Arrests of Immigrant Parents Create Mental Health Crisis for Children

An estimated hundreds of thousands of children, most of them U.S. citizens, have been separated from a parent by the Trump administration's deportation policies.

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LOS ANGELES — Damian Zermeño, 15, sensed something was wrong the moment he got home from school.

His aunt sat at the dining table, sobbing. His father, who'd walked him to the bus stop that morning and promised to take him to dinner when he got back, wasn't there.

Saúl Zermeño, a 45-year-old single dad, had gone to a routine check-in appointment at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement office that morning, a requirement he'd complied with for years. The father had deferred action that allowed him to stay and work in the U.S., according to his attorney. But that day, October 3, officers deported him to Mexico, where he hadn't lived since he was 9 years old. Zermeño had been Damian's sole caregiver since he was a baby because his mother chose not to be involved in the boy's life, the family said.

Suddenly, Damian, who was born in the U.S., found himself separated from his father by thousands of miles and a heavily guarded border. The previously cheerful 10th grader, who doesn't have a driver's license and can make a few basic dishes but isn't used to cooking for himself, faced navigating his teenage years alone, his dad's presence reduced to a two-dimensional image on his phone.

"I thought it wasn't true," Damian said. "I just went to my room. I didn't want to leave. I didn't even want to eat."

Damian is among an estimated hundreds of thousands of children, most of them U.S. citizens, separated from a parent by the Trump administration's deportation policies. Their mothers and fathers have been deported or locked for months inside detention centers, often miles away from where their families live. These children are separated, sometimes violently, from the adults they depend on. Parents have been arrested while dropping kids off at school, inside their homes, and at immigration check-ins with their children present. Most people detained have no criminal conviction. (Being in the U.S. without authorization is typically a civil offense). With their parents gone, kids' lives are plunged into fear and uncertainty.

As a result, a generation of children from immigrant families are exhibiting mental health problems that could affect them for years.

Parents, therapists, and others who work with immigrant families said they've already encountered preschoolers with speech delays, elementary school children who talk of suicide, and teenagers too anxious to leave the house. Research has shown repeatedly that separating children from their parents harms their health and development. The stress of losing a primary caregiver creates havoc in a child's brain and body, increasing their risk for mental and physical health problems, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, a weakened immune system, and developmental delays.

"You can just see it in their faces; it's almost like the light has been dimmed in their eyes," said the Rev. Tanya Lopez, a pastor at Downey Memorial Christian Church who regularly visits immigrant families as part of a support organization made up of Los Angeles-area religious leaders.

The health risks from this stress response are long-term. People who experience parental separation and other traumatic events as children are more likely to have heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and other chronic conditions as adults.

In a statement, the Department of Homeland Security said ICE does not separate families, and that parents are asked if they want to be removed from the country with their children or to designate a safe person for them to stay with in the U.S.

However, a report by the Women's Refugee Commission and Physicians for Human Rights found that many parents aren't given that choice, and that ICE often doesn't ask detainees if they have children or take steps to ensure that children left behind are safe. Saúl Zermeño said ICE officers didn't ask about his son or check on Damian's well-being when he was deported.

For days after his father's deportation, Damian didn't want to leave his room, eat, or go to school. He stopped talking to his friends. He stopped playing his favorite video game, Fears To Fathom. When he returned to school a week later, the teenager would cry in class or walk out overwhelmed with sadness. Even his favorite subject — English — lost its appeal.

Damian and his father were inseparable; family members joked that they never saw one without the other. Zermeño took Damian, who has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, and other health conditions, to his medical appointments. He cooked for him and combed his hair. He loved to take Damian to his favorite Thai restaurant or to get boba drinks after school. As much as they joked around and played pranks on each other, Zermeño also taught Damian the importance of work by bringing him along to construction jobs and to find supplies at Home Depot.

Damian used to get annoyed with his father's motivational chats about responsibility. Now they're one of the things he misses most.

"I thank my dad every day for teaching me to be strong before he left," Damian said.

