Chidlren’s Mental Health Risks Should Be Considered in Immigration Reform Debate

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Immigrant children who have been separated from one or both parents because of detentions and deportations are at significantly greater risk for depression and anxiety, according to a release by the American Psychological Association (APA).

Immigrant children are the fastest growing population of young people in the United States. Sixteen million children have at least one parent who is an immigrant, and up to 5 million children are estimated to have at least one parent who is undocumented.

“Research indicates that the emotional and sometimes physical trauma associated with shortsighted and overreaching immigration policies can have a lasting impact on children and adolescents,” Carola Suárez-Orozco, PhD, codirector of the department of immigration studies at New York University, said in prepared remarks at an ad-hoc congressional hearing about the recent Arizona immigration law.

During the hearing, convened by Representative Raúl Grijalva (D–Arizona), Suárez-Orozco told the committee about her own research among 400 immigrant children who had been separated from one or both parents for periods ranging from six months to 10 years. She found that the longer a child had been separated from a parent, the higher his or her risk for developing depression and anxiety.

“Unfortunately, the psychological consequences of these deportations and detentions on immediate family members and vulnerable children are often overlooked,” Suárez-Orozco said. “It is imperative that policymakers keep the needs of children in mind as our nation moves forward in reforming what President Obama referred to as our ‘broken immigration system.’”

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