

## **The Society of Behavioral Medicine Opposes the Forced Separation of Migrant Children from their Families**

The Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) strongly opposes the current U.S. immigration policy that involves the inhumane practice of forcibly separating children from parents among migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking families.

SBM is a multidisciplinary, national organization of over 2,400 clinicians, educators, and scientists dedicated to studying the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities, and populations.

As of June 18, 2018, nearly 2,000 migrant children have been involuntarily separated from their parents or caregivers over a span of six weeks at various U.S. entry points, most notably the southern border. The systemic separation of children from their family unit as a strategy to deter migrating families is a serious violation of children's rights and international human rights laws. Reports of the inhumane conditions (e.g., overcrowding, pens that separate siblings by gender) in which these children are placed are deeply disturbing. Such practices are exacting irreparable physical, neurological, and psychological harm on already-strained children and families, many of whom are fleeing from life-threatening conditions in their home countries.

Children are particularly vulnerable to adverse and traumatic experiences. Forced separation from their most trusted caregivers exposes children to extreme stress that can severely compromise their health and well-being for the rest of their lives. Children who experience extreme stress are at increased risk of neurological damage, developmental delays, depression, anxiety, drug abuse, and suicidality in the short-term; as adults, they are at increased risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer, depression, drug abuse, suicidality, and an estimated 20-year reduction in life expectancy.

The involuntary and forced separation of children from their parents at the border further compounds the distress experienced during migration and any trauma experienced in their country of origin. Many of these families are fleeing from dangerous conditions, including extreme violence, gang warfare, sexual assault, and abject poverty. Forced family separation and displacing children in institutional sites across the United States with no guarantee of reunion subjects both children and parents to re-traumatization and unjustly robs children of the most essential protection they have – their primary caregivers – in legal proceedings regarding their immigration cases, in their ability to cope with traumatic experiences, and in their overall well-being.

We join the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, and hundreds of other organizations recognized for expertise in child health, child welfare, and juvenile justice in urging our nation's leaders to immediately abandon the unnecessary and cruel practice of separating children from families seeking safe haven at our border. We will continue to speak out against policies and practices that leverage children in any way and demand that the fundamental rights and well-being of the most vulnerable of populations in our society are protected.

*This statement is the result of a collaborative effort from SBM members Pamela Behrman, PhD, Virginia Gil-Rivas, PhD, Idia Thurston, PhD, Elva Arredondo, PhD, Sheela Raja, PhD, Sasha Fleary, PhD, MS, and Monica Wang, ScD, MS; and SBM's Child and Family Health and the Violence and Trauma Special Interest Groups, and Civic and Public Engagement and Health Policy Committees.*

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