

Report details psychological and health impact of deportation on children

Meenakshi Jagadeesan
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Last August, the medical journal *Frontiers in Pediatrics* published an academic report entitled “Fear of Massive Deportations in the United States: Social Implications on Deprived Pediatric Communities” which details long-term health consequences of stress suffered by children whose parents are at risk of deportation. The report, written by Marie Leiner, Izul De la Vega and Bert Johansson, provides a systematic and chilling summary of the socio-psychological impact of mass deportations on millions of people. The report comes amidst an intensified crackdown on immigrants with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) boasting a staggering 30 percent increase in arrests from 2016, totaling at least 143,470 arrests in the 2017 fiscal year.

Leiner and her co-authors point out that regardless of whether the children might be living in the country legally or illegally, their parents—usually the intended targets of immigration raids—tend to use “negative coping mechanisms” to deal with the persistent stress and depression engendered by their situation. Because of the constant fear and insecurity, parents—and by extension—children “will experience limited access to the pillars that sustain society, including access to education, protection by law, basic needs (e.g., food and housing, health care) and opportunities to plan for the future.”

In real terms, this means parents who fear deportations stop taking their children to school, children fail to report family abuse, and parents stop seeking help in acquiring food, shelter or health care, both preventative and urgent, for themselves and their children. Above all, the environment of fear and instability prevents not just the parents, but also children from making any plans for the future.

As the report explains, each of the behaviors outlined

above has an even more ominous consequence for childhood development. Missing school means that the children inevitably fall behind their peers; the continuation of abuse leads to a devastating physical and psychological fallout that will create lifelong scars.

Additionally, lack of access to basic needs and preventive health care will inhibit growth and brain development, and the inability to envisage a secure future makes children potentially prone to “many physical, mental and emotional problems.”

What adds to the danger is the fact that the targeted communities also generally tend to be the most economically disadvantaged. Some of the earlier studies on the subject quoted by the report have detailed findings on how living in poverty affects the brain development of children, leading to “decreased reading/language ability and executive functions,” as well as “behavioral, cognitive and emotional problems.” Children of immigrants dealing with the looming threat of deportations thus face double the structural barrier to a healthy life.

While the long-term effects of massive deportations on children have yet to be studied, Leiner and her colleagues point out that the situation they face is not fundamentally different from those faced by children living in condition of systematic “generalized fear.” Studies that have dealt with such conditions—whether due to immigration raids or violence that is the result of terrorism, war or organized crime—have all concluded that it is the main trigger for negative outcomes.

Based on these studies, the conclusion reveals that the long-term effects of the ongoing massive deportations yields a terrible societal consequence. The report notes that the “feeling that society has failed individuals is the seed that generates individuals who are dedicated to crime, delinquency, or who are simply disconnected

from society and have no intention to positively contribute to a harmonious and balanced society.”

The dire consequences of massive deportations will not remain restricted to the targeted communities. They could, as Leiner et al. state, trigger “potential unintended consequences involving increased racial/ethnic discrimination, feelings of stigma, and possible lower tolerance of racial/ethnic diversity.” The negative consequences that will be initially seen in immigrant communities will soon spread and “affect every person” in the country.

The report concludes with the suggestion that the only way forward is through the creation of a “multidimensional approach for planning, understanding and considering all social, economic, and cultural implications” of the proposed immigration policies. In addition, what is needed is an investment in “early childhood programs that focus on families as an inseparable nucleus.”

The United States has the dubious distinction of being the only UN member state which has not ratified the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). The basic proposition underlying the convention is that in all actions that affect children a state should make “the best interest of the child” a primary consideration. A hallmark of a civilized society is its treatment of the most vulnerable sections of its population, including children. In this sense, the trauma produced by US government policy against immigrants, supported by both the Democratic and Republican parties, reflects the brutality of American capitalism.



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