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Five Reasons Trump's Immigration Orders Harm Children



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Introduction

Research shows that harsh immigration enforcement policies have consistently undermined the health, economic security, and overall wellbeing of children in immigrant families.¹ Earlier this year, the Trump Administration issued two executive orders that drastically expand the intensity and scope of federal immigration enforcement activities in the United States. These orders include policy changes that will have damaging consequences for children living in mixed-status immigrant families, the vast majority of whom are U.S. citizens, as well as unaccompanied children seeking protection here.²

One order on immigration enforcement activities within the United States prioritizes more immigrants—including parents—for deportation, triples the number of immigration agents, and calls for increased collaboration between federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement agencies to detain undocumented immigrants.³ Similarly, another order, which is focused on immigration enforcement along the U.S. southern border, calls for significant expansion of immigration detention capacity. It also makes policy changes that would return migrants—including women and children seeking asylum—back into harm’s way and strip children of critical protections.⁴ Ultimately, these costly and misguided policies pose a significant threat to millions of children whose wellbeing and long-term development is directly linked to the parent-child relationship, external stress factors, and family economic security.

Several provisions in these orders are likely to face legal challenges, while others would require additional funding to be fully implemented. Therefore, these policies should not be considered final or unalterable. However, it is clear that these orders—even those that have not been fully implemented—are already negatively affecting immigrant communities, creating a climate of fear, and endangering children’s safety and wellbeing. This fact sheet highlights key consequences for children and families.

Specifically, Trump’s immigration enforcement orders:

1. Tear families apart,
2. Harm children’s short- and long-term mental health,
3. Undermine children’s economic security,
4. Threaten children’s access to education and basic needs, and
5. Endanger the lives of asylum-seeking children and families.

1. Trump’s immigration enforcement orders tear families apart.

Mixed-status families are now much more likely to be separated by deportation because the new orders make every undocumented immigrant a priority for removal and speed up the deportation process for immigrants with former deportation orders. The accompanying guidance (official guidelines for implementing the orders) also rolls back previous Department of Homeland Security (DHS) policy that gave immigration officials discretion in deciding whether to detain certain immigrants, including parents and legal guardians of minor children.⁵ As a result, more than 5 million children in the United States currently living with at least one undocumented parent—4.1 million of whom are U.S.-born citizens—are now at greater risk of having a parent or guardian deported.⁶ In fact, Trump’s nationwide immigration raids have already apprehended hundreds of individuals who previously were not considered priorities for deportation, including parents and young people covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.⁷ DACA, an Obama Administration program established in 2012, provides temporary work authorization and relief from deportation for undocumented

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youth who came to the United States as children.⁸ Despite DHS policy guidance specifically exempting current and eligible DACA beneficiaries from the new enforcement orders, several recent detentions by immigration authorities demonstrate troubling inconsistency in the implementation of this guidance.⁹

Family separation is by far the most damaging effect of Trump’s aggressive policies. Research demonstrates the critical influence parents have in their child’s overall development and future success, meaning that the sudden loss of a parent can significantly harm long-term outcomes.¹⁰ Parents facing deportation must also make the difficult decision whether to bring their child with them—often to a country their child has never known—or leave them behind in the care of a family member or other trusted guardian. Both outcomes present unique challenges to child wellbeing.¹¹ In some cases, children may unnecessarily enter the child welfare system, a scenario that can have particularly dire consequences, including the possible termination of parental rights.¹² While ICE has implemented policies in recent years to mitigate the harm of immigration enforcement on children and reduce their chances of entering foster care, it remains unclear whether the Trump Administration will uphold these policies.¹³ What is certain is that increased enforcement coupled with weaker protections for child wellbeing could lead to more devastating outcomes for children and families.

