Literature Review

The Impact of Forced Family Separation on a Child

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Introduction

This literature review summarises research that has been conducted on the impact of family separation on a child, demonstrating how separation from a parent can cause harm to a child. The purpose of the reviews is to provide an in-depth overview of recent academic insights and discussions on the impact of 'family separation' from a number of different perspectives and contexts and focusses on academic literature from various disciplines published in the past 10 years. [1]

The first part of the review considers the impact of family separation in a general context of imprisonment, looking at the impact of parental incarcerations, as well as the specifics of incarceration of either the mother or the father on a child.

The second part of the review demonstrates that similar negative impacts on children are seen in the context of family separation as a result of deportation.

[1] The main question considered to define the literature review was: What is the impact of family separation on the well-being of children? Literature was sought via Google Scholar, narrowing the search from a period covering 2010-2020. The focus is on studies undertaken in the UK, supplemented by studies done in the US. The key words for the search that were used in a variety of combinations were: family separation, parental incarceration, parental imprisonment, paternal imprisonment, maternal imprisonment. Bibliographies of relevant literature results were cross-referenced to find further relevant studies and discover emerging themes and debates such as the role of family factors in intergenerational transmission of offending (discussed in 1.3).

Family Separation in the Context of Incarceration

Children of prisoners have been called the "forgotten victims" of crime[2]. Helen Codd, in the introduction to her book In the Shadow of Prison: Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice writes:

Most prisoners do not exist in a vacuum. They may stand alone in the dock in court and serve a prison sentence alone, but most prisoners are members of family, kin and friendship networks. While prisoners experience the primary effects of detention and deprivation of liberty, their families live their lives in the shadow of prison.[3]

From the existing literature it becomes clear that imprisonment may have far-reaching adverse consequences not just for prisoners, but their families and the wider community. According to the World Prison Brief, the UK has one of the highest imprisonment rates in Western Europe.[4] However, the effects of imprisonment on the children of prisoners are still under-scrutinised. The imprisonment of a member of the household is considered to be one of the ten adverse childhood experiences (AECs). AECs are defined as 'potentially stressful or traumatic events such as abuse or neglect.[5] AECs are known to have a significant impact on long-term health and well-being.[6]

Furthermore, there is evidence that the imprisonment of a parent is associated with disproportionate exposure to various other AECs: parental divorce or separation, parental death, familial abuse, exposure to violence, familial mental illness, and familial substance abuse. Based on data from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health in the United States, Turney concludes that the children of incarcerated parents are exposed to nearly five times as many other AECs as their counterparts without incarcerated parents.[7] The more ACEs a child suffers, the more likely this will have a negative impact on outcomes in terms of health, school attainment and later life experiences.[8] Children who are exposed to parental incarceration experience disadvantages across a variety of behavioural, educational, and health outcomes compared to their counterparts who were not exposed to parental incarceration.[9]

[2] Codd, "Prisoners' Families."

[3] Codd, In the Shadow of Prison: Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice, 1.

[4] https://www.prisonstudies.org/highest-to-lowest/ prison_population_rate?field_region_taxonomy_tid=14 (Accessed April 8, 2020)

[5] Turney, "Adverse Childhood Experiences among Children of Incarcerated Parents," 218.

[6] Felitti et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults."

[7] Turney, "Adverse Childhood Experiences among Children of Incarcerated Parents."

[8] Beresford, Loucks, and Raikes, "The Health Impact on Children Affected by Parental Imprisonment."

[9] For reviews from various disciplines, see Foster and Hagan, "Punishment Regimes and the Multilevel Effects of Parental Incarceration: Intergenerational, Intersectional, and Interinstitutional Models of Social Inequality and Systemic Exclusion"; Johnson and Easterling, "Understanding Unique Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children: Challenges, Progress, and Recommendations"; Murray et al., "Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Child Antisocial Behaviour and Mental Health: A Systematic Review."

