

Child Detainees: Mental and Physical Health Deterioration

Ann LOREK, Kimberly EHNTHOLT, Anne NESBITT, Emmanuel WAY, Chipso GITHINJI, Eve ROSSOR, Rush WICKRAMASINGHE (2009). "The mental and physical health difficulties of children held within a British immigration detention center: A pilot study." Child Abuse and Neglect 33(9): 573 - 585.

Although not the first research project undertaken to evaluate the mental and physical health effects of detention of children, this multi-author article was the first to study the UK detention context. The researchers are unequivocal in their conclusion that the children in their study “are clearly vulnerable, marginalized, and at risk of mental and physical harm as a result of state sanctioned neglect (inadequate care and protection), and possibly abuse in the sense of exposure to violence within the detention facilities themselves.” (584) Detention “is not in the best interest of the child and should not be used for the purposes of immigration control.” (583)

On the mental health side, the researchers discovered that 8 out of 11 of the children (73%) were categorized as psychiatric cases, and the majority of parents (6 out of the 9 adults) had contemplated suicide. (578, 579) On the physical health side, the authors relay “concerns related to poor nutrition within the detention center, high levels of health complaints of recent onset, chronic medical problems, and missed follow-up health appointments including those for vaccinations.” (579) In particular, “most of the 20 children seen by a pediatrician complained of recent onset or exacerbation of physical symptoms.” (580) In regards to the distressing nature of the immigration raids that picked up the children for transfer to detention, “the older children said that they missed their friends and school and were distressed that they had not been given an opportunity to say goodbye.” (580) The researchers also report concerns about inadequate child protection and sexualized behavior amongst children in the detention centre. (581) Finally, the research team notes that since approximately one-third of the child detainees will be released back into the UK, the trauma could impact the children’s reintegration – including their education and socialization skills – and might need to be addressed through the public health system, causing additional costs to both the families and the general tax-paying public. (582)

Further reading:

- Calvert, G. (2004). "Childhood in Detention." Australian & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy 25(2): 113 - 114.
- Fillmore, E. (2010). "The effects of immigration detention on the health of children and families in the UK." Adoption & Fostering Journal 34(1): 88 - 91.
- Jureidini, J. and J. Burnside (2011). "Children in immigration detention: a case of reckless mistreatment." Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 35(4): 304 - 306.
- Mares, S., L. Newman, M. Dudley, and F. Gale (2002). "Seeking Refuge, Losing Hope: Parents and Children in Immigration Detention." Australian Psychiatry 10(2): 6.
- Mares, S. and J. Jureidini (2004). "Psychiatric assessment of children and families in immigration detention – clinical, administrative and ethical issues." Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 28(6): 520 - 526.
- Shields, L., S. Stathis, et al. (2004). "The health of children in immigration detention: how does Australia compare?" Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health

28(06): 513 - 519.

- Steel, Z., S. Momartin, et al. (2004). "Psychiatric status of asylum seeker families held for a protracted period in a remote detention centre in Australia." Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health **28(6): 527 - 536.**
- Steel, Z., D. Silove, et al. (2006). "Impact of immigration detention and temporary protection on the mental health of refugees." British Journal of Psychiatry **188: 58 - 64.**