2. Trump’s immigration enforcement orders harm children’s short- and long-term mental health.

Childhood—particularly the early years—is a critical period for determining life-long physical and emotional wellbeing

Aggressive immigration enforcement policies can heighten anxiety among undocumented parents and their children. Childhood—particularly the early years—is a critical period for determining life-long physical and emotional wellbeing.¹⁴ Children living in households with high levels of parental stress often have poor cognitive development, which can be seen as early as age

two.¹⁵ Research also shows that persistent stress on children—commonly called “toxic stress”—can have long-term detrimental effects on brain development, particularly among young children.¹⁶

Several studies show that losing a parent to detention or deportation harms a child’s psychological wellbeing, which has implications for overall health. Children left behind often suffer from irregular sleeping habits, increased anger and withdrawal, and drops in academic achievement.¹⁷ Children who witness a parent’s arrest—an occurrence that has become increasingly common under the recent raids—are much more likely to endure long-term behavioral changes.¹⁸ Furthermore, when one parent is detained or deported, the remaining spouse or partner often experiences depression, which can affect children and cause poor developmental outcomes.¹⁹

A child’s mental health can also be adversely affected by constant fear of parental deportation as well as by exposure to parents’ increased stress and community-wide fear.²⁰ One study found that nearly 30 percent of children with one or more undocumented parent reported being afraid nearly all or most of the time, and three-quarters of undocumented parents reported their children were experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).²¹ Similarly, the high levels of stress and social isolation among undocumented immigrant parents is intensified by the additional threat of possible detention or deportation, which is often passed on to their children.²² Children who themselves are potential targets of immigration enforcement—such as unaccompanied or undocumented children who have grown up here—must endure the constant fear of being separated from family members and deported to a country they either sought to flee or may not even remember.²³ Furthermore, mixed-status families subject to immigration enforcement often lack access to mental health services that are affordable and culturally and linguistically appropriate.²⁴

3. Trump's immigration enforcement orders undermine children's economic security.

By increasing the risk of parental deportation, Trump's immigration enforcement orders threaten to push children in low-income immigrant families deeper into poverty. Despite high rates of parental employment, three-quarters of children (ages 0-17) in mixed-status families live in low-income households—largely due to the limited options available to unauthorized parents who often must work in low-paying jobs.²⁵ Therefore, a parent's deportation can drastically undercut the economic security of families already struggling to make ends meet, especially when that parent is the primary breadwinner. One study estimates that the sudden loss of a deported parent's income can reduce a family's household income by 73 percent.²⁶ Several other studies have similarly found that household incomes were frequently cut in half when a parent was detained or deported. These families were more likely to experience hunger and housing instability, which were further exacerbated by limited access to emergency assistance.²⁷

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Living in poor or low-income households has lasting consequences for education, health, and other key child wellbeing outcomes. Children growing up in poverty experience poorer health, higher incidence of developmental delays and learning disabilities, and more hunger compared to their peers. And the longer children live in poverty, the worse their adult outcomes on measures such as employment earnings.²⁸ Research also shows that poverty can lead to a lack of such necessities as food, clothing, health care, or safe housing. Poverty poses a particular challenge for children living in mixed-status families who already face significant barriers to basic health and nutrition assistance.²⁹ Moreover, poverty imposes extraordinary stress on parents, impairing their ability to provide the level of attention children need to develop and grow into healthy adults.³⁰

4. Trump's immigration enforcement orders threaten children's access to education and basic needs.

Harsh immigration enforcement policies create a chilling effect among immigrants and their families, making them fearful of government agencies or reluctant to attend school or other extracurricular activities. For example, after a raid earlier this year in Las Cruces, New Mexico, schools reported more than 2,000 children were absent the following two days.³¹ In localities where local police are engaged in immigration enforcement, a practice the new immigration orders seek to expand, the mobility of mixed-status families is further restricted because everyday activities—such as transporting children to and from school or child care—suddenly become increasingly risky to undocumented parents who fear a simple traffic stop could lead to deportation.³²