Impact on Health and Wellbeing

A recent major pan-European study (COPING), launched in 2010, investigated the characteristics, vulnerabilities and resilience of children with a parent in prison in four different European countries: the UK (England and Wales), Germany, Romania and Sweden. [10] The approach in the COPING-study was explicitly child-centred and gathered evidence from over 1500 children, care-givers, imprisoned parents and stakeholders across the four countries.

The researchers conclude that there are some significant differences between countries, however, in all countries, children with a parent or carer in prison are at a significantly higher risk of mental health problems than children in the general population. This risk is particularly evident amongst children aged 11 and above, where 25 per cent of children at high risk of mental health problems. [11]

Children with a parent in prison were prone to experience sadness, including feelings of guilt or disappointment, low self-esteem, anger or aggression, hysteria, separation anxiety, disturbed sleeping patterns, nightmares and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. These experiences might be observed by a caretaker or parent, but the study brings forth evidence that young people might deploy coping mechanisms such as stoicism, acceptance without complaining and optimism to cope. A 10-year old girl from the UK for example mentioned in an interview:

"I did try not to let out my tears and tried to move on, but it didn't really work ... I don't really want to say what's happened. I don't like keeping it in, but I don't really want to say it out loud." [12]

Comparing children's' accounts from the UK and Sweden, the authors conclude that 'it seems that there was a tendency for children to suppress painful feelings and, perhaps, feeling expected to put a brave face on their situation'.[13]

In the existing literature, there is further support for the findings of the COPING project that children of parent(s) in prison have a heightened risk of mental health problems. In a systematic review by Murray et al. of studies that examined children's antisocial behaviour and mental health after parental imprisonment, the authors identified 16 studies with appropriate evidence to support their conclusion that 'children of prisoners have about twice the risk of antisocial behaviour and poor mental health outcomes compared to children without imprisoned parents.'[14] A study of 258 adolescents in the U.S. receiving routine mental health services found that people with a history of parental incarceration had (1) significantly higher rates of disruptive behaviour disorders; (2) experienced a greater number of risk aactors over the course of their lifetimes (parental substance abuse, poverty, parental mental illness, child abuse/neglect, residential instability); and (3) were more likely to have experienced serious consequences including arrest and incarceration.[15]

Murray and Farrington [16], using longitudinal data of 411 Inner London males and their parents from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, compared boys who had experienced separation from their parents/carers, as a result of the latter's

imprisonment, with boys who had experienced parental/carer separation for other reasons, such as the latter's hospitalisation, separation or death.

They found that boys who experienced parental separation due to imprisonment of a parent performed significantly worse on a wide range of antisocial and delinquent outcomes compared to the other groups in later life, in some cases even up to the age of 40. In a study published a few years later, Murray and Farrington again conclude that:

Parental imprisonment is a strong risk factor (and possible cause) for a range of adverse outcomes for children, including antisocial behaviour, offending, mental health problems, drug abuse, school failure, and unemployment. Parental imprisonment might cause these outcomes through several processes: the trauma of parent-child separation, children being made aware of their parent's criminality, family poverty caused by the imprisonment, strained parenting by remaining caregivers, stigma, and stresses involved in maintaining contact with the imprisoned parent.[17]

[14] Murray et al., "Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Child Antisocial Behaviour and Mental Health: A Systematic Review," 8.

[15] Phillips et al., "Parental Incarceration among Adolescents Receiving Mental Health Services," 396–97.

[16] Murray and Farrington, "Parental Imprisonment: Effects on Boys' Antisocial Behaviour and Delinquency through the Life-Course."

[17] Murray and Farrington, "The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children."

