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## Family Separation at the US and Mexico Border Continues

Amanda Venta  
*University of Houston*

Ashley Bautista  
*University of Houston*

Maria Cuervo  
*University of Houston*

Alfonso Mercado  
*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, alfonso.mercado@utrgv.edu*

Luz M. Garcini  
*Rice University*

*See next page for additional authors*

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**Authors**

Amanda Venta, Ashley Bautista, Maria Cuervo, Alfonso Mercado, Luz M. Garcini, Cecilia Colunga-Rodríguez, Mario Ángel-González, T. Magnolia Preciado-Rodríguez, Fabiola Peña Cardenas, Karla Villarreal Sotelo, and Tony Payan

Family Separation at the US and Mexico Border Continues  
RH = Commentary

Amanda Venta, PhD, Ashely Bautista, BS, Maria Cuervo, BA, Alfonso Mercado, PhD, Luz M. Garcini, PhD, Cecilia Colunga-Rodríguez, PhD, Mario Ángel-González, PhD, T. Magnolia Preciado-Rodríguez, PhD, Fabiola Peña Cardenas, PhD, Karla Villarreal Sotelo, PhD, Tony Payan, PhD

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Dr. Venta and Mss. Bautista and Cuervo are with the University of Houston, Houston, Texas. Dr. Mercado is with University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg, Texas. Drs. Garcini and Payan are with Rice University, Houston, Texas. Drs. Rodríguez, González, and Preciado-Rodríguez are with the Universidad de Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Mexico. Dr. Cardenas and Sotelo are with Universidad Autonoma de Tamaulipas, Tamaulipas, Mexico.

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Author Contributions

*Conceptualization:* Venta, Mercado, Garcini, Colunga-Rodríguez, Ángel-González, Preciado-Rodríguez, Cardenas, Sotelo

*Project administration:* Bautista, Cuervo

*Writing – original draft:* Venta

*Writing – review and editing:* Bautista, Cuervo, Mercado, Garcini, Colunga-Rodríguez, Ángel-González, Preciado-Rodríguez, Cardenas, Sotelo, Payan

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Correspondence to Amanda Venta, Department of Psychology, University of Houston, 4849 Calhoun Rd., Room 373, Houston, TX 77204-6022; e-mail: [aventa@uh.edu](mailto:aventa@uh.edu)

Record-breaking levels of asylum seeking by families with young children continue at the U.S./Mexico border, particularly the Rio Grande Valley sector. In this Commentary, our aim is to increase awareness by providing child and adolescent mental health providers with an update on current migrant conditions, bringing to light issues of family separation previously highlighted in this journal<sup>1</sup>. For context, our international group has collected data, via three large-scale studies funded by the National Institutes of Health, from more than 600 Latinx immigrants seeking asylum at the U.S./Mexico border in the last four years, during which levels of violence, climate disruption, and poverty in Central America's Northern Triangle (i.e., El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) and Mexico have propelled high and sustained levels of asylum seeking in the U.S. We contribute expertise in clinical psychology, Latinx psychology, attachment disruption, and public health, as well as this front-row perspective.

The Rio Grande Valley border sector was in the spotlight in 2018, during the implementation of the "zero-tolerance policy," when parents and children were forcibly separated and detained, processed, and deported separately<sup>2</sup>. In response to this policy, the majority of major medical organizations in the U.S., including the American Psychiatric Association, wrote position statements citing the profound and longitudinal impact of family separation and attachment disruption.<sup>3</sup> Though the policy that led to forced family separations by U.S. immigration officials has been suspended, our clinical and research endeavors in the region indicate that family separation continues to expose migrant parents and children to a myriad of traumas, even if the separation currently occurs in a different manner. During our most recent field experience, our team witnessed two primary forms of family separation stemming from recent impacts of immigration policy. Our aim in this commentary is to highlight the myriad of pre-migration, migration, and post-migration stressors and traumas currently experienced by

migrant families and motivate action among academic and medical communities in hopes of generating trauma-informed, culturally-sensitive, and family-centered approaches to immigration policy and practice.

The first form of family separation that continues to occur relates to the systematic separation of fathers from their wives and children while in the custody of Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Families we interviewed had presented at the U.S. border seeking asylum, were temporarily held by CBP, and were released into the U.S. pending immigration court processes. We learned that mothers and children were detained, processed, and released while their husbands were detained and processed separately. Many of the wives interviewed reported that they felt “stuck” on the U.S. side of the border waiting for their husbands to be released—they did not know when or if the men would be released and, without cell phones or other means of communication, they did not know whether to continue their migratory journey to their ultimate destination in the U.S. or wait in unstable circumstances for a critical member of their family. The wives and children interviewed by our team consistently expressed qualitative themes of intense and prolonged psychological and emotional distress, coupled with profound isolation and a sense of loss, at being separated from the men who had heretofore played a central and irreplaceable role in their lives. Extant research is clear regarding the important role that fathers play in the wellbeing of Latinx families<sup>4</sup> and the detrimental impacts of separating families for parents and children alike<sup>5</sup>. We also witnessed, firsthand, wives receiving a long-awaited phone call from their husbands only to realize the call was not coming from Texas but rather from Mexico—their partner, their co-parent, their spouse, had been deported, leaving them to contend with migration, acculturation, and parenting on their own in a new country. In addition to representing significant attachment disruption in these families, separation from

