

Disrupting young lives: How detention and deportation affect US-born children of immigrants

Research on the impact of parental detention and deportation on U.S-born children.

By Luis H. Zayas ([http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Zayas, Luis H.%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Zayas,Luis,H.%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc)) and Laurie Cook Heffron, PhD ([http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Heffron, Laurie Cook%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Heffron,LaurieCook%22&sort=ContentDateSort%20desc))

In the United States today, there are more than 9 million children whose parents are undocumented immigrants, the majority from Mexico and Latin America (Passel et al., 2014; Taylor, Lopez, Passel & Motel, 2011). Half of these children, or about 4.5 million, are U.S. citizens — born to undocumented immigrant parents on American soil and, as such, accorded birthright citizenship by the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Typically, citizen-children and their undocumented siblings live in homes in which one or both parents are undocumented immigrants. In these “mixed-status families,” citizen-children have all of the experiences of being one unit that shares bloodlines, lineage, affection and interdependence. What they don’t share is a common legal status, which can be a source of psychological anguish and problems for citizen-children.

Living under the threat of deportation

Citizen-children endure many stressors beyond the deportability of their parents. For example, because of the many relocations of homes and communities as parents seek better employment, or the separation from parents who may live at some distance in order to support their families, citizen-children often experience the absence of parents’ attention and affection. The greatest stressor for citizen-children may be the fear of their parents’ discovery by U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials. Experiencing their parents’ arrest, detention and deportation can complicate citizen-children’s pre-existing stress and detrimentally impact their mental health (Zayas, 2015).

Citizen-children's fears of their parents' deportation are not unfounded. In the past decade, nearly 2 million persons have been removed from the U.S., 81 percent of them to Latin America. In communities where mixed-status families live, the effects of deportation are very visible. Neighbors, friends and family members have often been touched by deportation. Children have witnessed arrests. Their classmates recount the deportation of an uncle, aunt, older sibling or parent. They may even enact scenes of ICE raids in their play (Zayas, 2015). Citizen-children don't have to know the statistics presented by demographers: that for every two adults deported, one citizen-child is directly affected (Capps, Castañeda, Chaudry & Santos, 2007). These statistics only punctuate what they know and what they live.

In addition to disruptions in their lives and separations from parents, citizen-children and their undocumented siblings frequently live in poverty, suffer discrimination, watch and experience their parents' own emotional distress, and have poor physical and mental health (American Psychological Association, 2012). Parents suffer economic hardships that limit their capacity to pay for adequate housing, and often rely on overcrowded households and frequent moves (Ayón, Gurrola, Salas, Androff & Krysik, 2012). Regardless of legal status, children of undocumented immigrants more often suffer from food insecurity than children of US citizens (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014; Kalil & Chen, 2008; Ortega et al., 2009).

Citizen-children of undocumented parents access and utilize health care services much less than children with citizen parents. In spite of the fact that citizen-children have the right to health care, their parents may avoid encounters with providers for fear of discovery. Alex Ortega and colleagues (2007) confirmed that undocumented immigrants make fewer visits to health care providers than citizens with authorized immigrant status. Undocumented parents are not only less likely to use health care services because they lack health insurance and fear being reported to immigration authorities, but also may not use social services and public programs such as food stamps and child care subsidies, for which their citizen-children are eligible (Xu & Brabeck, 2012; Yoshikawa, 2011). "Scare tactics" such as being asked for identification cards by service providers are among the reasons immigrant mothers lack access to care for their children, despite these services being available for their U.S.-born children (Ayón, 2014). Children of undocumented parents are also less likely to enroll in public preschool programs and have lower rates of positive development-promoting activities than children of citizens or legal permanent residents (Crosnoe, 2006; Hernandez, Denton & Macartney, 2008; Kalil & Crosnoe, 2009; Kalil & Chen, 2008; Matthews & Ewen, 2006; Ortega et al., 2009; Yoshikawa, 2011).

