



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

April 5, 2017

The Honorable John F. Kelly
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Kelly:

On behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA), I am writing to express our deep concern about your proposal to separate undocumented families as they arrive at our border. I respectfully ask that you reconsider this policy. I am also writing to request a meeting with you and some of my APA colleagues to discuss this matter in greater detail. In this way, we could assist you in not only providing critical information on this complex topic but also in helping you and the Department of Homeland Security in developing policy that both protects our country and does not harm vulnerable others.

This issue is of particular significance to me given that I emigrated from Cuba at the age of eight with my family, and am personally familiar with the significant challenges that arise for immigrants in these conditions. I also have concerns about this proposal given that it separates families and can do irreparable harm, especially to children. As a child immigrant, the welcoming reception given to me by our great country had, and continues to have, profound effects on me and those in my large circle of contacts.

APA is the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States, with more than 115,700 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, students, and affiliates. APA's mission is to advance the creation, communication, and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives. We have members and affiliates across the United States, many of whom serve immigrant youth and adults in a wide range of settings, including schools, community centers, hospitals, and refugee resettlement centers.

Families have already incurred multiple risks in migrating to the United States. It is not at all clear that adding additional risk would serve as a deterrent.ⁱ The families fleeing their homes to seek sanctuary in the United States are already under a tremendous amount of stress.ⁱⁱ The scientific literature shows that sudden and unexpected family separation can add to that stress, leading to emotional trauma in children.ⁱⁱⁱ Data suggests that the longer that parents and children are separated, the greater the reported symptoms of anxiety and depression are for children.^{iv} Sudden and unexpected family separation is also associated with negative outcomes for children,

including housing instability, food insecurity, interrupted schooling, and behavioral/emotional responses, such as fear, anxiety, aggression, and changes to sleep and appetite.^v

Over the last few years, APA has expressed concerns to congressional leaders, the president, and the general public regarding the stigmatization of migrants and their U.S.-born children, the trauma of family separation, and the negative effects of detention and deportation processes. These effects are compounded by the negative impact of racial profiling and other mental health concerns facing recent migrants.

A policy that would purposely separate parents from their children will lead to damaging results for children and goes against the purpose of the child welfare system to protect children from further psychological harm and neglect.^{vi} In addition, family separation through detention and deportation processes is dangerous and impedes safe repatriation and reintegration. As psychologists, we have documented multiple negative impacts of such separations on children's emotional and psychological development and well-being and on families' security and economic well-being. It strips the dignity of an individual and their family. Similarly, there is ample evidence of the value of family integration for the welfare and health of our nation.

More specifically, APA asks you to consider the following policy recommendations:

- prioritize family unity as a primary factor in all charging and detention decisions;
- advocate for the best interests of the child in all processing, custody, removal, and repatriation decisions;
- hire child welfare professionals at the border to supervise the protection of children and families and to be consulted in instances of family separation.

We ask that you seriously reconsider the consequences of your proposal, which would separate children from their parents. As noted earlier, I would welcome a meeting with you to discuss some of these issues in greater detail. You can contact Serena Dávila (sdavila@apa.org or 202-336-6061) in APA's Public Interest Government Relations Office for more information and to coordinate this meeting.

Thank you for your attention to our concerns and for all that you do to preserve our nation's security.

Sincerely,



Antonio E. Puente, PhD
President

ⁱ Slack, J., Martinez, D.E., Whiteford, S., & Peiffer, E. (2013). In the Shadow of the Wall: Family Separation, Immigration Enforcement and Security. *The Center for Latin American Studies, University of Arizona*, SSRN:<https://ssrn.com/abstract=2633204>.

ⁱⁱ Chaudry, A. (2011). Children in the aftermath of immigration enforcement. *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 4 (1), 137-154.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dreby, J. (2012). The burden of deportation on children in Mexican immigrant families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 829-845. doi: 10.1111/j. 1741-3737.2012.00989.x.

^{iv} Suárez-Orozco, C., Bang, H.J., & Kim, H.Y. (2010). I felt like my heart was staying behind: Psychological implications of family separations and reunifications for immigrant youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 26(2), 222-257.

^v Dreby (2012)

^{vi} Dreby (2012)