Impact on Social Issues

Recent research has highlighted that children with a higher exposure to ACEs and the presence of multiple risks factors are more likely to go on to develop health-harming and antisocial behaviours when they grow up, such as substance abuse and violence.[18] Children with a parent who is imprisoned face various social difficulties such as break-up of the family, financial hardship and stigma which, according to various studies all increase the risk for anti-social behaviour, drug use and poor educational performance.[19]

Kjellstrand and Eddy's study for example used data from 655 families living in Oregon, US, recruited via schools in the top 50% of local neighbourhoods in terms of police contacts with juveniles. The study focused on the effects of parental incarceration during the first 10 years of the child's life. Their findings clearly indicated that there were higher levels of problem behaviours and serious delinquency for the youth across adolescence, [and] that the association between parental incarceration and problem behaviours strengthened slightly over time.[20]

Kate Philbrick found that children with a parent in a US prison who do not see the parent at home on a daily basis and need other relatives (or sometimes social services) to take them to visit their
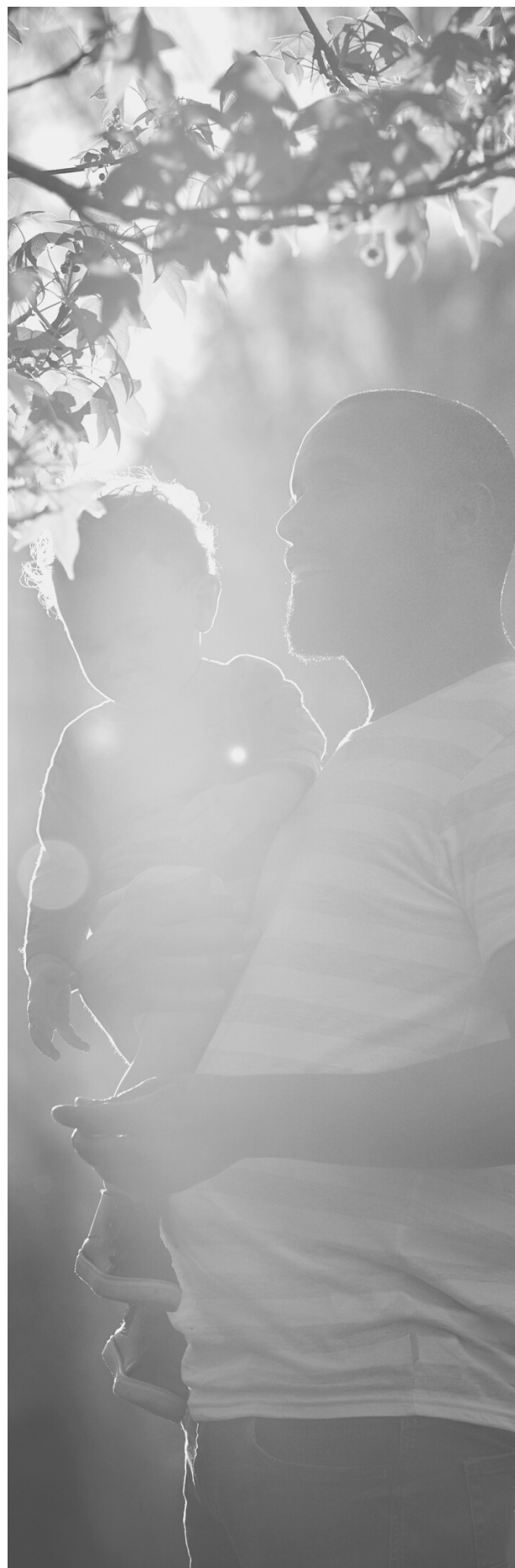
imprisoned relative are negatively affected. The incarcerated parents can be located far away, and the visit itself may include searching and waiting in sometimes harsh conditions and talking to their relative in a crowded visiting room. The study found that these children may suffer stigma, confusion, anger and often regress in behaviour or fall behind with their school attendance and work. [21]

It is often assumed that the father is the one incarcerated, and indeed in the UK women make up of only 5% of the overall prison population. Most women entering prison in the UK serve a short sentence of less than 12 months.[1] However, it would be wrong to assume that such shorter sentences do not have an impact, or less of an impact, on a child. In a recent study amongst mothers sentenced to imprisonment in England and Wales, the authors found that mothers described both short- and long-term effects on their children after they got out of prison:

