The Impact of Immigration Policy on the Health & Well-being of Immigrant Children

Amy M. Ryan, Ph.D.
California Psychiatric Association
Fleeing Violence in Central America
Current Immigration Policy & Laws

• A shift from “Catch and Release” to “Zero Tolerance”

• Undocumented adult immigrants to be prosecuted in federal court

• Children of parents awaiting prosecution placed with Department of Heath & Human Services
Potential for Trauma

“undermine the protection of detainees’ rights, their humane treatment, and the provision of a safe and healthy environment”

# Mental Health of Asylum Seekers

## Baseline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Detained (n=35)</th>
<th>Released (n=26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number (%) above recommended cut-off*</td>
<td>Symptom scores, mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anxiety</strong></td>
<td>28 (80%)</td>
<td>2.40 (0.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Depression</strong></td>
<td>30 (86%)</td>
<td>2.52 (0.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PTSD</strong></td>
<td>19 (54%)</td>
<td>2.52 (0.62)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Follow-up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Detained (n=35)</th>
<th>Released (n=26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number (%) above recommended cut-off*</td>
<td>Symptom scores, mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anxiety</strong></td>
<td>30 (86%)</td>
<td>2.58 (0.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Depression</strong></td>
<td>31 (89%)</td>
<td>2.73 (0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PTSD</strong></td>
<td>21 (60%)</td>
<td>2.63 (0.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Change in symptom scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Detained (n=35)</th>
<th>Released (n=26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anxiety</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Depression</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PTSD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PTSD=post-traumatic stress disorder. *Cut-offs: 1.75 for HSCL-25 depression and anxiety subscales, 2.5 for HTQ. †p not significant for changes in any symptom score in detained group. p=0.0001 for all three symptom score changes in released group. Mean (SD) values are group mean at each assessment. Change=change in mean score from baseline assessment.
Early Life Stress & Maternal Deprivation: Over 70 Years of Study

• High death rates in orphanages in 1940s

• Renè Spitz, 1946: developmental delays in institutionalized infants

• John Bowlby, 1961: separation from parents early in life lead to later psychiatric illnesses
Early Life Stress & Maternal Deprivation: Over 70 Years of Study

- Harry Harlow, 1958: monkeys spent their time with soft mother despite nutrition from wire mother
- Failed to develop proper social behaviors and had abnormal fear responses
Early Life Stress & Disrupted Neurodevelopment

Human Brain Development
Neural Connections for Different Functions Develop Sequentially

Sensory Pathways (Vision, Hearing)
Language
Higher Cognitive Function

FIRST YEAR

Birth (Months) (Years)
-8 -7 -6 -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University
Early Life Stress Affects Brain Structure

Normal

Typical neuron—many connections

Toxic stress

Damaged neuron—fewer connections

Prefrontal Cortex and Hippocampus

Radley, et al., 2004
Early Life Stress Affects Stress Response & Cognition

Dysregulated stress response, over or under active

Suor, et al., 2015
Future Consequences

ACES can have lasting effects on....

Health (obesity, diabetes, depression, suicide attempts, STDs, heart disease, cancer, stroke, COPD, broken bones)

Behaviors (smoking, alcoholism, drug use)

Life Potential (graduation rates, academic achievement, lost time from work)

4-12-fold increased risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and suicide attempt (Felitti, 1998)
Economic Impact

• Direct costs of mental health services:
  – $121B in 2003, projected to be $280.5B in 2020 (Dept of Health & Human Services)

• Indirect costs of mental illness:
  – Earn $16,306 less than those without illness (Kessler, 2008)
  – Unable to work
  – Imprisoned from crimes, victims of crimes

• Indirect costs approx. $193.2B in 2002 (Kessler, 2008)
What can we do to help children?

• Resilience: social support can protect children from adverse effects of early life stress
What can we do to help children?

• Stable social relationships are essential to health development

• How to frame recommendations?