



## The Suffering of Children

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Every pediatrician has his or her own tips for putting young patients at ease in the exam room. Mine include referring to even the tiniest Spanish-speaking patients as *usted* rather than

*tú*, as a sign of respect, and sitting at or below their level to avoid looming over them. Most important, I examine children in a parent's lap whenever possible. I will even vaccinate them in that position if the parent feels comfortable holding the child. For most children, there is no safer, more comforting place in the world than a parent's embrace.

That is why the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Medical Association, along with hundreds of other national organizations, have decried the U.S. government's recent policy of tearing undocumented immigrant children from the arms of the people who would carry them to safety.

The families flocking to our border are fleeing unspeakable vi-

olence. As of 2016, the homicide rates in El Salvador and Honduras were 81 and 59 per 100,000 population, respectively<sup>1</sup> (for comparison, the rate in the United States was 5 per 100,000, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation). Patients from Central American countries tell me about passing dead bodies on the way to elementary school, evading kidnapping attempts, and fleeing in the middle of the night with little more than the clothes on their backs when gangs' extortion demands devolved into death threats. The gangs are often referred to as "children's armies," since they aggressively recruit children as young as middle-school age to serve as lookouts or "girlfriends" (a euphemism for sex slaves). The gangs operate with impunity, hav-

ing infiltrated many already overwhelmed police precincts by corrupting officers with bribes and threats. In some areas, as many as 95% of crimes go unpunished.<sup>2</sup>

When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees interviewed 404 unaccompanied or separated immigrant children in 2013, they found that 72% and 57% of the children from El Salvador and Honduras, respectively, potentially met criteria for refugee protections under international law.<sup>3</sup> Yet in recent years, only about one third of asylum requests by unaccompanied minors have been granted — and the proportion is likely to diminish under the current administration's ever-narrowing asylum criteria.

Since the surge in unaccompanied minors and family units arriving at the U.S. border peaked in 2014, when Mexico began to step up its own immigration enforcement at the behest of U.S. authorities, immigrants have sought ever more remote and dangerous

routes. Families with young children traverse mountains and deserts on foot, falling prey not only to the elements, but also to robbery, kidnapping, and extortion by local bandits. An estimated 6 of 10 women and girls experience sexual violence en route, according to UNICEF. Those who can afford to pay coyotes (people smugglers) to help them are not immune to mistreatment at their hands. Yet the number of people attempting the journey is again rising toward previous record levels, according to statistics from the Department of Homeland Security. The decision to flee is not made lightly or in ignorance of the risks; it is born of desperation.

These children and families arrive at our borders to be greeted by guns, dogs, and military-grade equipment. At times, our own Customs and Border Protection inflicts further violence and deprivation on them, as detailed in a recent report from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).<sup>4</sup> Though they have been victimized and exploited at every turn, when these immigrants finally commit the misdemeanor of crossing our border without authorization (an administrative offense), they receive the most draconian of punishments. Even those who instead present legally at a port of entry to request asylum risk facing the same consequences, according to the ACLU. In recent weeks, families were corralled in cages and children were torn from their parents' arms and then sent, sometimes without warning or explanation, to shelters resembling warehouses that may be halfway across the country. Despite adding beds at a rate that makes appropriate oversight impossible, the shelters are operating at more than

95% capacity. With more than 2300 children separated from their parents since early May alone, according to news reports, the administration has erected a tent city to house displaced young people in a part of Texas where daytime temperatures rise above 100°F.

Though an executive order has at least temporarily halted the practice of routinely separating families, no clear plan exists for reuniting the children and parents who have already been separated. Moreover, the United States currently lacks adequate family detention facilities to humanely house children with their parents while their immigration cases proceed. The United Nations has warned that the appalling treatment of these vulnerable children violates U.S. obligations under ratified international treaties, but the admonishment has so far fallen on deaf ears.

Though aggressive immigration enforcement raises more obvious concerns about the well-being of foreign-born children, American children have also suffered dire consequences. One fifth to one quarter of adult immigrants deported from the United States in recent years were parents of U.S.-citizen children.<sup>5</sup> Recently, a father in my practice who was his family's sole breadwinner was deported, leaving behind an American wife and several American children who quickly became homeless. The mother had a mental breakdown, and the children are now in state custody. Research reveals that such repercussions are altogether too common. Proposed "public charge" measures that would punish even legal immigrants for accessing benefits programs for their U.S.-citizen children, such as Women, Infants, and

Children (WIC), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), will further harm the health of our population.

As physicians, we know that traumatic experiences like the loss of a loving caregiver can inflict toxic stress on a child, hindering healthy development and leading to changes in physiology that promote physical and mental illness throughout the life course. Such trauma can even become epigenetically encoded, thereby passing to future generations.

As parents, we can barely begin to imagine the suffering of these families, but like AAP president Colleen Kraft, we might recognize it as "government-sanctioned child abuse," paid for with millions of taxpayer dollars.

As citizens, we have an obligation to advocate against the devastating harm being inflicted in our names. If we permit such brutal treatment of already traumatized children to continue, the stain will be on all our hands.

Disclosure forms provided by the author are available at NEJM.org.

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