attachment figure is necessary for their overall development. When attachment relationships are disrupted, even traumatically so, there is some research on attachment repair to mitigate some long term harm.⁶⁷ One study conducted qualitative and thematic analyses in a sample of refugee children and reported that secure attachment narratives included themes of parents emphasizing family cohesion during separation whereas insecure attachment stories featured themes of parental absence. When children are separated from their primary attachment figure, having a positive relationship with the substitute caregiver is associated with reduced psychological distress.⁶⁸ If children are able to be reunited with parents or primary caregivers, those that experienced ruptures need specific support for healthy reunification. Providing evidence-based, culturally responsive assessment and treatment for post-traumatic stress, addressing the mental health needs of parents, and ensuring children have warm, sensitive and consistent interactions with their primary caregivers are critical for repair and long term harm mitigation.⁶⁹

FAMILY SEPARATIONS LEAVE CHILDREN VULNERABLE TO INSTITUTIONAL CARE, WHICH CAN HAVE DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS ACROSS COGNITIVE & SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT, & THE MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN.

While existing empirical studies often concentrate on well-being and mental health effects, there is evidence of declines in learning, cognition, and brain activity associated with certain kinds of separation.⁷⁰ One study documented changes in the social-emotional development of children whose parents' workplace was raided by U.S. Customs and Immigrations Enforcement (ICE).⁷¹ International research of similar political contexts finds parental separation led to decreased cognitive and social emotional development.⁷² Researchers point to institutionalization as the inciting factor in poor development outcomes as children often receive less consistent care, stimulation, and affection. During high-stress situations, parental care, love, and attention help reduce the impact and prevent adverse outcomes for children.

The need for more research, specifically on the effects of separation due to immigration on the domains of child development is pressing. Family separations leave children vulnerable to institutional care, which has long documented detrimental effects across cognitive and social-emotional development, and the mental health of children.⁷³ Disruptions in these areas often lead to strained adult-child relationships, peer relationships, and physical development.⁷⁴ Poor living conditions in institutions including detention centers exacerbate the harmful effects of separation. These spaces are frequently of low-quality conditions, overcrowded, inconsistent and have been shown to have harsh adult care and care by those who are not trained to support young children, developmentally or otherwise.⁷⁵

Importantly, research has found that even centers that house unaccompanied children are ill suited—in standards and personnel—to support young children’s development, health, mental health, and well being, as both state licensing standards and federal standards set forth by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, are often not sensitive to or specific enough to ensure appropriate environments for young children.⁷⁶

ECONOMIC IMPACTS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Undocumented immigrants and their families often experience material hardship due to the limits placed on their economic opportunities by their status and lack of work authorization. Adults in mixed-status families are more likely than adults in families with naturalized citizens, permanent residents, or all-U.S.-born citizens to have low family incomes and report problems paying rent or utility bills.⁷⁷ Immigration detention and deportation have detrimental short- and long-term economic hardships for families. In addition to the legal and logistical expenses of having a loved one arrested or deported, the sudden loss of income from a detained or deported family member leaves remaining family members facing hunger and unstable housing situations, even homelessness.⁷⁸ These financial adversities have been found to affect children regardless of their immigration or citizenship status.⁷⁹ In fact, an increase in immigration enforcement has been linked to higher poverty rates among US citizen children of undocumented parents.⁸⁰ Poverty has damaging long-lasting effects on children, impacting their health and development, and lowering their educational attainment and earnings into adulthood.⁸¹



PARENTAL ARREST, DETENTION, & DEPORTATION DISRUPT FAMILY STABILITY IN SIGNIFICANT WAYS, GREATLY INCREASING THE RISK OF CHILD POVERTY & RESULTING IN NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON **CHILDREN'S HEALTH, DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, & EVEN ADULT EARNING POTENTIAL.**

