

Immigration, Migration, and Refugees

A summary of the scientific literature on immigrant children.



How This Impacts Children's Development

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that separation between children and parents is harmful to the development of children, families, and communities. The adverse effects last into adulthood and do not

always resolve with time. For immigrant families that make it into the United States (U.S.), immigrant children with or without an undocumented parent face unique challenges with receiving the social supports they need and are eligible for.

[Read the Brief: Amicus Brief: The Traumatic Impact of DACA Rescission on Recipient's Children: Updated for the Fifth Circuit Courts of Appeal, 2024](#)

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[READ THE BRIEF: Children of undocumented parents: How Public Policy and Community-Based Organizations can help reduce risks, 2013](#)

[READ THE BRIEF: CHILDREN in Immigrant Families: Key to America's Future, 2008](#)

Talking Points from the SRCD Briefs

- In 2012, the Obama Administration issued the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Memorandum providing a two-year reprieve from deportation for those under 31 who met certain requirements.
- The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) separated approximately 2,000 children from their parents in April and May of 2018 as they approached the U.S. border.
- Parent-child separation is a toxic stressor with lasting effects on a child's well-being, including difficulties with emotional attachment, self-esteem, social functioning, anxiety, depression, and other physical and psychological health issues, even after reunion.
- Undocumented parents face psychological stress, which affects their children's development and education, often keeping them from accessing federal benefits. Immigrant children are more likely to live in poverty, contributing to educational gaps, especially in preschool. Early exposure to English provides long-term cognitive and economic benefits for these children.
- Ending DACA would jeopardize the mental and physical health of hundreds of thousands of children—mainly U.S. citizens—whose parents are DACA recipients, by stripping away access to income, food security, housing, healthcare, education, and a sense of safety, which are critical for healthy child development. It would also create fear and uncertainty for these families, as they worry about the loss of their parents' benefits and potential deportation.

Policy Considerations in the Briefs

1. Policies that separate immigrant families upon entry to the U.S. have devastating and long-term developmental consequences for children and their families.
2. Institute a pathway to citizenship for undocumented parents and youth to reduce parents' reluctance to enroll their U.S.-citizen children in programs that they are eligible for.
3. Address undocumented parents' job conditions, including pay rates below minimum wage and lack of access to benefits.
4. Community-based programs should provide English language training for immigrant parents, especially for families in which no one over the age of 13 speaks English, to encourage literacy in families' daily lives and help parents find jobs.
5. Advocate for and support high-quality dual-language learning programs in pre-k and early childcare settings.

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