

The Psychological Effects of Immigration on Children

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10 April 2012

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March 18, 2012

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According to NCCP. Org, there are 17.2 million children in the United States with a foreign-born parent. Out of these 17.2 million children more than 5 million have at least one parent that is illegal in the country (Capps, et al). One would think there would be emphasis placed on these children, since there is so many, but sadly that is not the case. The 14th amendment in the United States Constitution grants an automatic right to citizenship to someone born on United States soil; a growing number of elected government officials want the repeal of birthright citizenship, saying it serves as a magnet for illegals to cross over (Passel and Taylor). President Obama wants to see a pass for citizenship that would have an immigrant pay a fine, learn English and then get in line for citizenship (Drash). Representing a growing number, immigrants and their children should have the same right as any other United States family. Not only are immigration laws destroying families, they are destroying the United States itself. With more and more children in foster care because of parents being sent back to their home country, it puts a weight on United States citizens who have to pay for this care. No child wants to live in the hands of a stranger when he or she has lived so long with their parents. Feelings of loneliness and even suicide can enter in the mind of a child when he or she is separated from their parents, because it is a traumatizing effect, almost to the extent of losing their loved ones to death. Immigration and immigration-related separation can have a profound effect on children of all ages and can cause many problems with the psychological well-being of the child, including depression, anxiety separation disorders, and negative changes in routine.



*The girl shown here is a child of an immigrant. She suffers from depression and poverty. Photographs taken by Helen Guerrero

Immigration Around the World

Worldwide, there are an estimated 191 million immigrants (Shah). Out of those 191 million, women make up about half of all immigrants at around 95 million (Shah). Women leaving their country not only leave their roots, but their children and family. Thirty-three percent of all immigrants live in Europe and twenty percent (about 30 million) live in the United

States alone (Shah). Four percent of the nation's population is illegal, which accounts for about 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States. (Drash). Out of those 12 million, about 7 million are from Mexico (Drash). Illegals make up more than five percent of the United States work force (Drash). Thirty-seven percent of all adult illegal immigrants are parents of children who are United States citizens; that is more than 4 million children (Passel and Taylor). The Department of Homeland Security arrests more than 1.6 million immigrants per year (Capps, et al 10). These arrests leave many children left behind unprotected.

There are many reasons why people migrate. Some are forced to move due to violence and conflict and others for financial gains or for work (Shah). Many immigrants come from third-world countries, where it is nearly impossible to move ahead. Reducing poverty and addressing issues of development and opportunity are important in trying to reduce immigration (Shah). There are many benefits that come with immigration, as Anup Shah notes: migrant workers will work for longer hours and lower wages, which benefits the host country. Immigrants will often do jobs that citizens of a country will not or cannot do (Shah). Immigrants can add to the diversity of the society, which helps with tolerance and understanding (Shah). Just like with any good there is bad; anti-immigrant sentiment typically comes from the bad economic conditions. Immigrants are often scapegoats, which are used as an easy target (Shah). In May 2008, the extremely poor in South Africa turned against thousands of immigrants from other African countries, killing about 50 and forcing many to leave (Shah). Immigration can become a social political issue, where racism can be used to exploit feelings or as an excuse for the troubles of citizens (Shah). What people do not realize is that immigrants can be exploited with labor that last long hours and low wages (Shah). The government does not help much either; the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service treat immigration detainees as if

they were criminals (Shah). Media can also have a big influence on the views of citizens on immigrants; they only show one side of the picture: the bad side.

Immigration-Related Separation

Immigration-related separation is one of the biggest issues facing illegals in this country; it destroys families and the United States. Focus is put on U.S-born children because they know the United States as home (Capps, et al 10). These children need attention because they are emotionally, financially, and developmentally dependent on their parents (Capps, et al 10).

It was a normal day for Maria Lopez*, on April 10 of 2010, who was shopping at Wal-Mart with her sister and niece. She did not know that day would mark her life for years to come. Her sister did not have a driver's license because she was an illegal immigrant, so the police stopped her because of that. Lopez states, "I was coming out of the store and my sister was coming towards me with the police behind her. I asked her what happened and she told me that the police had stopped her. The police then asked me what was my relation to the child and I said her aunt. Then her dad arrived and they took my sister." She remembers her niece crying and asking why they were taking her mom as the police arrested her. She was put in charge of her four-year old niece for the next three and a half months since she shared an apartment with the mother. After the disappearance of their parents, children tend to experience feelings of abandonment, instability and other emotional trauma that can lead to depression, separation-anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal thoughts (Capps, et al 13). Lopez was asked what differences she noticed in her niece's behavior. According to her, the child "did not eat much and overall she cried a lot and always asked when her mom was coming back. She didn't want to go to school, and when we were out in public and she saw the police, she would say they were bad people because they took her mom." The intensification of enforcing