The psychological toll accumulates for citizen-children in mixed-status families. Uncertainty about their lives and their futures is ever-present (Chavez, Lopez, Englebrecht & Viramontez Anguiano, 2012). As parents' risk of deportation rises, so too does the stress of their children (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Yoshikawa, 2011). The lingering possibility of deportation of parents leaves children with constant anxiety and vigilance about the potential becoming real (De Genova, 2010; Dreby, 2012; Talavera, Núñez-Mchiri, & Heyman, 2010). Rules often govern the lives of citizen-children: "be silent about your family, tell no one about us" and "be still, don't draw attention by anything you do"

(Zayas, 2015). Breaching these rules could result in a parent's deportation, and with that comes guilt and shame.

Migration-related family disruption

Unfortunately for many citizen-children, deportation-related separation is not the first family separation they have experienced. Deportation-related separation often occurs within the context of premigration and migration-related stress and trauma. Adults and children often make dangerous journeys in search of safety from gang violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, poverty and oppression in their home countries. Migration-related family separation, particularly between mother and child, has negative psychological impacts on both children and parents that persist even after reunification (Gindling & Poggio, 2009). During the journey, they may be exposed to further violence, including physical and sexual abuse, and exploitation (Amnesty International, 2010; Infante, Idrovo, Sánchez-Domínguez, Vinhas & González-Vázquez, 2012; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015). Despite potentially being eligible for asylum or other forms of immigration relief, many immigrants are detained in facilities with limited access to legal representation or mental health services.

In addition to the negative physical and emotional health consequences of premigration or migration-related stress, trauma and violence, immigrant detention itself is related to persistent negative mental health outcomes, including depression, PTSD and anxiety (Coffey, Kaplan, Sampson & Tucci, 2010; Robjant, Hassan & Katona, 2009; Steel et al., 2006). Detention also creates disruptions to the family unit, which may include role reversal of parents and children and undermined attachment relationships (Silove, Austin & Steel, 2007).

Living without parents

Parents' legal vulnerability, detention and deportation are strongly associated with depression, anxiety, fears of separation, social isolation, self-stigma, aggression, withdrawal and negative academic consequences among children (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Chavez et al., 2012; Delva et al., 2013; Dreby, 2012; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013). Allen, Cisneros and Tellez (2013) showed that citizen-children were significantly more likely to show signs of depression, anxiety, aggression and conduct problems than children whose parents were not deported or whose parents were in the process of deportation.

Zayas (2015) conducted a study of three groups of citizen-children of undocumented immigrant parents: children who returned with deported parents back to Mexico; children who remained in the U.S. following a parent's deportation; and children whose undocumented parents were not in deportation proceedings. The results underscored the psychological harm of deporting parents of citizen-children. Children who moved to Mexico with their deported parents reported symptoms of depression and emotional problems and described more physical symptoms than children whose undocumented parents were not in deportation proceedings. Children whose parents were

detained or deported (whether the child returned to Mexico or stayed in the U.S.) were more likely to report depressive symptoms, negative mood, physical symptoms and negative self-esteem. All children in the study showed probable anxiety disorders, including separation anxiety disorder.

Qualitative analysis of these data explored the ways that deportability shapes citizen-children's understanding of their sense of belonging (i.e., to family; place; identity as American) (Zayas & Gulbas, 2016). Three major themes emerged, reflecting how children negotiate their place in a social world of family, neighbors and friends, a world that is divided by legal status: discovery; rupture; and exclusion. Through discovery, or learning that their parents were undocumented, children understood acutely how legal status conferred social and economic privilege. Children realized that their own belonging was irrevocably tied to their parents' illegality and deportability, generating a sense of not belonging (to the U.S. or to Mexico). The second theme was of rupture — both of family and geographic bonds — due to deportation. The family unit was now broken. This led to the third theme, the sense of exclusion from citizenship, community and place, and family.