THE IMPACT OF DEPORTATION AND FAMILY SEPARATION ON FAMILIES' FINANCES



SUDDEN LOSS OF INCOME



HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY



HOUSING INSECURITY



DECREASED PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS



SIGNIFICANT LOSSES FOR THE U.S. ECONOMY



The broader consequences of harsh immigration enforcement go beyond just the immediate arrest; they contribute to long-term challenges in rebuilding lives and sustaining families. A study examining immigration enforcement in six U.S. locations from 2006 to 2009 found that families experienced a loss of 40-90% of their income, with an average decrease of 70%, within six months following a parent's immigration-related arrest, detention, or deportation.⁸²

An analysis of 2018 Census data found that when an undocumented family member's income is lost, the household's income can drop by as much as 45%. Moreover, it is estimated that 908,891 households with at least one US citizen child would fall below the poverty line if the undocumented income earners in those families were deported.⁸³

A 2017 study found that removing undocumented residents from mixed-status households would plunge millions of US citizens in mixed-status households into poverty, reducing median household income from \$41,300 to \$22,000—a drop of \$19,300, or 47%, below the 2025 federal poverty line of \$32,150 for a family of four.⁸⁴

Research has found that after the detention or deportation of a father, some mothers faced difficulty finding employment because they lacked prior work experience and were not listed on any bills or important family documents.⁸⁵ In some cases, families lost their only source of transportation, further complicating their ability to secure employment.⁸⁶

Several studies have found that when one caretaker is deported, a lack of affordable child care becomes a barrier for the remaining caretaker, who suddenly needs to work additional hours to make ends meet.⁸⁷ Before arrests, many families managed by having both parents work, splitting day and evening shifts to avoid the extra cost of child care.⁸⁸ After detention or deportation, the remaining parent is often forced to make an impossible choice between working double shifts to support their family, or caring for their children and not being able to afford basic necessities.⁸⁹

THE NATIONAL AND PERSONAL COSTS OF MASS DEPORTATION AND FAMILY SEPARATION

Deportations and family separations incur costs to directly impacted individuals, families, and communities. A 2024 study by the American Immigration Council found that mass deportation would have a severe economic impact on communities across the US.⁹⁰ Deporting all undocumented immigrants would result in a significant loss of their purchasing power, which was \$256.8 billion in 2022 alone—money that supports US businesses and helps sustain jobs for U.S. workers. Additionally, the report predicts losses in several key areas: \$46.8 billion in federal taxes; \$29.3 billion in state and local taxes; \$22.6 billion in Social Security; and \$5.7 billion in Medicare. Overall, mass deportation could reduce U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) by 4.2% to 6.8%, or between \$1.1 trillion and \$1.7 trillion. For context, the US GDP shrank by 4.3% during the Great Recession of 2007–2009.⁹¹ Nonetheless, while the economic costs to U.S. citizens in terms of lost tax revenue and output would be significant, undocumented immigrants and their families would suffer most.

Deportations also have significant costs to individuals and families, beyond the consequences of loss of income, which can have especially damaging impacts on children and families who are already more likely to live in low-income households. A 2020 study found that an immigration arrest costs households an average of \$24,151.⁹² In addition to lost income, this amount includes out-of-pocket legal fees, the value of assets seized and not recovered, and other expenses related to supporting a family member as they navigate the immigration court system. For example, families may face the financial burden of paying thousands of dollars for immigration bonds.⁹³ When families make the difficult decision to remove a child from the United States—which happens most often when it is a mother who is deported—families must navigate the challenge of covering the child's travel expenses and obtaining essential documents, such as passports, notarized school and medical records, and powers of attorney for caretakers of children left behind in the United States.⁹⁴





HOUSING INSECURITY

DEPORTATIONS OFTEN RESULT IN HOUSING FORECLOSURES, RELOCATION, CRAMPED SHARED HOUSING, OR HOMELESSNESS, ALL OF WHICH IMPACT CHILDREN'S WELLBEING, AND MAY RESULT IN INCREASED ANXIETY, EMOTIONAL DISTRESS, BEHAVIORAL CONCERNS, AND LOSS OF IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS THAT COULD BUFFER AGAINST THE DETRIMENTAL IMPACTS OF STRESS.

