“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
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.”
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
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 is associated with high maladjustment risk (Dallaire et al., 2014)
- Substance use (Abram et al., 2014)
  - Detention as teen is associated with “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