A role for mental health professionals

Families, in addition to the service providers and immigration attorneys working alongside them, are often overwhelmed with this complex array of challenges. Mental health professionals are well placed to provide assessments, support, information and therapeutic services in response to the psychosocial impacts of detention, deportation and other migration-related stress and trauma. It is critical that these factors, in addition to family separation and threats of detention and deportation, be included in psychological assessment and evaluation across multiple settings — including health and mental health services, educational settings and temporary shelters. Clinicians are also often uniquely positioned to conduct evaluations and offer professional expertise to immigration attorneys and courts during lengthy legal processes towards immigration remedies. In light of recent and troubling displays of hatred, fear and anti-immigrant sentiments that keep migrants from feeling safe and prevent them from seeking help, the community of mental health providers can also engage in community-level advocacy and outreach initiatives in support of citizen-children and mixed status families. Finally, it is critical that mental health experts play a role in the close examination of current border militarization, detention and deportation policies that separate families, and the promotion of trauma-informed solutions for children and their families.

References

Allen, B., Cisneros, E.M., & Tellez, A. (2013). The children left behind: The impact of parental deportation on mental health. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 1–7.

American Psychiatric Association. (2008). Symposium: Mental health of immigrant children. Washington, D.C.: 161st Annual Meeting; 2008.

American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Immigration (2012). *Crossroads: The psychology of immigration in the new century*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/topics/immigration/immigration-report.pdf>

(PDF, 1.35MB).

Amnesty International (2010). *Invisible victims: Migrants on the move in Mexico*.

Ayón, C. (2014). Service needs among Latino immigrant families: Implications for social work practice. *Social Work, 59*, 13-23.

Ayón, C., Gurrola, M., Salas, L.M., Androff, D., & Krysik, J. (2012). Intended and unintended consequences of the employer sanction law on Latino families. *Qualitative Social Work, 11*(6), 587-603.

Brabeck, K., & Xu, Q. (2010). The impact of detention and deportation on Latino immigrant children and families: A quantitative exploration. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 32*(3), 341-361.

Capps, R., Castañeda, R.M., Chaudry, A., & Santos, R. (2007). *Paying the price: The impact of immigration raids on America's children*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute for National Council of La Raza.

Chavez, J.M., Lopez, A., Englebrecht, C.M., & Viramontez Anguiano, R.P. (2012). Sufren Los Niños: Exploring the impact of unauthorized immigration status on children's well-being. *Family Court Review, 50*(4), 638-649.

Coffey, G.J., Kaplan, I., Sampson, R.C., & Tucci, M.M. (2010). The meaning and mental health consequences of long-term immigration detention for people seeking asylum. *Social Science & Medicine, 70*(12), 2070-2079.

Crosnoe, R. (2006). *Mexican roots, American schools: Helping Mexican immigrant children succeed*. Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press.

De Genova, N. (2010). The deportation regime: Sovereignty, space and the freedom of movement. In N. De Genova & N. Peutz (Eds.), *The deportation regime* (pp. 33-65). Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Delva, J., Horner, P., Sanders, L., Martinez, R., Lopez, W.D., & Doering-White, J. (2013). Mental health problems of children of undocumented parents in the United States: A hidden crisis. *Journal of Community Positive Practices, 13*, 25-35.

Dreby, J. (2012). The burden of deportation on children in Mexican immigrant families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 74*, 829-845.

Gindling, T.H. & Poggio, S. (2009). *Family separation and the educational success of immigrant children* (UMBC Policy Brief No. 7). Baltimore: Department of Public Policy, University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Retrieved from <http://publicpolicy.umbc.edu/files/2014/04/Immigrationbrief.pdf> (<http://publicpolicy.umbc.edu/files/2014/04/Immigrationbrief.pdf>) (PDF, 453KB).

Gonzales, R.G., Suárez-Orozco, C., & Dedios-Sanguineti, M.C. (2013). No place to belong contextualizing concepts of mental health among undocumented immigrant youth in the United States. *American Behavioral Scientist, 57*(8), 1174-1199.

Hernandez, D.J., Denton, N.A., & Macartney, S.E. (2008). The lives of America's youngest children in immigrant families. *Zero to Three, 29*(2), 5-11.