Studies have shown that after the deportation of a family member, families often struggle to pay rent.⁹⁵ As a result, children experience frequent relocations which may include having to move far from their homes and school districts.⁹⁶

Moreover, families often have to move into homeless shelters or cramped shared households (i.e., households with multiple families).⁹⁷ Families also experience having utilities shut off because they are unable to pay for them.⁹⁸

A 2022 study discovered that residents of metropolitan areas living in shared households with multiple families are more prone to housing instability in areas with high deportation rates. Furthermore, housing instability was found to be higher among Latine households that include noncitizens. By contrast, residents of cities with high deportation rates living in households with non-Latine noncitizens or US citizens were less likely to report housing instability.⁹⁹

A 2016 study of immigration enforcement and housing foreclosures found that deportations exacerbate foreclosure rates among Latine communities. When income earners are removed from their owner-occupied households, families struggle to afford their mortgages and are forced to leave their homes. The study also found that counties with 287(g) agreements, which facilitate collaboration between local police and ICE, saw significantly higher foreclosure rates among Latines.¹⁰⁰

HUNGER & FOOD INSECURITY

CHILDREN OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS EXPERIENCE HIGHER RATES OF FOOD INSECURITY, RESULTING IN BOTH PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACTS AND ELEVATED LEVELS OF CHRONIC STRESS. LIMITED ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOOD CAN INTERFERE WITH CHILDREN'S SCHOOL SUCCESS AND DEVELOPMENT OVER THE LONG-TERM.

Regardless of legal status, children of undocumented immigrants experience food insecurity at significantly higher rates than children of U.S. citizens.¹⁰¹ A 2023 study found that the likelihood of food insecurity was 28% higher for noncitizens compared to U.S.-born citizens.¹⁰²

Estimates suggest that the rate of food insecurity among immigrants could be as high as 30% to 60%.¹⁰³ The loss of income associated with detention and deportation leaves many families struggling to afford food.¹⁰⁴

An Urban Institute study of immigrant families across the nation found that **households continued to experience food insecurity 6 months after the detention of a family member—more than 80% of families ran out of food and could not afford to get more, and 28.3% of households experienced hunger and could not afford to eat.**¹⁰⁵ In a 2018 study on the family impacts of detention deportation, adults shared that they went hungry to ensure their children had enough to eat.¹⁰⁶

Food insecurity is linked to poorer self-reported overall health in undocumented adults and higher chronic stress levels in children of undocumented parents.¹⁰⁷ In addition, research has found that caregivers with undocumented status are more likely to rely on food donations from organizations and churches; these donated foods are often non-perishable and may lack fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthy foods.¹⁰⁸ A diet lacking in nutrition-dense foods can have negative repercussions on the physical health and development of children and families in the long-term.¹⁰⁹



FEARS OF DEPORTATION INHIBIT FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY BASED PROGRAMS THAT MITIGATE THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH, DEVELOPMENT, AND EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT.

Harsh immigration enforcement has been found to reduce the use of social services among immigrant and mixed-status families, contributing to greater economic hardships.¹⁰⁵ among immigrant and mixed-status families, contributing to greater economic hardships. For example, a 2017 study of Mexican non-citizen households found that harsher immigration enforcement reduced families' use of social services and increased their rate of food insecurity by 10%.¹⁰⁶

EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS

All children in the United States have the civil right to a public education which is codified by law, including those who are asylum seekers, those who are undocumented, and those who come from mixed status families. These children's right to attend public schools is protected by the [Equal Educational Opportunities Act \(EEOA\) of 1974](#), which prohibits states from denying equal educational opportunities on the basis of race, color, sex, or national origin, and the 1982 landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler v. Doe*, in which the court ruled that states cannot deny public education to children based on their immigration status.

