



Position Statement Regarding the Impact of Immigration Policy on Children, Individuals, and Families

The American Psychoanalytic Association endorses reform of United States immigration policy based on the following principles:

- Avoid separating children from their parents. Maintenance of family unity is the best path to support the healthy development of children.
- Encourage citizen responsibility by creating reasonable and speedy pathways for immigrants to become legal residents, citizens, taxpayers and voters.
- Find alternatives to traumatizing actions such as raids on homes and worksites, traffic stops, and sudden parental or family member arrest, detainment and deportation.
- Rescind and avoid promulgating laws and policies that encourage racial and ethnic profiling, as these damage self-esteem and create chronic insecurity, leading to depression and dysfunction in U.S. citizens as well as immigrants.
- Oppose demonizing minorities and groups identified as “other” as this rends the social fabric, foments violence, and diminishes society’s ability to solve its problems.

Rationale

The American Psychoanalytic Association, representing 3500 psychoanalyst and affiliated psychotherapist members, was founded one hundred years ago. Many in that original group of founders were immigrants or first generation descendants of immigrant parents. The experience of acculturation and identity development has been an integral part of the evolution of psychoanalytic theory and practice since that time.

Current immigration statutes, policies and enforcement have a major deleterious impact on children, individuals, and families. The Department of Homeland Security estimates that 10-12 million people are living in the U.S. without documentation, with some estimates as high as 20 million. Approximately 5.5 million children are living with at least one parent without documentation^{1,2}.

These children, three-quarters of whom are U.S.-born citizens³, represent some of the most vulnerable members of our society. Many go to sleep each evening or to school each day with the conscious or unconscious fear that one or both parents could suddenly be arrested and removed from home or work. In 2009, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported 380,000 people, of whom 100,000 were parents. Currently 32,000 people are detained every night due to their immigration status³. Sadly, the “American dream,” has become a nightmare for many. As President Obama has said, we have a “broken immigration system.”

Migration, immigration, detention and deportation create additional trauma for individuals, families and children who have already experienced severe trauma and are seeking political asylum.

Psychoanalysts witness daily the impact that traumatic separation can have on children and adults. Psychological symptoms of depression, sleep disturbances, chronic anxiety, anger, and post traumatic

stress disorders result from children being suddenly separated from their parents, or separated for prolonged periods. The separations of deportation or detention can thus do serious, demonstrable harm. The research is clear that these symptoms interfere with children's emotional development, capacity for learning at school, and the regulation of feelings in a social milieu. Combine that with financial uncertainty for a family following deportation, and basic needs (such as housing and food) and well-being are completely disrupted⁴.

Without developing a sense of safety in one's family, and connection to one's community, it is very difficult to achieve psychological maturity^{5, 6}. It is our psychoanalytic view that current immigration policies injure the emotional growth of children and their parents and family members and disrupt overall functioning.

Enforced immigration policy is only part of the problem. We believe that enforcement provisions in new state laws, such as Arizona SB 1070, currently under appeal and blocked from full implementation, risk further promotion of ethnic and racial profiling and exacerbation of ethnic and racial prejudice. Research has shown immediate and long-term negative effects on self-development and self-esteem because of such prejudice⁶. Merely walking down the street or going to school or work creates the potential for being traumatized and marginalized by one's own community.

Psychoanalysts are aware of phenomena in which societies under stress begin to scapegoat those perceived as "others" or outsiders, in order to feel a false sense of repaired self-esteem. This is a dangerous practice and in its most extreme forms leads to genocide and ethnic cleansing⁸. Healthy societies must make strong attempts to be inclusive and to avoid demonizing any subgroup perceived as "different"⁹. We agree with the National Council of La Raza which says, "We have a moral imperative to put hate in check by addressing immigration effectively and humanely."

In addition an estimated 36,000 LGBT binational couples are facing imminent separation or already live with one partner in exile. Forty-seven percent of binational LGBT couples are raising children who potentially face extended or permanent separations from one parent. In 79% of binational families, the non-citizen partner is from a country that doesn't provide immigration benefits to these couples, meaning neither partner is able to sponsor the other for immigration in their home countries¹⁰.

We are concerned about the human rights of special populations such as LGBT detainees, who are frequently placed in solitary confinement, ostensibly for protective custody. We know, as mental health professionals, that solitary confinement breaks spirits and minds and decri its use for any detainees^{11, 12}. Experienced mental health experts have noted that the conditions in solitary confinement often meet the definition of torture.

Further, we are particularly concerned about the needs and rights of persons with mental disabilities who face special problems when detained. Problems for these individuals include lack of treatment in detention, disadvantages in the legal system, and release practices that do not take their safety into account¹².

In light of the current immigration enforcement system that ignores the mental health of millions of families and children, the members of the American Psychoanalytic Association recommend the following:

- We join with other mental health, medical professional and civil rights organizations in strongly condemning the discrimination and systematized ethnic and racial profiling that can result from immigration laws such as Arizona SB 1070, (the Support our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act). If we are a country that truly cares about the family, policy makers must create an immigration system that takes into account the mental health needs of families and children and is protective of their basic and emotional needs.
- We support Federal legislation that is aimed at safeguarding the mental and behavioral health of immigrant children, their families and other vulnerable populations. Such legislation should take into account the damaging toll of traumatic family separations and sudden traumatic changes in life circumstance from arrests during worksite raids, home raids, roadblocks and traffic stops. We support legislation that promotes the dignity of all individuals and creates policy measures that reduce racial and ethnic prejudice.
- We promote efforts to increase the availability of and access to educational and mental health services for immigrant, deported, and detained individuals and their children and families.
- We support educational programs that increase public awareness of the negative impact on all Americans of ethnic and racial profiling and ethnic and racial prejudice.

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