Several described younger ones as 'clingy' and insecure', and conversely older children as 'more independent', 'distanced' or 'aloof'. Mothers reported their children experienced bedwetting, nightmares and anxiety. Older children were described as 'angry' and 'resentful', less amenable to maternal discipline and 'quietly judging', and 'as though they were punishing me for leaving them'. Some children experienced bullying at school because of having a mother in prison. One sibling group were instructed to keep their mother's whereabouts a secret to avoid stigma, for the whole of the mother's five-month prison sentence.[23]

In the US, Cho conducted an analysis of school dropout on a sample of 6,008 adolescents where she found that adolescents are indeed at greater risk of school dropout during the year(s) their mothers are incarcerated.

Furthermore, children who were removed from maternal guardianship and placed under the guardianship of an adult relative were observed to have higher odds of school dropout than children who remained under maternal guardianship after the mother's imprisonment.[24] Other studies have also shown that custodial sentences – including short ones – can put a severe strain on mother-child relationships, and that these can bring about various long-term disadvantages to the whole family.[25] Thus, the existing literature shows that both paternal and maternal incarceration have a negative impact on a child's wellbeing.

[18] Dallaire, "Incarcerated Mothers and Fathers: A Comparison of Risks for Children and Families"; Farrington et al., "The Concentration of Offenders in Families, and Family Criminality in the Prediction of Boys' Delinquency"; Poehlmann, "Children's Family Environments and Intellectual Outcomes during Maternal Incarceration"; Murray and Farrington, "Parental Imprisonment: Effects on Boys' Antisocial Behaviour and Delinquency through the Life-Course."

[19] Kjellstrand and Eddy, "Parental Incarceration during Childhood, Family Context, and Youth Problem Behavior across Adolescence"; Murray and Farrington, "The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children"; Davis, "Men's Imprisonment: The Financial Cost to Women and Children."

[20] Kjellstrand and Eddy, "Parental Incarceration during Childhood, Family Context, and Youth Problem Behavior across Adolescence."

[21] Philbrick, "Imprisonment: The Impact on Children."

[22] Women in Prison. Key Facts. https://www.womenin prison.org.uk/research/key-facts.php (Accessed 20-04-2020)

[23] Baldwin and Epstein, Short but Not Sweet: A Study of the Impact of Short Custodial Sentences on Mothers & Their Children.

[24] Cho, "Understanding the Mechanism Behind Maternal Imprisonment and Adolescent School Dropout."

[25] Booth, "Prison and the Family; an Exploration of Maternal Imprisonment from a Family-Centred Perspective"; Flynn, "Mothers Facing Imprisonment: Arranging Care for Their Adolescent Children."

Child delinquency

Child delinquency was not investigated in the COPING Project discussed at the beginning of this literature review; however, the authors note how delinquency among the children of prisoners is one of the most discussed issued in recent literature. Using data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development where 411 south London males have been followed up from age 8-48, Farrington, Coid and Murray found that there was 'significant intergenerational transmission of convictions between three generations, particularly from fathers to sons.[26] Similarly, in a study among boys in the US, Farrington et al. also found that offenders were highly concentrated in families, and that the arrests of relatives a boy's[C1] delinquency.[27] A longitudinal study of 1697 young adults in the US aged 18-24 found that imprisonment of mothers led to increased risks of criminal behaviour in adulthood for their children. The results thus 'highlighted the direct effect of incarceration on adult offspring involvement in the criminal justice system'.[28] Goodwin and Davies summarized findings of broad research into intergenerational offending as follows:

[The] existent international literature reveals evidence of an intergenerational transfer effect between parents with criminal histories and their offspring, with the criminality of the father being particularly influential. The intergenerational transfer of criminality can be mediated by parenting practices and mothers may play a key role in this regard, potentially having a protective influence on the transfer of criminality from fathers to their children. [29]

Despite increasing evidence of an intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour and convictions, in a recent review Catherine Flynn does utter a word of caution. [30] Flynn offers a critical review of studies of parental and maternal imprisonment conducted since the 1960s. While she does not deny 'that the children of imprisoned parents may be at higher risk of offending or imprisonment', she does urge researchers and organisations to 'focus our concern on the immediate and well documented problems experienced by these children, rather on their potential for causing problems in the future.' [31]

[26] Farrington, Coid, and Murray, "Family Factors in the Intergenerational Transmission of Offending," 109.