PLYLER V. DOE

In the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* case, the Supreme Court ruled that states cannot prohibit undocumented students the right to public education. This landmark case established that denying education to undocumented students violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th amendment of the Constitution, which indicates that states cannot deny equal protection under the law to anyone in its jurisdiction.

The case of *Plyler v. Doe* is significant because it challenged state statutes denying funding for the education of undocumented students. It also established that it is unconstitutional to deny students who are asylum-seekers or undocumented a free public education on account of their immigration status. In this case, Justice Burger stated, **"apart from compassionate considerations, the long-range costs of excluding any children from the public schools may well outweigh the costs of educating them."**¹¹²

Despite these protections, evidence suggests that undocumented students face many obstacles in their educational trajectories, with an estimated 15% to 40% of undocumented young adults not having completed high school!¹³

For children to learn, they need to feel safe emotionally and physically. Research shows that fears around the risk of deportation affect all children's educational outcomes, not only those whose families are directly deported!¹⁴ Indeed, if students are plagued with fear of losing their families, are chronically absent from school due to upheaval at home or fear of family deportation, or are facing homelessness or food insecurity because their parents have lost their income due to immigration family separation, it is difficult to see how schools can unilaterally make improvements in students' academic outcomes while being assailed by challenges outside their control.

Children whose families are impacted by harsh immigration policies are more likely to have reduced school enrollment and increased absences, resulting in lower academic achievement.¹⁵ These academic impacts can even extend beyond the families directly experiencing threats of detention and deportation. For example, children whose families are not directly in threat of being deported might be negatively impacted by seeing their classmates gone from one day to the next, or from hearing the communities' distress about the potential deportations.



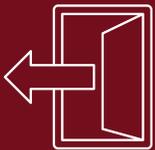
THE IMPACT OF DEPORTATION AND FAMILY SEPARATION ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATION



REDUCED ENROLLMENT AND INCREASED ABSENCES



DECLINES IN ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE,
ESPECIALLY MATH AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS



INCREASED RISK OF SCHOOL DROPOUT



HIGHER RISK OF GRADE RETENTION



RUPTURE OF FAMILY-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS



REDUCED LEARNING DUE TO EMOTIONAL
DISTRESS AND BULLYING



DISRUPTIONS IN LEARNING DUE TO THE
EFFECTS OF FAMILY SEPARATION



REDUCED ENROLLMENT AND INCREASED ABSENCES

Children living in communities with high rates of deportations experience chronic absenteeism, in part, due to fears of their families being deported and separated.¹¹⁶ For example, one study found that when local governments partnered with ICE to increase deportation enforcement, the number of Latine children enrolled in schools in these districts was reduced by nearly 10% across two years.¹¹⁷ This decline in student enrollment was most evident in elementary schools, where the enrollment of Latine students dropped by 9.4% in just one year.

Research shows that children's absenteeism and reduced school enrollment is linked to lower academic performance resulting from significant disruptions to their learning.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, another study found that children who were not directly impacted by deportations were also negatively impacted by their peers' chronic absences and reduced enrollment, as they witnessed their peers' empty desks and the unpredictability of their removal from school.¹¹⁹

DECLINES IN ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Deportations, and even the fear of deportations, have a negative impact on children's academic performance.¹²⁰ Research shows that children attending schools in communities that are highly impacted by deportations have reduced math¹²¹ and English Language Arts performance.¹²² For example, a study showed that Latine students in 3rd and 8th grade in communities partnering with ICE to enforce harsh immigration policies experienced a 10% decline in their English Language Arts scores. What's more, counties with higher rates of immigrant detentions had the largest declines in students' English Language Arts scores.¹²³ These findings were consistent with a study that found that 60% of educators in an urban region of the U.S. reported their students experienced reduced academic performance when the community was affected by deportations.¹²⁴

Children who experience family separation (including deportation) experience many negative educational outcomes, including higher likelihood of grade retention, lower academic achievement, experiences of bullying, and ultimately, school dropout. School dropout has long-term consequences that include poorer health outcomes, lower earning potential, and reduced employment.

