Migration and Immigration Detention: Harms to Refugee Children and Families

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Migrant children: Accumulation of trauma

1. Pre-migration trauma (gangs & violence)
2. In-transit trauma (coyotes, assaults, deprivation)
3. Post-migration trauma (hieleras & detention)
Witnessing death, dead body, or serious injury

- Largest part of PTSD burden; long symptom-duration (Atwoli et al., 2013; Ferry et al., 2014)
- Affects memory & helplessness in PTSD etiology (Atwoli et al., 2013)
- Adds to memory formation, intrusive & vivid recall (Hackett, 2009)
- More distressing when multiple traumas experienced (Hackett, 2009)

Danny’s pre-migration violence in town

Danny’s pre-migration violence hits home
In-transit: Migrating through Mexico

- Who to trust?
- Coyotes, criminals, and organized gangs
- Witnessing violence and death
- Victimization: intimidation, physical abuse, sexual assault
- Imprisonment and deprivation
- Constant danger and depravity

Stories from the migration in Mexico

- Mother and two sons: Took buses from Guatemala. No problems.
- The women on the bus and girl who broke her leg, and the “angels” who helped
- How a father guided his family remotely from Virginia
- Two weeks in a dungeon
- “Hold on mom. Stay with me” crossing the Rio Grande

Post-migration trauma: hieleras (ICE-boxes)
Post-migration: Perreras (kennels)

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)

3-year-old locked up 2 years

Mom: “He learned how to talk and walk there. That’s where he learned everything.”
Family separation: A brief timeline

2017
- March: Gov’t considers “Zero Tolerance”
- June: Gov’t quietly starts separating kids (Houston Chronicle, Nov 25, 2017)

2018
- June 15: DHS admits it separated 2,000 kids (April 19 to May 31)
- June 20: Under pressure, president ends family separation;
- June 20: Another 2,342 had been separated (May 5 to June 9)
- June 26: Federal judge: “reunite families in 30 days & kids <5 in 2 weeks”
- Nov 17: Families still being separated at the border

2019
- Jan 17: DHS IG “thousands more separated since 2017 than previously known.”
- Exact number unknown; no tracking system.
- List of families to be reunified “still being revised” ~ 6 months after court order

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A Closer Look
Effects of Detention and Separation on Young Children

Child Attachment Reactions

About attachment and bonding
- 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
Adverse events & sensitive developmental periods

- Detention and separation as ACE
- Detention
  - Parental tension, distress, anxiety, depression
  - Disrupted family structures and interaction
- Separation damages parent-child relationship
- Shape neural trajectories, brain development
  - Disrupts social, emotional, cognitive, language development, and health (chronic illness to adulthood)

Insecure attachment styles – I

- Insecure-avoidant attachment
  - Child expects rejection from parent on reunion
  - Displays avoidance rather than seeking proximity
  - Avoids to reduce anticipated conflict or rejection

Insecure attachment styles – II

- Insecure-ambivalent attachment
  - Child is uncertain of parent’s response on reunion
  - Display passive or angry resistant behavior that serves to establish proximity to parent
  - When parent responds, child is ambivalent and not comforted by parent
Insecure attachment styles – III

- Disorganized attachment
  - Child shows fear, freezing, or disorientation

Case 1: Insecure-Avoidant

Boy reuniting with mother, separated for 3 months

- Expects rejection
- Avoids caregiver

"Mi amor,"
"My love."

Case 2: Insecure-Ambivalent

Boy in shelter with mother, after separation

- Uncertain of caregiver’s affection
- Angry, resistant behavior
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

Trauma & imperiled developmental trajectories

- Dysregulation of child’s stress response
  - Symptoms and behaviors: numbness, dissociative episodes
  - Upsetting memories and nightmares; fear being returned to home country
  - Internalized negative attributions; loss of hope;
  - Poor self-esteem regulation
- Functional impairments: psychological, social, academic
- Disrupted sense of belonging

Urgently need services

- Medical care
- Psychosocial assessments and therapeutic interventions
- Psychoeducational services for parents
- Parent-child interaction therapy
- Educational assessment and intervention
- Social integration in community