Elsewhere in Los Angeles, Jacob, a shy 9-year-old with cropped, curly hair, skinny limbs, and a serious expression, was missing his mom. On a Saturday in May, he clung tightly to his father's hand as they walked among homeless people, street peddlers, and the stench of urine that hangs in the air outside the building where they live in a cramped apartment. He hoped his mom would soon be released from immigration detention so that he could hug her again.

"If my mom was here, I'd be happy," he said. "Right now, I'm not."

Jacob is in some ways a typical 9-year-old. He likes playing Roblox and Street Fighter. He dreams of becoming a police officer and of owning a guard dog, "because you can train them and they defend you."

But he also endured a harrowing journey, even before being separated from his mom in January. Jacob's family fled their home country of Colombia in 2024 because members of a paramilitary group threatened to kill them, his father, Andreis, said. During their journey to the United States, Jacob saw dead bodies while trekking through the jungle, was kidnapped and robbed at gunpoint with his parents, witnessed a rape, and had to sell candy and beg for money, his dad said. KFF Health News is not using the father's or son's real name because the family fears it would jeopardize their asylum cases.

After the family arrived in Los Angeles, Jacob suffered from nightmares and an intense fear of being alone. He started to recover once he began attending school and got connected to therapy through the school district, his dad said. For a short while, the family felt they had found peace.

Then, immigration officers detained Jacob's mother at a check-in appointment while he and Andreis sat in the waiting room. The mother has a pending asylum application and no criminal record, Andreis said. The father said he and his son broke down when officers informed them of his wife's detention, handing them a bag with her wallet and cellphone. They returned home without her, leaving Jacob inconsolable.

"He was terrified," the father said, fighting back tears, his voice growing quiet as he recounted that moment. "He was crying with rage."

After that, Jacob didn't want to eat or go to school. When he went to school at his dad's insistence, his teacher called home to ask why he was crying in class. Jacob couldn't sleep. He acted out. He blamed his dad.

"When will my mom come back?" he asked his dad. "Why do they have my mom? I miss my mom."

At the same time, Andreis said, he was going through his own crisis, trying in vain to console his son while wrestling with grief, worry, and desperation over what happened to his wife. He stopped his work as a laborer for two weeks to take care of Jacob, but that created financial stress and meant he sometimes couldn't afford to fund his wife's commissary account so she could buy better food and make phone calls. Jacob lived for those phone calls.

Jacob listed all the things he missed about his mom, including her cooking (rice with meat, corn cakes with egg), visiting the park together, and her taking him to get his hair cut, treating him to McDonald's on the weekend, and bringing him to church. Most of all, he missed being close to her.

"I would lie down with her, and I'd watch videos with her," he said. "My mom would hug me and I'd hug her."

Sometimes he sprayed her perfume on himself so he could smell her.

After almost five months at the Adelanto ICE Processing Center, Jacob's mother was released based on a habeas corpus petition in May. The family is still living in fear of detention or deportation. The father worries he too could be detained, and what that would mean for Jacob. Andreis is currently appealing a removal order for the two of them.

A recent analysis published by the Brookings Institution estimates that over 200,000 children — including 145,000 U.S. citizen children — have likely had at least one parent detained since President Donald Trump returned to office. About a third of those children are under age 6. The number of children with detained parents is expected to grow as the federal government pours over $200 billion into immigration enforcement, including funding from the GOP's One Big Beautiful Bill Act and a $70 billion appropriation Trump signed this month.

More than 4.6 million U.S. citizen children live with a parent at risk of deportation, according to the report.

Families Broken

Noemi, a Guatemalan mother and asylum seeker, stood in the parking lot at an ICE office north of Los Angeles, her three children wailing and clinging to her, glass from the family's car scattered at their feet.

Moments earlier, immigration agents had smashed a window and forced her partner out of the car while he waited for Noemi and the kids to finish a check-in appointment. While they were inside, officers tried to separate Noemi from the couple's children, ages 9, 7, and 1, but gave up after the kids started screaming, Noemi said. Meanwhile, her partner, a Mexican national who's lived in the U.S. for almost 20 years, was sent to the ICE detention center in Adelanto.

"It was something tragic, something inexplicable that happened that day," said Noemi, who asked to withhold her full name because she fears government retaliation for sharing her story. "It's something that marks you for your whole life. My family was broken."

