



# **Family Separation in the Sunshine State: Preparing for the Traumatic Impact & Economic Costs of Immigrant Parent Deportation on Florida's Child Welfare System**

## ***Executive Summary***

**The Scope of the Problem:** Recent U.S. immigration policies have weighed heavily on families. Since April 2018, thousands of immigrants have been detained at worksite raids, individual apprehensions in homes and communities, and at the United States/Mexico border. Although the apprehensions at the border have garnered the most public attention, it is critical not to overlook the immigration policies that impact millions of undocumented parents and their children already living in the U.S.. Recent data indicates that 80% of children of unauthorized immigrant parents were born in the U.S. into “mixed-status” families that include undocumented and citizen members (Balderas, Delgado-Romero, & Singh, 2016; Capps, Fix, & Jong, 2016). These children face involuntary separation when the U.S. Government detains and deports their undocumented parent (Dreby, 2014, p. 245).

Based on research, it is anticipated that thousands of children are at risk of being separated from their parents due to detention and deportation (DCF, 2015; Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Saurez-Orozco, 2011). In Florida, there are 357,638 children currently living with an undocumented family member (Mathema, 2017). Additionally, Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Haitians with Temporary Protective Status (TPS) collectively have 28,800 U.S.-born children living in the State. It is predicted that in January 2019, more than 50,000 adult Florida residents living with Temporary Protective Status are expected to return to their home countries or be expelled due to the federal government's cancellation of their TPS status, potentially leaving their children without a parent or guardian.

The number of children who might ultimately become dependents of the State and enter foster care is difficult to estimate. Florida's current child welfare coding procedures do not capture these cases (State of Florida, 2018), hindering the ability to quantify the children affected. Neither the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) nor the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) provide current national or state statistics about the number of children in foster care due to the detention or deportation of a parent.

**Economic Costs of Foster Care to the State of Florida:** Florida is likely to face immediate economic pressures to house and support children of detainees/deportees in foster care. Annually, it costs a minimum of \$5,495 (“My Future, My Choice”, n.d.) per child for room and board. Additional costs need to be anticipated for long-term costs associated with the care of minors, those with special needs, children's medical care, legal fees and staffing. Child welfare agencies will be challenged to: manage an influx of children, monitor the number of families being separated, and address complex communication during periods of separation. These steps are crucial to making family reunification a possibility (Dreby, 2014).

**Societal Impact of Family Separation:** Research clearly reveals that the trauma of a child's separation from their parent can profoundly affect their physical and mental health, future economic earnings and relationships for years to come (SRCD, 2018). Parental detention and deportation increase children's risk for serious problems including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic disorders and severe psychological distress (Rojas-Flores, Clements, Hwang Koo, &

London, 2016). The research suggests that without culturally-sensitive, trauma-informed prevention and intervention efforts, the experience and aftermath of parental detention and deportation could present long-term, negative repercussions for their children (Rojas-Flores, Clements, Hwang Koo, & London, 2016). The evidence also suggests that state child welfare agencies, such as Florida's, should take steps to prevent and mitigate the negative consequences of family separation.

**Safeguards and Rights of Parents and Children:** The rights of immigrant families are outlined by the policies of three specific agencies: 1) Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Directive for Parental Rights, 2) Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Memorandum and 3) State child welfare agencies. Adhering to policies protecting these rights is crucial and time sensitive, as detention can easily lead to the termination of parental rights as it removes children from parental custody. Enormous pressure falls on child welfare agencies to weave divergent state and federal systems together to assure family reunification.

**Action Steps to Protect Children and Families:** To address this complex issue, this report suggests 11 Action Steps for child welfare agencies to enact, thereby increasing the feasibility of family reunification. These concrete Action Steps range from creating a coding system to track these unique cases to identifying a Community Liaison who will work quickly to patch voids in protocols, linking parents and children across systems, and potentially borders. Communication involving foreign consulates, child welfare agencies, and ICE will ensure that parental rights are protected. These are crucial to shifting inadequate protocols and policies.

The Action Steps are the result of a review of existing practices used in foster care at a state and federal level, as well as recommendations in response to areas of weakness or unexplored approaches to an emerging crisis. Included in the report are appendices with resources for child welfare agencies that detail Safety Planning and Power of Attorney procedures that many families may have adopted.

**Conclusion:** The current Administration has made its plan clear to massively and swiftly deport non-U.S. citizens. Increased raids, and the expansion of Border Patrol and ICE nationally, heighten concern for the wellbeing of children of detainee/deportees in Florida. A proactive approach, which preemptively addresses voids in child protection and family reunification strategies at the state level, will serve to ensure safe custodial care and successful reunification of those separated by federal immigration policies.

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