

Speaking notes

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What does the research tell us about mental health impact of detaining children and their families?

I carried out a review of the literature into the mental health implications of detaining asylum seekers in 2009 that was published in British journal of psychiatry.

Asylum seekers and other categories of foreign nationals already have higher rates of mental health problems. The process of seeking asylum in Western countries places additional demands on this group, including the possibility of detention.

Detained individuals experience additional stressors and traumatic events including, witnessing distress of other detainees, forced removal, hunger striking, riots, self harm, serious mental health problems. As well as their own distress resulting from loss of Liberty, uncertainty regarding return to country of origin, social isolation, reduced access to health care.

The ten studies that were reviewed all showed that immigration detainees showed high levels of psychological and psychiatric problems including PTSD, anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidality and psychosis.

Turning specifically to the health of children, research has shown that detention affects children both via the harmful effects of the detention environment itself, and also, through the impact of detention on their parents mental health. Children are very sensitive to change in the psychological well-being of parents and rely on healthy emotional functioning of parents in order to regulate their emotional wellbeing, ensure good mental health and normal psychological development.

Children's problems included: separation anxiety, behavioural problems, sleep disturbances including nightmares, night terrors and sleep walking and impaired cognitive development and failure to meet developmental milestones. Severe signs of distress including mutism, refusal to eat and drink were also observed. In younger children, developmental delays in language and social skills are seen, in children over the age of 6- more significant mental health problems were observed including PTSD, depression and suicidality including self harm attempts.

One study that compared the welfare of children and families prior to and during detention found a threefold increase in mental health problems when the parents were detained, and a tenfold increase in the children. All children had at least one psychiatric condition, 80% had multiple disorders. Parents also described feeling less able to parent their children.

What is the long term impact?

It is often assumed that immigration detention is harmful for mental health while the person is detained but that recovery begins immediately post release. In reality, the impact is long term. Many children describe detention as a terrifying experience and many continue to experience distress associated with these experiences post release. For example, I have worked with adolescents who have intrusive memories and nightmares about their time in detention even years after they are released. In those

who have PTSD, these become integrated into the flashback and nightmares they experience about other events they have experienced in their home countries.

Children who have been detained have missed a number of opportunities including access to education, social interaction and play with other children. They may have developmental delays that are attributable to the period in detention. Post release they often experience lack of confidence with peers, and lack of social skills, leading to increased vulnerability to bullying and social isolation. Even amongst those who do not meet criteria for psychiatric diagnoses post release, experiences during detention cause fundamental changes to how they view themselves, their families and the world, which increases their vulnerability. They also experience changes in how they perceive their parents capacity to protect them, which is also critical for a healthy development. Witnessing the development of mental health problems and distress in their parents is overwhelmingly distressing and anxiety inducing in children. In some cases children have been asked to interpret for their parents, placing them in an adult role within the family and altering the family dynamics as well as reducing the protective power of the parent.

In conclusion, the impact of immigration detention on children and their families is long lasting and increases vulnerability to future psychological difficulties.

If treatment is available in detention, can negative impact be mitigated?

No. The environment is harmful in and of itself and so to try to provide treatment in such an environment is nonsensical and treatments will not be effective. Treatments for PTSD should not be delivered in an environment that is currently perceived as traumatic, instead these individuals should be released from detention and not subjected to conditions which will have a long term harmful impact on mental health and development.