Even before the recent executive orders, children in immigrant families—with or without undocumented family members—were less likely to access basic health care, nutrition, and early education programs. This was true because of complicated eligibility rules and fears—both real and unfounded—about possible repercussions of using safety net programs.³³ Research shows that anti-immigrant policies exacerbate these fears and lead to even less access to public programs.³⁴ For example, the interior enforcement order states that any immigrant who has “abused any program related to receipt of public benefits” is a priority for deportation.³⁵ This simply reinforces long-standing policy about intentional misuse of public benefits and does not create new restrictions. However, increased enforcement and uncertainty about a leaked policy proposal that could drastically rewrite immigrant eligibility rules for federal means-tested benefits have alarmed immigrants regardless of status, even Lawful Permanent Residents and their families.³⁶ In fact, reports from around the country confirm that parents have withdrawn their U.S. citizen children from critical programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) despite being eligible, ultimately imperiling the long-term health of children.³⁷

Increased immigration enforcement also creates challenges for schools, early education/child care programs, health clinics, and other programs that serve immigrant children and families. Among the challenges: responding to questions and concerns about confidentiality of student and client information and providing information and support to parents who need to prepare for possible deportation. Current ICE policy restricts immigration enforcement activities from occurring in “sensitive locations” such as schools, child care centers, bus stops, hospitals, and places of worship.³⁸ However, troubling incidents around the country—such as parents being apprehended by ICE agents on the way to drop children off at school—have forced program administrators serving children and families to review internal policies to identify existing protections and consider additional protocols to ensure the safety of all.

5. Trump’s immigration enforcement orders endanger the lives of asylum-seeking children and families.

Several policy changes under the border enforcement order also compromise the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children seeking protection in the United States. For example, the new order directs border patrol agents to turn away migrants at our borders, forcing them to await the outcome of their proceedings outside the United States, exposing children and other vulnerable migrants to traffickers and other dangers.³⁹ Additional DHS guidance would expand the use of “expedited removal”—a form of deportation that happens without appearing before a judge—to those who have resided in the country for less than two years, including recently arrived children and families. Furthermore, the policy guidance also seeks to redefine who qualifies as an “unaccompanied child” to limit the number of children who meet the definition, thereby stripping them of protections guaranteed to those with “unaccompanied” status. These protections include the right to be transferred in a timely manner to the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and to receive appropriate shelter and services along with the right to a hearing before an immigration judge.⁴⁰ Thus, rather than place children with parents or family members in this country while awaiting the outcome of immigration proceedings, children could be deported without a fair hearing. The policy guidance also suggests that parents in the United States seeking to reunite with their children could face deportation or criminal charges. Finally, the new order calls for a significant increase in detention center capacity along the border, including more detention of women and children—a controversial practice that has been challenged in court and is shown by research to severely impede healthy child development.⁴¹

While these policy changes purport to deter migrants from making the dangerous journey across the border, they will only further threaten the lives of children and families, many of whom have already experienced significant trauma during migration and in their home countries. The number of unaccompanied children entering the United States from the Northern Triangle of Central America—comprised of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—has risen significantly in recent years with more than 68,000 entering in 2014 and high numbers since, despite U.S. efforts to reverse the trend.⁴² Research consistently shows that the majority of these children and families are asylum seekers fleeing extreme violence and instability in their home countries, primarily driven by drug trafficking and organized crime.^{43, 44} Furthermore, the spike in gender-based violence and targeting of increasingly younger children for gang recruitment or retaliation is forcing more girls and young children to migrate.⁴⁵ Ultimately, punishing children, women, and families seeking asylum is a failed strategy that ignores the root causes of violence in home countries and creates additional trauma.

Conclusion

Trump’s immigration enforcement orders betray our American values by threatening the wellbeing of vulnerable children—both citizen and noncitizen—who will suffer the consequences of these damaging policies over many years. Separating families, driving children deeper into poverty, and denying children basic protections will have serious long-term implications. The majority of children harmed by these misguided policies are citizens whose

health, economic, and educational outcomes are important not only for their individual success but also for the collective economic success of our country. The Trump Administration should reverse course on its destructive immigration agenda and instead work toward promoting policies that will enable all children in America to achieve their full potential.

Endnotes

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² A mixed-status family includes people with different immigration statuses. Children in mixed-status families are often U.S.-born citizens with at least one undocumented parent.

An unaccompanied child is defined as a child with no lawful immigration status in the United States, is under the age of 18, and has no parent or legal guardian in the United States or no parent or legal guardian available to provide care and physical custody in the United States.

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