The Psychological Implications of Early Life Stress Related to Immigration and Detention

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Introduction
• Early life stress increases risk for depression and other psychiatric disorders
• Migrant children experience extreme stress in their home countries, along the journey to the border, while waiting in Mexico, and in detention centers in the United States
• A better understanding of this stress can help inform policy and public health initiatives

Objectives of the Study
To characterize the stress that migrant children experience related to immigration and detention & identify possible risk and resilience factors

Methods
• I conducted 20-30 minute interviews in shelters in Brownsville and San Antonio to gather information on 73 children over 3 weeks
• Families come to these shelters immediately post release from Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities
• I asked parents about their child’s immigration/detention experience, trauma history, and current PTSD symptoms using a modified version of the UCLA PTSD Reaction Index

Preliminary Findings/ Observations
• Most common reasons for leaving home are community violence, domestic violence, and poverty
• Appears to be a linear relationship (though not yet quantified) between # days detained and # PTSD symptoms for CBP facilities
• This relationship is greatly influenced by the child’s trauma history
• Observed many counter examples of children with very traumatic pasts appearing most happy
• The relationship between PTSD symptoms and # days detained does not seem linear for children held in ICE facilities
• Appears that the symptoms are related to the conditions in the detention centers and the parents’ stress levels

Questions for Data Analysis
• How does family separation influence PTSD symptoms post detention?
• What type of trauma history increases risk for PTSD symptoms?
• What factors promote resilience?
• How do age and gender influence PTSD symptoms post detention?

Reflection
• The political situation and where to place the blame is more nuanced than I understood
• That being said, we need to reconsider policies such as Migrant Protection Protocol and our detention practices to reduce trauma
• Pro-bono lawyers are important for helping families organize their story for asylum proceedings

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