fathers has detrimental effects on a family's stability and earning potential, making the asylum-seeking family's future in the U.S. even more perilous. Separating men from their families, and ultimately creating a new generation of single mothers, also increases the likelihood that migrants will become reliant on U.S. financial assistance and social programs. For judges and/or lawmakers who take their role as a steward of federal dollars seriously, clearly outlining how families with two parents can contribute more to the economy, pay a higher rate of taxes, and ultimately generate, produce, and provide more for our economy and society can be helpful. Conversely, youth without significant parental engagement and involvement are at risk for a host of psychosocial challenges that impact their ability to function and contribute to society. From an immigration policy standpoint, we must question what that father will do. In most cases, he is not from Mexico himself, has left his extended family in his home country, and realizes his wife and children are now alone in the U.S. Our qualitative research indicates that the practice of separating migrant fathers from their families likely exacerbates a number of stressors faced by migrant families while considerably impeding their ability to resettle successfully.

The second form of family separation occurring at the U.S./Mexico border has its roots in the Remain in Mexico<sup>6</sup>, a policy that requires asylum-seeking families to wait for their asylum case proceedings in Mexico prior to entering the U.S. Given backlogs in the U.S. immigration court system, many families are forced to live in Mexico under hazardous conditions in tent encampments for an extended period of time, sometimes years, while awaiting a decision on their petition for asylum. With the Remain in Mexico policy applied inconsistently and unpredictably, families do not know when they will be granted entry to the U.S. as asylees or whether it will occur at all. Likewise, they do not know when or if they will receive notice of an official denial, offering them an end (albeit a disappointing one) to their time hanging in the

balance of U.S. immigration policy. Hazards experienced in Mexican migrant encampments documented in recent literature include risk of assault, exposure to disease, extortion, organized crime activity, as well as the sexual assault and kidnapping of children.<sup>7</sup> Given the aforementioned risks, many families are desperate to flee, and may pursue avenues of crossing the border that result in increased risk of physical harm, mental harm, emotional harm, and family separation. For example, a family may separate based on gender, and try to only send the wives and daughters across, while the fathers and sons may try to physically cross the rivers and/or mountains, each with its own unique likelihood of trauma. Desperate and hopeless families may send their children across the border alone to seek asylum without the constraints of the Remain in Mexico policy<sup>6</sup>. These children will become unaccompanied immigrant minors to the U.S.—a vulnerable group of migrants with pressing mental health needs<sup>8</sup>. In these ways, current immigration policies and practices are inadvertently leading to family separations among those who are attempting to enter the border by following established procedures to claim asylum, and it is leaving life-long scars among children and families.

Our aim in this commentary is to draw attention to continued family separations occurring at the U.S./Mexico border, while calling for trauma-informed policies and practices. Current immigration policies and practices expose asylum-seeking families, both explicitly and distally, to trauma and separation, and are increasing risk of mental health problems among already vulnerable families. The profound attachment disruptions that continue to occur will have life-long and inter-generational implications. Various humanitarian, medical, and academic organizations sounded the alarm when family separation was occurring in 2018. Five years later, family separations continue, despite scientific and medical communities acknowledging its dangers.<sup>9</sup> We recommend the following specific actions. (1) Families should be kept together to

minimize pre-migration, migration, and post-migration trauma and improve the success of integration into American society. Youth with parental involvement have far fewer adverse childhood experiences and go on to much more productive lives.<sup>10</sup> (2) When possible, families should be kept out of U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement detention and placed in the community for better outcomes.<sup>11</sup> If detained, it should be together. (3) When possible, unaccompanied minors should be placed in the community with family members rather than in Office of Refugee Resettlement Shelters, given documented abuses occurring in shelters.<sup>11</sup> (4) Migrants should be screened for acute safety concerns and long-term mental health needs. Those in custody of the U.S. government should be screened for mental health symptoms and provided with mental health care (e.g., psychotherapy, medication management, hospitalization when necessary). (5) Mental health supports should continue for migrant families after settling in the U.S., with greater facilitation of community supports and multi-system collaboration between mental health providers, primary care providers, the Office of Refugee Resettlement, schools, grass-roots immigrant organizations, job training centers, and other community entities. Now is the time to lead with science and prioritize policy change for children and families.



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