immigration laws by the government has put children left behind after their parents have been deported at risk of getting separated from family, economic problems, and psychological trauma (Capps, et al 10), and financial issues can become a big problem for the family or community networks that took them in (Capps, et al 12). Maria Lopez recalls how hard it was to take care of two children emotionally and financially because she and her niece cried a lot and she had to treat her niece like her niece was her own. Financially, she says it was tough because her and her sister shared the rent and bills, and, as she puts it, “She was gone so I had to pay them alone.” Many arrested immigrants have limited access to communication with their families; some even leave the country before being able to get an immigration lawyer or saying goodbye to their families (Capps, et al 11). On days of raids in immigrant labor spots, many children are left behind and even though school districts try to make sure no child does, some walk home to empty houses (Capps, et al 12). Some teens are left with other teens and children, and younger ones sometimes are left in the care of a babysitter for months (Capps, et al 12). Immigration officials say that they are just enforcing the law and that it is the fault of the parents for putting children into this situation because they did not following proper immigration procedures (Drash). Lopez’s niece went to see her mother twice a week and she describes the visits as “... very sad because she cried a lot and she would out her hand on the glass separating her and her mom; she would yell, `MOM! `” Some parents of children left behind were held in detention for months and only released when they paid bonds up to \$10,000 (Capps, et al 12). Most of the children affected are United States citizens, like Lopez’s niece, and are as young as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (Capps, et al 11). The United Sates has developed systems to protect children, but they cannot replace parents when they are taken away from their children (Capps, et al 15). After Lopez’s sister was deported back to Honduras and her niece was sent with relatives

to Honduras after her mother, Lopez states that she misses her sister greatly because they have been very close since they were small, and her sister's daughter was like her own, and, as she says, "Because of this I haven't seen them again and now I am scared of going through the same thing."

This situation really affects many people; it separates families and leaves other utterly alone in this country. The government needs to put a focus on solving these problems. As Maria Lopez puts it, "Because of this I am alone in this country. My sister did not kill anyone, she only worked honestly and it is a shame that the authorities of this country cannot see that with the eyes of their soul; they only see it with eyes of convenience."

Immigration-related separation not only affects U.S- born children but also children left behind in their home country by parents who migrate to the United States. Many women are migrating alone and leaving their children behind in their country of origin to improve their families' economic situations (Muir et al). Immigration-related separation causes emotional distance between mothers and children which can cause huge behavior problems (Muir, et al). The separation of a child and a parent can have a big impact on the development of the child-parent attachment since mothers are primary-care givers. Parent-child attachment plays a big role in childhood and teenage years and throughout the entire lifespan. Children are left behind with caregivers and the treatment they are given ranges from love to neglect (Muir, et al). Sometimes children do not receive adequate care because of problems already encountered by caregivers (Muir, et al). Children's attitudes towards mothers during separation are influenced by the attitudes of people left in charge of them (Muir, et al). Explanations children are given for the absence tends to be lies in effort to protect the child or because the caregiver wants them to hate their mothers (Muir, et al). Children who are led to believe lies about their mothers have

difficulty accepting their mothers (Muir, et al). Since mothers are illegal and poor, they can not go back, and contact is limited to an occasional telephone call, letters or gifts (Muir, et al). This lack of communication further intensifies the weakening bond between mother and child and makes it that much more difficult to reunite in a positive way with their mothers. Children often develop a strong bond to the caregivers they are left with and they experience a second separation when it is time to reunite with their mothers. Once reunited with their mothers, the children have to adapt to the United States and adjust to being with their mother again (Muir, et al). Before coming to this country, children have great freedom outdoors and when they come to the United States, the mother often expects them to stay home because the children are not well-adapted to the United States environment, and that causes problems (Muir, et al). The mothers may lack experience in raising older children and her sense of loss and guilt causes her to attempt to continue parenting from when they were younger (Muir, et al). A problem found in reunited families is that the mothers treat the older child as if he or she were younger (Muir, et al). A second problem is the conflict that arises between the mother and an older sister or brother that was in charge of the younger children (Muir, et al). Mothers are reluctant to set boundaries for these children because of guilt related to leaving them behind (Muir, et al) and in a country where people must work to get ahead, many of these children are left alone to do as they please. This can cause problems for the population because since these children are naïve and they have to adapt to a new setting, consequently, many find refuge in gangs and drugs. When dealing with these children, psychologists first have to find the core of the problem, and many times it is the separation from mothers at an early age.

