

Policy Brief: Mental Health Problems of US Citizen Children caused by Immigration Policies

Background

The number of children in mixed-status homes (i.e., undocumented immigrant parents and citizen-children) grew from 2.7 million in 2003 to 4 million in 2008. There are many U.S.-born citizen-children in mixed-status families whose parents can be or have been removed. In removals, it is citizen-children that are “collateral damage,” forgotten, neglected and harmed. In the ICE raids of 2006 and 2007, according to the Urban Institute, 900 adults were arrested and separated from 500 of their children (many of them under age five, left in the care of relatives or others) with separations ranging from weeks to months.¹ Critics and supporters of U.S. immigration and deportation policy agree that we must find common ground to improve the lives of these children “most of whom will grow up as Americans”.²

The United States has stalled its comprehensive immigration reform that includes a clear path to citizenship without considering the implications suffered by US Citizen Children when one or both of their parents are deported to their country of origin. The lack of scientific studies that link the trauma to which these children are exposed to and the relationship to their mental health is a disservice to this population.

In 2014, the US media picked up the stories of hundreds of unaccompanied minors from Mexico and Central America that were now living in US territory, and for which its legal system was ill prepared to accommodate immigration courts or procedures that were humanely sensitive to their situation. The public for the first time was divided in agreeing or disagreeing with the fate of these children’s. Some believed they should receive asylum, or refugee status while others thought we should give them no status at all. People want to wash their hands by saying that they are not our problem, but what do we do with our own US Citizen children who face migrating to a country they have never been to, or lived in when their parent(s) is/are deported?

In a pilot study conducted by the University of California Davis and the Instituto Nacional de Psiquiatría Ramón de la Fuente Muñiz of Mexico the researchers conducted an exploratory-developmental research study that recruited a total of 61 US Citizen Children from three groups. Group A included children who accompanied their deported parents to Mexico, Group B who remained in the US when parents were deported and a Group C a group of citizen children whose undocumented parents are not being deported at the time.

Findings

The quantitative analysis revealed that around a third of the participants presented a few indicators of negative symptoms that were significant which included depressive symptoms, functional problems, ineffectiveness, interpersonal problems, and anxiety symptoms. Depressive symptoms, emotional

¹ (Capps et al., 2007)

² (Haskins, Greenburg, & Fremstad, 2004, p.1)

problems, negative mood, low self-esteem and interpersonal problems were more significant in girls and somatic problems were more significant in boys from the Mexico sample. In comparison, the sample in the United States showed no significance by gender. Yet, when the results for boys and girls were combined the significance remained.

The qualitative interviews show that girls in both countries demonstrated signs of low self-esteem and the desire for things to be much different for their families. Many of them were doing poorly academically which was a direct reflection of the legal and economic hardship they were facing at home.

Table 1. Children’s Demographic Information

		Mexico	US	Total
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Total		36 (100)	25 (100)	61 (100)
Gender: Female		18 (50)	13 (52)	31 (51)
Age	8-9	5 (14)	5 (20)	10 (16)
	10-11	17 (47)	7 (28)	24 (39)
	12-13	9 (25)	8 (32)	17 (28)
	14-15	5 (14)	5 (20)	10 (16)
Grate Level	3-4 elementary	8 (22)	6 (24)	14 (23)
	5-6 elementary	18 (50)	9 (36)	27 (44)
	1-2 middle school	6 (17)	6 (24)	12 (20)
	3 middle school	4 (11)	4 (16)	8 (13)
Areas of Residence	Rural	10 (28)	-	10 (16)
	Semi-urban	12 (33)	-	12 (20)
	Urban	14 (39)	25 (100)	39 (64)
Time in Mexico (months) M (SD)		9.7 (5.8)	-	-

*Rural areas have fewer than 2,500 residents , semi-urban areas have some infrastructures in place and some services, urban regions have more than 2,500 residents and they have an infrastructure in place.

Table # 2. Children with significant symptoms in Mexico and the US

	Girls		Boys	
	Mexico	US	Mexico	US
	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)
	18 (50)	13 (52)	18 (50)	12 (48)
Depression Scale (CDI2)				
Total	9(50)*	3(23)	2(11)	1(8)
Emotional Problems	7(39)*	2(15)	0(0)	0(0)
Negative Attitude	5(28)*	3(23)	0(0)	0(0)
Negative Self-Esteem	6(33)*	1(8)	0(0)	0(0)
Functional Problems	8(44)	5(38)	5(28)	2(17)
Ineffectiveness	8(44)	4(31)	4(22)	2(17)
Interpersonal Problems	8(44)*	5(39)	1(6)	3(25)
Anxiety Scale (SCARED)				
Total	7(39)	7(54)	5(28)	5(42)
Child Self-Report Scale(YSR-DSM)				

Emotional Problems	3(17)	1(8)	2(11)	4(33)
Anxiety Problems	6(33)	1(8)	3(17)	3(25)
Somatic Problems	0(0)	0(0)	5(28)*	3(25)
ADHD and Hyperactivity	1(6)	1(8)	0(0)	0(0)
Oppositional Defiant Problems	1(6)	1(8)	2(11)	1(8)
Behavior Problems	1(6)	0(0)	1(6)	1(8)

*p>0.05

Recommendations

If the United States policies continue to abruptly deport their undocumented populations and in particular the types of families it should be protecting which are the families of US citizen children who are of Mexican descent, we will continue to see behavioral and emotional problems in the US citizen children population.

The qualitative analysis reflects heartbreaking and painful experiences, as well as a presence of anxiety and sadness in these children, which is more than indicated by the psychological tests. More research is needed about the reliability and validity of the evidence, we need to evaluate the understanding of the language, even though in Mexico almost all the children agreed to be interviewed in Spanish.

Children face a process for adapting to a new culture and lifestyle, which they experience as a challenge in which family plays an important role as a source of support. Policies and programs should be developed in areas such as:

Schooling: Not only in supporting the adaptations of these children to Mexican culture by providing facilities that will recognize them as Mexican by birth certificates, but also in school programs which they were not educated in the United States about Mexico such as history, geography and Spanish.

Reintegration Program: To facilitate the process of having a national identity by providing them with a birth certificate and identity to access education and health services. Programs that support the economic stability of families by the reintegration of parents to the work force would aid the well-being of children and families.

In the United States policies can include a comprehensive immigration reform that includes a clear path to citizenship for these families to remain intact. We need to deal with the problem of wellbeing of migrant children who are truly citizens of both countries, which would imply a political will from both Mexico and the United States.