

## **Detaining child immigrants is harmful to their health and well-being and degrades America**

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Do you not hear the children's cries for their mothers? Do you not hear the mothers' cries for their children? Do you not hear Lady Liberty herself (through Emma Lazarus' poem) calling for "... your tired, your poor, your huddled masses ..."? It does appear that, in these present dark days of our country, too many people are deaf. Some bully politicians are shamelessly willfully oppressing the weak and vulnerable. It is a betrayal of American values and a degradation of human decency and morality.

As physicians, we work to help people maintain and improve their health. More important, in partnerships with others, we advocate to prevent disease and injury and promote health and well-being for all people and all communities. As Latino physicians (many of us are immigrants), the ongoing oppressive actions against Latino immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border affect us personally and immensely emotionally. We are not deaf and we cannot stay silent. We must keep the best interests of the children and families in mind and action.

We are gravely concerned about the present and future physical and mental health effects on those immigrant young children experiencing toxic stress because of the separation from their mothers. The scientific evidence is strong that such adverse childhood experiences are linked with future mental health problems like depression, alcoholism, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, and lower academic achievement, as well as with physical health problems like diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer. The strongest predictors of early onset mental illness AND early manifestation of chronic health conditions are a child's experience of traumatic events like separation from parents and neglect (along with other childhood adversities such as abuse). Of course, parents experiencing forced separation from their children also have significant long-term adverse health effects.

Now, reports say that immigrant parents and children will be detained in family jails, basically internment camps, possibly indefinitely. All families deserve to be free to move, free to live, and free to thrive. Families belong in our communities, not in detention camps.

June is Immigrant Heritage Month, intended to recognize and celebrate the vast contributions of immigrants in this country, that was founded by immigrants. Instead, we are witnessing human rights violations not seen in generations. This is certainly not about crime or security; these mothers and children are not 'rapists and murderers'. With a little societal support now,

many of the immigrants crossing today have the great potential to be productive thriving residents and contribute to improving society tomorrow.

We request that our legislators, local, state, and federal, demand ending forced separation of immigrant families at the border and instead keeping families together in community-based settings, not in internment camps or other detention facilities, while their legal proceedings are pending. We recommend that all residents and citizens of good conscience similarly contact your legislators at all levels; you may tell them that you expect them to do better, and to do it NOW. Some people may want to join protests in the streets, advocate on social media, or take other actions. Most important, we urge all to vote in all elections for those people and those policies that preserve and protect the interests and values of the people, including immigrants. Remember, anyone who plays deaf, doesn't speak out, or turns a blind eye may be complicit.