Located in the Mojave Desert, the privately run Adelanto ICE Processing Center is the immigration detention center closest to Los Angeles and one of the largest in the U.S. It held a daily average of over 1,700 people as of April, and a facility next door called the Desert View Annex held an additional 426.

Since her partner's detention in December, Noemi said, their children haven't been the same.

Her 7-year-old daughter, till then usually happy and smiling, became depressed and refused to eat. Her once-high grades plummeted, and she forgot the names of letters and numbers in both English and Spanish. She and her 9-year-old brother struggled to sleep and asked constantly about their dad, wondering if he was taken because they'd done something wrong.

"Why is this happening to us?" they asked her. "We're good. We're studying."

Noemi's youngest daughter went back to crawling for three months, even though she'd already learned to walk before her father was taken. The little girl would cry out in her sleep, "Pa! Pa!"

Sofia Mendoza, a therapist who works with immigrant families at a community clinic in Los Angeles County, said separated children can experience a form of grief. It's hard for them to come to terms with their parent's absence because the parent is still alive, but not with them. This can disrupt the child's bond with that parent and their ability to form trusting relationships in the future, she said.

Many children also become extremely anxious, angry, and fearful, Mendoza said. Young children often complain of physical symptoms such as stomachaches, develop separation anxiety, and regress to earlier behaviors like bed-wetting. Older children may have panic attacks, nightmares, and difficulty focusing, Mendoza said. Caregiver loss is also associated with increased risk of suicide and substance use in children.

Norma Gómez, a project manager for the Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project in Oxnard, said after immigration raids shook the community last summer, her 9-year-old daughter refused to go to school for a week and was afraid to leave her mom and dad, even though they're legal U.S. residents. She'd seen other kids at school crying because family members had been detained. Gómez showed her daughter their U.S. residency documents to reassure her. The child asked to make copies for her classmates, hoping they would protect them too.

'Time To Be an Adult'

Back in East Los Angeles, Damian is living with one of his aunts and struggling to adapt to not having his father around. He said his grades have dropped because he can't focus in school. He no longer wants to do things he used to enjoy with his dad, such as going out to eat.

"Fun is over," he said. "It's time to be an adult right now."

Being without his father has forced Damian to become more independent, he and his aunt Claudia Zermeño said. Before, his dad did almost everything for him. Now, Damian does his own laundry, helps with housework, and styles his own hair. He's protective of his aunts, who are both devastated by their brother's absence; he hugs them frequently and tells jokes to try to cheer them up. He doesn't want to upset them more by showing his own sadness.

Damian receives therapy both in and outside of school. He said he's learned breathing exercises

that have helped, but he still feels sad and worried a lot of the time. Sometimes he feels angry.

“I try my hardest to think, to stay focused,” he said. “But with everything that’s going on, I can’t keep the facade of ‘everything’s normal’ when I feel heartbroken.”

Saúl Zermeño, now living in Guadalajara, said he’s worried about his son’s health. Damian has a genetic condition called neurofibromatosis Type 1, which causes tumors to grow on nerve tissue in his body, including one in his head that, if not checked regularly by a doctor and monitored by his family, could interfere with his brain. He also suffers from epilepsy and was born with only one kidney, which means he tires easily and doesn’t play sports. Saúl is afraid his son won’t get the care he needs without him there. As Damian’s legal guardian, Claudia Zermeño is doing everything she can for him, but she has two children of her own and is also caring for her mother, who has neurological problems from a stroke.

Damian talks with his dad as often as he can. He hopes to visit his father in Mexico, but he doesn’t have a passport and, as a minor under 16, there are more requirements to get one without his dad present. Saúl is working with an attorney to get permission to legally return to the U.S., but the process is complicated and uncertain.

So, for now, Damian’s hanging on to hope that his dad will be allowed to return and is trying to become the man he believes he should be. He’s making plans to get his driver’s license when he turns 16 this month. He’s given up his goal of going to college and instead wants to get a job right after high school to help his aunts and send money to his dad.

He still cries, but only when he’s alone in his room.

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