

# Betraying the American Dream: Trauma and Mental Health Problems for Immigrants

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The United States is often considered to be the land of freedom where any goals can be accomplished. The commanding narrative of American society preaches that the American Dream is attainable for all, and that anyone is sure to accomplish the said dream if they work hard. In reality, this “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality is not the reality for the majority of Americans, particularly its immigrants. Many come to the United States to obtain a better life than the one their country of origin has to offer them, but it has become a difficult reality to face once they are within the country. Due to the dangers associated with travel to the U.S., as well as crimes often perpetrated on vulnerable immigrants and their families at the border, immigrants often suffer various forms of trauma caused by U.S. immigration practices. State-sanctioned detention centers— locations that forcibly hold people due to their illegal entry to the United States— have a negative impact on immigrants' physical and mental health. The detention centers' horrid conditions are not adequate to ensure the well-being of the people that they house. Immigration policies in the United States only worsen the trauma that has been experienced by many immigrants. This study will explore how immigrants' mental health is impacted by U.S. policies at the Mexican-American border through a historical analysis of the United States' involvement in the affairs of Latin American countries.

Many immigrants experience difficult journeys in their quest to enter the United States with these difficulties affecting their mental health. The decision to travel to the United States is not an easy one to make. For some, the choice becomes unavoidable due the instability of their home government that resulted in a rise in violence, crime,

and economic instability (Torres et al., 2018).<sup>1</sup> For many, there is little hope for political stability in the regions from which they came.

In many cases, the United States has contributed or even caused instability in Latin American countries in order to corrupt them and to exploit the regions' resources. Considering that the United States has contributed to the chaos within many countries, it is particularly interesting that the U.S. government refuses to aid Latinx immigrants. For example, the United States participated in the 1954 coup d'état against the government of the Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz who had been democratically elected. The United States interfered with the Guatemalan government due to Arbenz's reforms aiming to break the monopolies of the American United Fruit Company and other foreign businesses (Moye, 1998).<sup>2</sup> Arbenz was influenced by the Communist Party during his political campaign, which also did not align with United States' policies (Moye, 1998).<sup>3</sup> The CIA organized a coup resulting in the start of the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996). Carlos Castillo Armas— favored by the United States— was named the new leader of the country; however, Armas's leadership established a new dictatorship that led to corruption, violence, and genocide where "over 9,000 were arrested and an unknown number summarily executed (Moye, 1998, p. 49)."<sup>4</sup>

Under Arbenz, there was hope of improvement, but the United States took that away from Guatemalans. Guatemalans' hope was fueled by the policies that were advocating for social change; for example, the proposed agrarian reform would redistribute land among citizens to ensure that the working class could possess land (Trefzger, 2002).<sup>5</sup> This is not the only time: the United States has involved itself multiple times throughout the affairs of Latin American nations, such as in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Chile (Moye, 1998).<sup>6</sup> The issues—economic degradation and social

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<sup>1</sup> S.A. Torres, C.D. Santiago, K.K. Walts, and M.H. Richards, "Immigration policy, practices, and procedures: The impact on the mental health of Mexican and Central American youth and families," *The American Psychologist* 73, no. 7 (2018): p. 848.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Moye, "The United States Intervention in Guatemala," *International Social Science Review* 73, no. 1/2 (1998): p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Moye, "The United States Intervention in Guatemala," p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Moye, "The United States Intervention in Guatemala," p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Douglass S. W. Trefzger, "Guatemala's 1952 Agrarian Reform Law: A Critical Reassessment," *International Social Science Review*, vol. 77, no. 1/2, 2002, pp. 32–46.

<sup>6</sup> Moye, "The United States Intervention in Guatemala."

chaos, for example—that Latinx immigrants are now escaping have been due in large part to the actions of the United States. Everything experienced during these conflicts in Latin American countries has damaged the mental health of those who have immigrated.