HIGHER RISK OF GRADE RETENTION

Unfortunately, children whose families are separated are also more likely to repeat a grade.¹²⁵ For instance, a study showed that children experiencing family separation were twice as likely to repeat a grade as their peers who had not been through this experience.¹²⁶ Children who have at least one family member who is deported between 6-13 years are at the highest risk for grade retention, with 14% increase in their likelihood of repeating their grade.¹²⁷ Many children who are retained in a grade experience reduced self-esteem, isolation, stagnant or declining academic performance, and higher risk of high school dropout.¹²⁸

Children's learning, social relationships, and emotional stability are all likely to worsen when families experience separations due to deportation, or even the threat of separation.

REDUCED LEARNING DUE TO EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AND BULLYING

Children whose family members are deported, or are at risk of family separation, also experience high levels of emotional distress and bullying which negatively impact their capacity to focus on their learning.¹²⁹ For example, one study showed that children of immigrant parents had difficulty learning at school because their family member's deportation caused depression, nightmares, and isolation.¹³⁰ The results of another study revealed that children's academic performance was affected by anticipatory stress (i.e., fear of permanent family separation), as well as the anxiety and fear of deportation and the stigma of being in a family at risk of deportation.¹³¹ This emotional distress is also present for children who are U.S. citizens whose parents are deported, and they lose access to their education and school support network when they have to move outside the U.S. with their parents.¹³² Unfortunately, children of immigrant parents at risk for deportation are also at a higher risk of experiencing bullying, which affects their capacity to feel safe and welcomed in school.

DISRUPTIONS IN LEARNING DUE TO THE EFFECTS OF FAMILY SEPARATION

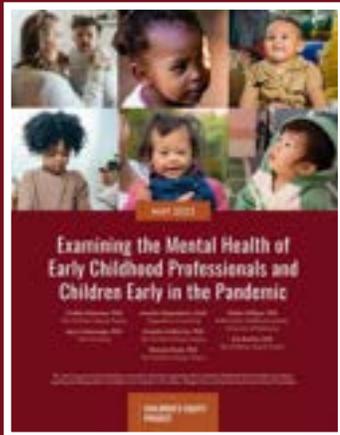
When a family member is deported, this causes significant changes in family dynamics, adultification of children, income loss, and more.¹³⁴ These major changes in families' stability negatively impact children's learning, as they no longer have the capacity to focus exclusively on their schooling. For instance, a study found that when children's fathers were deported, their school performance was negatively affected because they had to take on adult responsibilities, and mothers had to work extra and were not available to help children complete their homework.¹³⁵ In addition, children in families who are affected by deportations have reduced academic performance because they are more vulnerable to economic instability due to family income loss and house foreclosures.¹³⁶ Indeed, the impact of family separations are vast and complex, and it creates a home environment that makes it difficult for children to optimize their learning at school or home.

INCREASED RISK OF SCHOOL DROPOUT

Research also shows that deportations increase the risk of students' high school dropout.¹³⁷ For example, one study showed that when local communities partnered with ICE to implement deportations, children's likelihood of school dropout increased by 11%. This risk of dropout was even greater for children in K-8th grade, as their likelihood increased by 25%.¹³⁸ What's more, another study found that teachers of children whose families were undocumented tended to have lower expectations of their academic capabilities, and that when children felt that teachers had lower expectations of them, this increased their risk of school dropout.¹³⁹ The consequences of high school dropout are momentous, as individuals who drop out of school experience higher rates of unemployment, lower earning potential, and poorer health outcomes.¹⁴⁰



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Examining the Mental Health of Early Childhood Professionals and Children Early in the Pandemic

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ENDNOTES

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