[27] Farrington et al., "The Concentration of Offenders in Families, and Family Criminality in the Prediction of Boys' Delinquency."

[28] Huebner and Gustafson, "The Effect of Maternal Incarceration on Adult Offspring Involvement in the Criminal Justice System."

[29] Goodwin adn Davies 2012, cited in Flynn, "Understanding the Risk of Offending for the Children of Imprisoned Parents: A Review of the Evidence."

[30] Flynn.

[31] Flynn, 216.
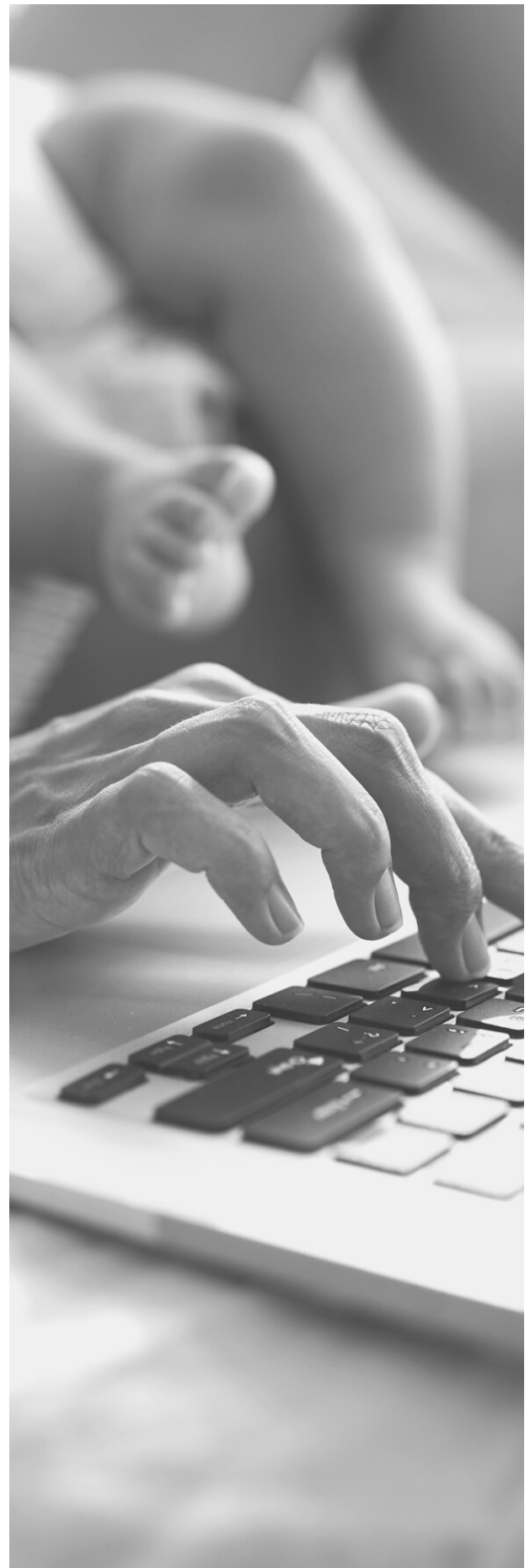
Family Separation in the context of migration and deportation

Various studies suggest that the effects of immigration experiences that involve the separation of a parent from their child should not be assumed to be generalised and universal; rather, these experiences are considered varied and context-dependant. [32] Suárez-Orozco et al emphasise that immigration in itself is an inherently disorientating and disruptive experience. [33] Even though the effects of immigration may be long-lasting, these experiences should be distinguished from the positive or negative effects that might occur because of family separation and reunification.

