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WHAT STARTS HERE CHANGES THE WORLD

Migration and Immigration Detention: Harms to Refugee Children and Families

Luis H. Zayas, PhD
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Colorado State University
&
National Hispanic/Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

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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)

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Pre-Migration Trauma



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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)

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Danny's pre-migration violence in town

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Danny's pre-migration violence hits home

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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

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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

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Post-migration trauma: *hieleras* (ICE-boxes)



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Post-migration: *Perreras* (kennels)

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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)

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3-year-old locked up 2 years

Mom: "He learned how to talk and walk there. That's where he learned everything."

Source: HuffPost, WHY; August 8, 2017

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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

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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

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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)

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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

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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

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Insecure attachment styles – III

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

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Case 1: Insecure-Avoidant

Boy reuniting with mother, separated for 3 months

- Expects rejection
- Avoids caregiver

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Case 2: Insecure-Ambivalent

Boy in shelter with mother, after separation

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

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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

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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

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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

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