Latinx immigrants find themselves trying to accomplish the American dream despite the struggles faced in their countries of origin. However, they go through many traumatic events before and after entering the United States. Such events increase the risk of developing a mental disorder which can become difficult for one to deal with when there is no support offered. Stephanie Torres writes of “the potential experience of traumas at each stage: 1) pre-migration traumas occurring in the home country, 2) traumas en route to the new country, and 3) the often hostile environment in the new country” (Torres, 2018, p. 844).<sup>7</sup> These three stages demonstrate the potential for the development of mental disorders in immigrants, such as anxiety, PTSD, and depression. The trauma that immigrants face is never ending; it begins in their countries, remains then in the journey, and continues still with their life in a new country. There is a misconception that once they enter the United States, their lives automatically improve: they are supposed to achieve the American Dream. But the fact that an immigrant has entered the country does not necessarily mean their situation will improve, as evident by stages two and three of Torres’s paradigm. Some immigrants had to encounter “La Bestia [which] is an infamous name for the train which some use to travel to the U.S. [where they may experience] assaults, robberies, accidents, including falls and mutilations” (Torres, 2018, p. 845).<sup>8</sup> Immigrants risk their lives to pursue the American Dream regardless of the risks: they would rather embark on this journey than continue their lives in their native countries. In fact, upon entry into the United States, “31% of Latino/a people reported personal experiences with discrimination and 82% reported that discrimination is hindering the success of Latino/a people in society”(Torres, 2018, p. 847).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Torres, “Immigration Policy, Practices, and Procedures,” p. 844.

<sup>8</sup> Torres, “Immigration Policy, Practices, and Procedures,” p. 845.

<sup>9</sup> Torres, “Immigration Policy, Practices, and Procedures,” p. 847.

Even after settlement in the U.S., migrants continue to face another difficult challenge: the possibility of deportation. Immigrants tend to turn away from any help, even when they are going through psychological distress and other health problems because of their fear of deportation. This should not be the case because no one should be living in constant fear that one day their life will be changed drastically without warning. "Deportation most typically occurs within the context of exploitation, stigma, discrimination, economic disadvantage, and social marginalization"(Brabeck et al., 2014, p. 498).<sup>10</sup> The severity of capture and deportation generates a constant state of fear that immigrants live in. They fear that they will suffer tremendous injustices while detained, and that they will return to the life that they originally escaped. This fear is not only embedded in those who are undocumented, but in their family members as well.

It can become difficult to live within the U.S. after such events because "traumatic events increase risk for PTSD, depression, and other mental health difficulties" (Torres, 2018, p. 845).<sup>11</sup> Mental health problems are themselves difficult to deal with, but the situation worsens when there is no aid available. Detention centers are not equipped to serve the mental health needs of the detainees within them. These detention centers are jail-like locations that are not meant to help detainees. Just as in jails, detention centers are surrounded by fences lined with barbed wire, and detainees are forced to sleep on thin pads on the floor (Pompa, 2019).<sup>12</sup> Some immigrants are detained in these centers due to their illegal status in the country for days, months, or even years. They are treated as criminals when the majority of them have entered the country in the search of a hard-working, prosperous life. Immigrants of all ages are detained in these centers, to which the majority walk out on them with some sort of trauma; some never make it out alive.

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<sup>10</sup> Kalina M. Brabeck et al., "The Psychological Impact of Detention and Deportation on U.S. Migrant Children and Families," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 84, no. 5 (2014): p. 498.

<sup>11</sup> Torres, "Immigration Policy, Practices, and Procedures," p. 845.

<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Pompa, "Immigrant Kids Keep Dying in CBP Detention Centers, and DHS Won't Take Accountability," *ACLU*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/immigrant-kids-keep-dying-cbp-detention>.

In particular, detained children are not given the proper care they need. Within the detention centers, “children frequently attempt to sleep in freezing rooms with constant illumination on concrete floors with aluminum blankets as the only coverage for warmth” (Peeler et al., 2020, p. 318).<sup>13</sup> Children not only experience the trauma of being separated from their family members, but they are also forced into crowded locations where they don't have a proper place to sleep. It can be worrisome to realize that children are being treated in such a manner when they are the most defenseless. Emphasis is often placed on what are the current practices within detention centers, but not on the trauma these children will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Over time, “sleep deprivation has a known reciprocal association with depression and anxiety; sleep deprivation independently predicts an increased risk of suicidal behavior” (Peeler, 2020, p. 318).<sup>14</sup> Immigration officials do not take into account the future effects such living conditions are having on the children in their custody, even though these practices violate the tenets of the American Constitution and the American peoples’ professed values of life and liberty of the American people.

More severe and quantifiable negative impacts on mental health can be established by examining suicide rates in the detention centers. A study conducted on the youth demonstrated that “all Detention Center suicides occurred within the first 4 months of confinement, with over 40% occurring within the first 72 hours” (Hayes, 2005, p. 146).<sup>15</sup> The confinement leads the youth to take drastic measures to escape their harsh living conditions. No psychological support is provided to detainees in the detention centers. In fact, “many detention facilities use solitary confinement as punishment or to monitor individuals who experienced victimization or are mentally ill, despite its detrimental impact on physical and psychological well-being” (Saadi et al., 2020, p. 189).<sup>16</sup> There is no justification for people—especially young people— being

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<sup>13</sup> Katherine R. Peeler et al., “Sleep Deprivation of Detained Children: Another Reason to End Child Detention. *Health and Human Rights*,” *Health and Human Rights* 22, no. 1 (2020): p. 318.