Infante, C., Idrovo, A.J., Sánchez-Domínguez, M.S., Vinhas, S., & González-Vázquez, T. (2012). Violence committed

- against migrants in transit: experiences on the Northern Mexican border. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 14(3), 449-459.
- Kalil, A. & Chen, J. (2008). Family citizenship status and food insecurity among low-income children of immigrants. *New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development*, 121, 43-62.
- Kalil, A. & Crosnoe, R. (2009). Two generations of educational progress in Latin American immigrant families in the United States. In E. Grigorenko & R. Takanishi (Eds.), *Immigration, diversity, and education* (pp. 188-204). New York: Routledge.
- Matthews, H. & Ewen, D. (2006). *Reaching all children: Understanding early care and education participation among immigrant families*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy.
- Ortega, A.N., Fang, H., Perez, V.H., Rizzo, J.A., Carter-Pokras, O., Wallace, S.P., & Gelberg, L. (2007). Health care access, use of services, and experiences among undocumented Mexicans and other Latinos. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 167(21), 2354-2360.
- Ortega, A.N., Horwitz, S.M., Fang, H., Kuo, A.A., Wallace, S.P., & Inkelas, M. (2009). Documentation status and parental concerns about development in young U.S. children of Mexican origin. *Academic Pediatrics*, 9(4), 278-282.
- Robjant, K., Hassan, R., & Katona, C. (2009). Mental health implications of detaining asylum seekers: systematic review. *The british journal of psychiatry*, 194(4), 306-312.
- Silove, D., Austin, P. & Steel, Z. (2007). No refuge from terror: The impact of detention on the mental health of trauma-affected refugees seeking asylum in Australia. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 44(3), 359-393.
- Steel, Z., Silove, D., Brooks, R., Momartin, S., Alzuhairi, B., & Susljik, I.N.A. (2006). Impact of immigration detention and temporary protection on the mental health of refugees. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 188(1), 58-64.
- Talavera, V., Núñez-Mchiri, G.G., & Heyman, J. (2010). Deportation in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands: Anticipation, experience and memory. In N. De Genova & N. Peutz (Eds.), *The deportation regime* (pp. 166-195). Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Taylor, P., Lopez, M.H., Passel, J.S., & Motel, S. (2011). *Unauthorized immigrants: Length of residency, patterns of parenthood*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2015). Women on the Run. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.html> (<http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.html>).
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (2014). Definitions of Food Security. Retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx#ranges> (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx#ranges>).
- Xu, Q., & Brabeck, K. (2012). Service utilization for Latino children in mixed-status families. *Social Work Research*, 36(3), 209-221.

Yoshikawa, H. (2011). *Immigrants raising citizens: Undocumented parents and their children*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Zayas, L.H., (2015). *Forgotten citizens: Deportation, children, and the making of American exiles and orphans*. New York: Oxford

Zayas, L.H., & Gulbas, L.E. (2016). *Discovery, rupture and exclusion: Processes of belonging for citizen-children of undocumented immigrants*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Author bios

Luis H. Zayas is dean of the school of social work at The University of Texas at Austin and holds the Robert Lee Sutherland chair in mental health and social policy. He is the author of "Forgotten Citizens: Deportation, Children, and the Making of American Exiles and Orphans" (Oxford, 2015).

Laurie Cook Heffron, PhD, LMSW, is an assistant professor in the school of behavioral and social sciences at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. She has interest and expertise in the areas of forced migration, domestic and sexual violence, and human trafficking, and her research explores the experiences of, and relationships between, violence against women and migration, particularly among Central American migrant women in the United States.

SUBSCRIBE

Related APA Resources

Newsletter Article (66)

Magazine Article (53)

Web Page (44)

Press Release (20)

Fact Sheet (8)

[More resources \[+\]](#)

Newsletter (8)

Web Article (8)

Psychology Topic (5)

Book/Monograph (3)

Council Policy (3)

Digital Media (3)

Legal/Government Document (3)
