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Opposing Family Separation Policies for the Welfare of Children

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The current administration's widely criticized policy of separating immigrant families at the border has called attention to the detrimental long-term effects of separating children from their parents. Physicians, psychologists, and public health experts have expressed profound moral outrage while also explicitly warning of the medical and psychological dangers of needlessly separating children from their families of origin. Additional information currently coming to light about the squalid conditions in which children are kept highlight the downstream risks of this harmful practice: detaining and confining children is morally abhorrent and dehumanizing. Calling attention to the long-lasting medical harm of family separation, in addition to the moral outrage these acts sparked, has helped frame public conversations on protecting the well-being of migrant children as a public health imperative.

Separating children from their parents, as both supporters and detractors of this policy have noted, is neither new nor unique to immigrating families. Media outlets published historical accounts of child separation, from slavery through forced separations of Native American families. This renewed focus on family separation presents an opportunity to question common child welfare interventions, which may result in both temporary and long-term child separation.

Child welfare interventions that result in the separation of children from their families are often accepted as necessary for the benefit and safety of the child. Annually, more than a quarter of a million children are removed from their parents by state governments. Yet 75% of substantiated child protection cases involve neglect, an amorphous category correlated and unfortunately too often confused with poverty. Most children involved in child welfare investigations and interventions are not victims of sexual and physical abuse.¹ Studies indicate that apart from extreme cases of imminent physical harm to children, the family unit is the preferable place for children to grow and thrive. Suboptimal families are better for children than removal.² Beyond a focus on outcomes for children, there is a moral imperative to keep families together and respect parents' affirmative right to raise their children.

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A HAPHAZARD PROCESS

Section:

Unfortunately, child removal is a haphazard process that is often overutilized rather than used as a tool of last resort, and the policies that safeguard this intervention vary by state and even among counties within the same state. This has been a longstanding concern among advocates for children. Many jurisdictions remove children simply to return them to their families within days or weeks. Nationally, 25 000 children each year are returned home within 30 days of their removal.³ This begs the question of why removal was warranted in the first instance, as few serious and systemic concerns that might justify separation could in fact be rectified in this time period. The risks of child removal, an intervention known to have significant adverse effects on children and

families, can only be acceptable if the benefits are greater than the risks. Short-term removals raise significant questions regarding the overuse of child removal as a tool to ensure the safety of children and can serve as a target for intervention. Outcome measures that incorporate reduction in all cases of child removal as well as in the subgroup of children removed for less than 30 days could be interpreted as evidence of more judicious use of child removal.

STATE-LEVEL DIFFERENCES

Section:

Furthermore, child removal rates are sensitive to state-level interventions. States with higher standards for substantiation of child abuse allegations have lower rates of foster care placement. An increase in the state-level substantiation standard for child abuse allegations is also correlated with a decline in foster care placement.⁴ States with more restrictive welfare systems place more children in foster care than those with generous welfare programs.⁵ Studies also demonstrate that investing in housing supports for families, raising the minimum wage, and reducing child-support obligations can also decrease the number of children who need to be in foster care.⁶ Taken together, research has shown that local social priorities influence children's likelihood of being removed from their homes. Furthermore, skewed financial incentives have historically favored out-of-home placement rather than provision of in-home services. The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (part of Division E in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 [HR 1892]) was designed to address this challenge, yet many barriers to family preservation remain.

Individual states' responses to the challenge of child maltreatment are reflective of their broader approach and philosophy to addressing social concerns. Large differences in entry rates into foster care among states indicate how policy and political choices rather than imminent risk of harm shape the placement of children outside their homes. This is unacceptable.

ADVERSE OUTCOMES

Section:

Long-term out-of-home placement has been correlated with numerous adverse outcomes for children.³ Even short-term removal can cause long-lasting trauma to children and families, and in younger children threatens secure attachment. Separating mothers from their infants, even temporarily, jeopardizes not only infants' attachment but also the breastfeeding relationship.

With a renewed public focus on the detrimental effects of family separation, public health experts have an opportunity to lend their voices to an important policy debate pertaining to all children, regardless of immigration status.

OPPOSING SEPARATION

Section:

Public health experts with a passion for advocacy can partner with community activists to work together to ensure that courts and agencies make critical removal decisions with full knowledge about the impact of child removal on the development of children. As advocates for children, we can call attention to the harm of family separation of any kind and advocate policies that focus on supporting families in their communities. We should oppose policy measures that separate children from their parents for reasons such as immigration status, substance use disorder, or lack of resources such as housing. We can make clear that foster care must be a tool of last resort, reserved for the most serious of cases of child maltreatment in which there is imminent risk of harm to a child. We can advocate strong social programs that support parents to care for children in their own homes.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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