

Family Separation in Their Own Words: The Lasting Harm of the Trump Administration's Zero Tolerance Policy

The Trump administration's family separation policy remains a lasting and disgraceful legacy of that administration and of the United States as a nation. Under the policy, formally known as "Zero Tolerance," the US government forcibly separated migrant children from their parents as a deliberate measure to deter others from attempting to migrate or seek asylum. Crueler still, the federal agencies that separated families failed to track which children were separated from which parents. In total, at least 5,569 children were separated from their parents or guardians under the Trump administration, a figure that includes separations during and after the formal zero tolerance policy. More than 1,000 children remain separated from their parents as of November 30, 2023. Out of these 1,000 children, the government's Family Reunification Task Force still does not have any ability to contact 68 of the separated parents, further complicating the reunification process and prolonging families' suffering.

To bring to light the terrible human costs of family separation, the Women's Refugee Commission and Barnard College began a project in 2020 titled "Separated: Stories of Injustice and Solidarity."¹ We interviewed 27 children, parents, and other migrants and people seeking asylum who endured or were otherwise affected by zero tolerance. The participants in our project described how they must cope with the lasting effects of trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), challenges with day-to-day functioning as a direct result of their experience, and their hopes for how the United States will take steps toward rectifying the harm caused, and ensuring it does not happen to other families. Everyone WRC spoke to offered deeply powerful testimony about their experiences; this brief only offers a snapshot—through participants' own words—of some of the most critical, recurring themes that emerged.

Family Separation Inflicts Severe Trauma on Children, Leading to Long-Term Harm

Being ripped away from one's parents is traumatic and distressing for children. It also leads to long-term suffering. The depression, feeling of helplessness, and suicidal ideation that the participant described below is widespread.

"Those nine months were torture for me. Really, I didn't want to know anything anymore. I just felt like I wanted to kill myself, that's what was going on inside me. To kill myself and not know anything anymore."

"It changed my life, changed my life. That time, I was so sad, depressed, I didn't want to know anything. All I wanted to know was where she [his mother] was. To see her. To hug her. To know that she was okay because I was so worried about her. I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know if she was alright, if she was even alive, or what was going on. I was just so sad. So sad I just had a cloud that—a black cloud that made me feel so, so sad."

(Fifteen-year-old boy separated from his mother, Guatemala)

1 The interviews quoted in this brief were conducted by Fanny Garcia and Nara Milanich of Barnard College in 2020 and 2021. WRC extends our sincere gratitude to the parents and other participants who generously and courageously shared their experiences of family separation at the time of the joint WRC-Barnard College endeavor. The project continues today with Barnard College and others under the name: "Separated: Stories of Injustice and Solidarity." More information available at: <https://www.separatedoralhistories.org/>.

Separating Children from Parents Hurts Parents

In addition to the immeasurable pain and trauma inflicted by family separation, separation also creates long-term harm to separated parents. In [one study](#) of zero tolerance, 16 of 19 separated parents showed one or more diagnosable major mental health condition post-separation, and 3 of 19 experienced suicidal thoughts during separation.

“Not a day goes by without me thinking of my son, wondering what he’s doing, if he’s behaving himself, now that he’s bigger and growing up.”

(Mother still separated from her son at time of interview, Guatemala)

“I have this pain that lives inside my heart. It’s so hard to talk about this situation with anyone because years have passed and I feel the pain as if it was yesterday....It’s just burned into your mind, and then in your heart is something that, something that can never fill the void inside of you.”

(Mother also still separated from her child at time of interview, Guatemala)

Family Separation Fractures Family Bonds and Impairs Attachments

On top of robbing parents of months or years of time with their children during crucial developmental periods, family separation also undermines the relationship between parent and child. One parent recounted:

“Manuel² came out with a lot of issues from the shelter....When I saw Manuel again, Manuel rejected me. He said, ‘Mommy, you abandoned me. Why did you leave me? I don’t love you anymore, Mommy, because they hurt me and you weren’t there to protect me.’”

(Mother separated from two of her young children, Honduras)

In many instances, parents who were reunited with their children described living with the debilitating fear that their children would be taken from them again.

“I live with this terrible insecurity because I still experience it every day. When I go to work, I check if my children are still there. At night, I wake up, I always go to check on my children because it feels like they’re not with me....It’s an insecurity that has remained so long after.”

(Mother separated from two of her young children, Honduras)

Forced Separation Has Devastating Effects on Children’s Development and Emotional Regulation

While the pain of being forcibly taken from one’s parent is crippling, so are the [lasting effects](#) of the trauma. In one [study](#) on forcibly separated children, 100% of children studied exhibited symptoms of PTSD, major

² Name is a pseudonym.

depressive disorder, or generalized anxiety disorder. [Another study](#) found that separated children had three times the rate of severe emotional or behavioral difficulties in comparison to the baseline US population.

"I met a bunch of people there [at the shelter]. When they could tell I was sad, they would ask me to play or if I wanted to talk. I told them no, that I was fine, that I didn't want to play, all I wanted was to be alone, that I didn't want to think about how I was there and without my mom....When I was in school, I just didn't feel like classes. I had nothing. The only thing I wanted was to forget it all."

(Fifteen-year-old separated from his mother, Guatemala)

The Support Separated Families Need, In Their Own Words

The effects of family separation are detrimental and lifelong. As participants in our project emphasize, nothing can undo the harm, but there are steps the US can take to begin to atone for the damage and provide resources for forcibly separated families to address the damage done to their mental health, familial relationships, and overall well-being.

When asked what the US can do to help those subjected to zero tolerance, participants frequently noted the importance of offering opportunities for separated parents to reunite with their children in the US and be provided opportunities to legally work in and reside in the US with their children. Additionally, participants communicated the importance of having access to mental health care.

"All this stress is eating us up, most of all. And I've been told it was going to really harm me if I don't get treatment."

(Mother still separated from her son at time of interview, Guatemala)

"What we want is someday to have papers and to have a stable life....At least a work permit because I know that by working, I can move forward."

(Mother separated from her son, eventually reunited while in the US, Honduras)

Families: No One Should Have to Live Through Family Separation

Although the US can and must respond to the needs of forcibly separated parents and children, firstly by prioritizing the reunification of families, and by providing them with essential services, the families we spoke to made clear that the harmful effects of forced separation cannot be fully remedied. Therefore, participants' primary hope was that no one else would be subjected to cruel policies such as zero tolerance.

"I would tell them to please stop separating people because all it does is wound people. And it turns into such a pain, such a wound that no bandage can ever cover the wound."

"It's a pain that can't be erased."

(Fifteen-year-old boy separated from his mother, Guatemala)

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Women's Refugee Commission

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth who have been displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them. womensrefugeecommission.org.

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