Psychologists have shown that children are remarkably resilient in the face of loss or trauma [34], and therefore Zentgraf & Chinchilla argue that we should not automatically assume that the separation of a parent and a child is necessarily traumatising, especially in cultures with a tradition of high levels of out-migration. [35]

Family separation in the context of migration however is a complicated topic, for it covers a variety of situations: The impact on "left-behind children" of transnational families [36] [37], the impact as a result of (unaccompanied) child migration and refugee children [38], the impact of return migration on children and families [39], and involuntary separation of children and parents as a result of deportation.

For the purpose of this review, the focus in the following sections lies on the impact of involuntary separation of a parent from their children as a result of deportation.

Enforcement practices in the context of immigration policies tend to lead to the involuntary separation of parents and children when the government detains and removes the parents of citizen children. Particularly in the U.S., the threat of forced separation is an emerging reality for many immigrant families and communities.[40] Of course, with increasingly strict immigration policies this is also the case in the U.K..[41]

While there are still limited studies available, research documenting the short- and long-term effects of detention and deportation on children and families is increasing. Aside from the issues arising from parent incarceration discussed previously in 1.1 – 1.3., research has shown that physical separation between a parent and child, particularly when unexpected, as in the case of deportation, disrupts the essential secure base of a child, thereby risking internalising symptoms (depression, anxiety), externalising behaviours (withdrawal, aggression) and social and cognitive difficulties.[42] Unlike separations involved in voluntary migration decisions, which may include both positive elements such as economic benefits and more opportune future perspectives as well as social-emotional costs, forced separation related to deportation tends to incur the social-emotional cost without the economic benefit. Drawing on data from a large ethnographic study on children's experiences growing up in different types of Mexican households, Joanna Dreby writes:

The most detrimental effect of forced separation on children was the abrupt shift from living with two parents to living with just a mother [...] a father's deportation led to a permanent change in the family structure.[43]

Deportations involve different kinds of trauma for children, who may not only personally witness the forcible removal of the parent, but also suddenly lose their parent, caregiver and/or abruptly lose their familiar home environment.[44]

In some cases, this might even lead to family dissolution. Dreby found that one quarter of families in her sample that experienced deportation were unable to keep their transnational family together post deportation, and that children harbour many fears about their family stability. Aside from the loss of a family member, a deported parent can create a crisis in childcare, and older siblings may increasingly have to take care of younger siblings.

Another particular problematic consequence of deportation that has direct and long-lasting negative effects for families and children, is the loss of a deported person's income – particularly when this person was the sole breadwinner of the family. Numerous studies show how this can lead to housing insecurity, food insecurity, psychological distress, and falling from low income into poverty.[45] For children who are left behind, deportation thus often not only leads to emotional suffering and psychological trauma, but also to long-term financial hardship that can result in losing one's home, leading to housing instability and frequent moves. [46] Combined with many of the other problematic factors associated with parents' undocumented status and the compounding effect of successive traumatic experiences such as immigration raids and parental detention, parental deportation causes increased emotional and behavioural distress among children. These place children at risk for the development of a range of disorders, such as sleeping disorders, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.[47]

[32] Zentgraf and Chinchilla, "Transnational Family Separation: A Framework for Analysis"; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, "Making up for Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and Reunification among Immigrant Families."

[33] Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, "Making up for Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and Reunification among Immigrant Families."

[34] Neimeyer, Mean. Reconstr. Exp. Loss.

[35] Zentgraf and Chinchilla, "Transnational Family Separation: A Framework for Analysis," 350.