Poverty among immigrants is a very big issue, because even though most of them work, their jobs pay very little. Many immigrants are exploited in their jobs. Since parents are the primary caregivers of their children, poverty affects the children in every aspect of their lives. As Vanessa Wight, who is a family demographer, puts it, “High poverty rates among children of immigrant parents, coupled with unique social and economic challenges, make them particularly disadvantaged when compared with children of native-born parents (NCCP).” A little over one-fourth of U.S-born poor children have married parents, twice as many poor immigrant children have parents that are married, and they are more likely to live in a household where at least one parent works full time (NCCP). Eighty percent of all children with at least one illegal parent live in a two-parent household, compared to only seventy-one percent of children with parents born in the United States (Drash). Yet about 1.8 million children of illegal parents live in poverty (Drash), and about 4.2 million children of immigrant parents live in poverty (NCCP). The average wage paid by the hour for U.S-born parents of young children was about \$17.00, while for immigrant parents of young children it was \$13.00 for the higher-earning parent. Low incomes are associated with increased food insecurity, a greater chance of living in crowded house and poorer health (Urban Institute). Most of the children have at least one parent who has lived in the United States for ten or more years (NCCP), but they are less likely to receive food stamps receive cash welfare, food stamps, or housing assistance, than poor United States citizen children (NCCP). Less than one half of poor immigrant children receive help from the government, compared to two-thirds of the poor children in United States citizen homes (NCCP). Curtis Skinner has suggested many reasons why immigrant parents do not get food stamps, which include lack of information, complications with verifying qualifications, and pronounced feelings of not wanting to be a burden on society (NCCP). Due to culture, few immigrants ask

for help because of the fear of possible consequences (Capps, et al). Vanessa Wight also adds that poverty among this group is not linked to joblessness but it reflects the "...dark side of low-wage work and the related barriers to valuable work supports" (NCCP). Unauthorized parents have unstable jobs and lack access to a bank account and other financial services (Urban Institute). The well-being of these children is influenced not only by the illegal status of parents, but also by family income, parental work patterns, educational attainment by the parents, and how well they can speak English (Urban Institute).

Education can be greatly influenced by poverty. Education is the key to success, but many children of immigrants barely finish high school. Over half of elementary-aged children of immigrants are considered low-income, which plays a role in academic performance and ability (Urban Institute). Children of immigrants may also be less advantaged because their parents have less schooling, more than thirty-two percent of elementary children have parents are immigrants and have less than a high school education, compared with only nine percent of U.S-born parents (Urban Institute). In fact, about fifteen percent of immigrant parents have less than a ninth grade education, and only one percent of U.S-born parents have less than a ninth grade education (Urban Institute). Another big issue that arises is the fact that more than half of immigrant parents are not English proficient (Urban Institute). Therefore, a conclusion can be made that these kids learn another language other than English in their first years of life and can have a hard time with the English language. Lack of English skills can cause many economic hardships among immigrant families, such as poverty, food insecurity (Urban Institute), and availability of jobs is limited because many require the use of the English language. Since many immigrant parents are English deficient, they can have a difficult time trying to get involved in their child's education and school. These children have to rely on themselves to do homework and solve

many school dilemmas that usually involve parents. Also, because parents work for long hours, they barely have any time to ask their children about school. A parent's lack of involvement in a child's life has been proven to significantly affect the child in a negative way. That absence causes behavior problems, especially in teen years when children are most vulnerable to join gangs and start drug use. Education is very important and higher education means higher income, so these children will live in a never ending cycle of poverty.

Immigrants around the world are people that should be receiving attention. Immigrants in the United States are treated as criminals and barely receive any benefits from the government. When immigrants come over they are looking for better opportunities for their families, and since many come at an early age, they have children. Even though many people do not agree with foreigners coming over, their children who are United States citizens need the care and benefits that other children of native parents receive. Immigration can affect many aspects of a child's development through the course of their lives. It can separate mother from child as we learned from Maria Lopez's experience. Mother and child separation can have a very big impact on the child including psychological effects and can cause behavior problems. Whether the child is separated from the mother because she is being deported from the United States or she is leaving her home country, it causes them stress and a range of different problems. Being the child of immigration also means there is a greater risk of being poor because of low-quality jobs and ignorance. Poverty affects a child's ability to perform well in school. It is proven that children of immigrants do not do well in school because of the lack of knowledge on the parent's part. Many have a very low education and cannot help their children with homework or demand the benefits United States children are entitled to. Education is very important, and very low education can lead to poverty, which becomes a never-ending cycle of poverty and helplessness.

The focus needs to be put on these children because their parents` immigration status, jobs, social economic status, fear of separation, and actual separation itself, can all have a profound effect that causes many undesirable factors in the children, like depression and anxiety. Programs need to be created to help these children reach their full potential, because America might be missing out on a lot of talent and intelligence by ignoring the fact that is a problem and it needs to be fixed. Parents cannot be replaced; therefore, emphasis needs to be put away from deporting all these illegal immigrants, because it is not helping anyone. The ones who suffer the consequences of these actions are innocent children, who did not ask to come into this world.

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