[36] Dreby and Adkins, "Inequalities in Transnational Families"; Zentgraf and Chinchilla, "Transnational Family Separation: A Framework for Analysis"; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, "Making up for Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and Reunification among Immigrant Families"; Gao et al., "The Impact of Parental Migration on Health Status and Health Behaviours among Left behind Adolescent School Children in China"; Antman, "Gender, Educational Attainment, and the Impact of Parental Migration on Children Left Behind."

[37] For a detailed review, see Rossi, "The Impact of Migration on Children in Developing Countries."

[38] Heidbrink, Migrant Youth, Transnational Families, and the State: Care and Contested Interests; Dobson and Stillwell, "Changing Home, Changing School: Towards a Research Agenda on Child Migration"; Huemer et al., "Mental Health Issues in Unaccompanied Refugee Minors"; Chavez and Menjívar, "Children without Borders: A Mapping of the Literature on Unaccompanied Migrant Children to the United States."

[39] Hatfield, "Children Moving 'Home'? Everyday Experiences of Return Migration in Highly Skilled Households"; Vathi and Duci, "Making Other Dreams: The Impact of Migration on the Psychosocial Wellbeing of Albanian-Origin Children and Young People upon Their Families' Return to Albania"; Ní Laoire, "'Girls just like to Be Friends with People': Gendered Experiences of Migration among Children and Youth in Returning Irish Migrant Families"; Chalcraft, The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon.

[40] Hagan, Castro, and Rodriguez, "The Effects of US Deportation Policies on Immigrant Families and Communities: Cross-Border Perspectives"; Menjívar, "The Power of the Law: Central Americans' Legality and Everyday Life in Phoenix, Arizona."

[41] Stewart and Mulvey, "Seeking Safety beyond Refuge: The Impact of Immigration and Citizenship Policy upon Refugees in the UK"; Bloch, "Living in Fear: Rejected Asylum Seekers Living as Irregular Migrants in England'; Hasselberg, "Reshaping Possible Futures: Deportation, Home and the United Kingdom"; Turnbull, "Starting Again: Life After Deportation from the UK."

[42] Makariev and Shaver, "Attachment, Parental Incarceration and Possibilities for Intervention: An Overview."

[43] Dreby, "The Burden of Deportation on Children in Mexican Immigrant Families," 836.

[44] McLeigh, "How Do Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) Practices Affect the Mental Health of Children?"; Brabeck, Lykes, and Hunter, "The Psychosocial Impact of Detention and Deportation on U.S. Migrant Children and Families."

[45] Dreby, "U.S. Immigration Policy and Family Separation: The Consequences for Children's Well-Being"; Dreby, "The Burden of Deportation on Children in Mexican Immigrant Families"; Chaudry et al., "Facing Our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement"; Rodríguez and Hagan, "Fractured Families and Communities: Effects of Immigration Reform in Texas, Mexico, and El Salvador."

[46] Chaudry et al., "Facing Our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement."

[47] Henderson and Baily, "Parental Deportation, Families, and Mental Health"; Baum, In the Child's Best Interest?: The Consequences of Losing a Lawful Immigrant Parent to Deportation; Allen, Cisneros, and Tellez, "The Children Left Behind: The Impact of Parental Deportation on Mental Health."

Conclusion

Recent research clearly demonstrates the devastating impact that family separation due to parental imprisonment and deportation can have on children and family life and that many of the issues that children face is similar in both contexts. In the case of parental imprisonment, studies indicate how imprisonment of a member of the household is considered as one of the ten adverse childhood experiences which can lead to long-term health issues and is considered to have a negative impact on a child's well-being. Children who are exposed to parental incarceration experience disadvantages across a variety of behavioural, educational, and health outcomes and are at risk of developing quite severe mental health problems. While family separation in the context of immigration should not be automatically considered as traumatic for children, recent studies on the impact of deportation on a child's well-being clearly demonstrate negative short- and long-term effects of detention and deportation on children and families. These include many of the negative effects seen with family separation as a result of parental incarceration, such as severe emotional cost, stress and pressure on the left-behind family, increased financial difficulty and the risk of children developing long-term mental health problems.

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