<sup>14</sup> Peeler, “Sleep Deprivation,” p. 318.

<sup>15</sup> L. M. Hayes, “Juvenile Suicide in Confinement in the United States: Results from a National Survey,” *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 26, no. 3 (2005): p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> Altaf Saadi et al., “Understanding US Immigration Detention: Reaffirming Rights and Addressing Social-Structural Determinants of Health,” *Health and Human Rights* 22, no.1 (2020): p. 189.

placed in solitary confinement when there is no benefit to doing so. Solitary confinement has proven to create more harm than good.

This harm can be seen through the experience of Dulce Rivera, a transgender woman from Honduras who was placed in solitary confinement for eleven months. She recalls that when she asked for a psychologist in the detention center, she was turned away. This led to her to a dark decision:

...to tie a piece of blanket to the window above, and I completely covered the door outside so that no one was seeing what was happening inside the room. I made a lasso. I hung myself. So it's something psychological, mental, that affected my being in that place. So disgusting and horrible. (Goodman, 2019)<sup>17</sup>

Instead of actually dealing with the underlying issues, government officials passively ignore detainees. Dulce was pleading for help, just as many other detainees have done and continue to do. Why should detainees be pushed to a breaking point in order for something to be done? Another detainee described that solitary confinement made them feel as though they were in jail, leading them to contemplate "trying to hurt myself, kill myself, because [they] just couldn't bear being alone" (Goodman, 2019).<sup>18</sup> There should be no reason that solitary confinement continues to be a practice within detention centers when people's lives are being placed at risk.

Many problems occur within detention centers but are ignored by officials, including sexual assault. Detention centers hide a scary truth: "the Department of Homeland Security received 33,126 complaints of sexual and physical abuse [detention centers] from January 2010 to July 2016 but investigated only 570" (Saadi et al., 2020, p. 189).<sup>19</sup> Statistics only reflect reported assaults, not all assaults that have occurred in detention centers. There is still so much information that the public is not aware of because many forms of abuse occurring within detention centers are unreported. Sexual and physical assault can be very difficult to deal with, especially while knowing

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<sup>17</sup> "How ICE Is Using Solitary Confinement to Punish Asylum Seekers, Including LGBT & Disabled Immigrants," interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now*, May 22, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> "How ICE Is Using Solitary Confinement to Punish Asylum Seekers."

<sup>19</sup>Altaf Saadi, Maria-Elena De Trinidad Young, Caitlin Patler, Jeremias Leonel Estrada, and Homer Venters, "Understanding US Immigration Detention: Reaffirming Rights and Addressing Social-Structural Determinants of Health," *Health and Human Rights Journal* 22, no. 1 (2020): p. 189.

that offenders see no repercussions. Government officials have not created a safe and supportive space where detainees feel like they are able to report any incidents or assaults. Isaac, a former detainee, recalled that “in juvenile halls, I suffered rape about three times, and then I had to basically figure out what I was going to do to protect myself and to keep myself safe” (Neary, 2010).<sup>20</sup> Isaac felt as though he had no one to protect him. The detainees' well-being is being dismissed as though it is not important. No one who has experienced sexual assault should feel as though they have no support from those around them, yet each center is an environment where fear has been instilled amongst detainees. There are many reasons for why detainees have refrained from reporting their assaults, but it is evident that nothing is being done to investigate such cases. It is difficult for people to report any incidents of assault, believing that they would likely be ignored anyway.

Additionally, immigration policies have affected many Latinx families within the United States itself. Policies regarding immigration have changed throughout the years; recently, there are more deportations than families being reunited. The discrimination experienced by immigrants can be seen embedded within current policies since they allow for officers to detain any person who they believe is in the country illegally (Torres, 2018).<sup>21</sup> Such events can be seen in “mixed-status” families, which are composed of at least one member who is undocumented. Issues arise when “migrant adults who fear deportation (regardless of legal status) are more likely to experience employment challenges, physical health problems, psychological distress, acculturative stress, and decreased access to services” (Brabeck et al., 2014, p. 498).<sup>22</sup> Fears of deportation can take a toll on people’s mental and physical well being, especially as people in these situations take drastic measures in an attempt to protect themselves from deportation.

In the case of mixed-status families, children tend to be documented while at least one of their parents is not documented. We need to consider how the lives of

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<sup>20</sup> “Juvenile Inmates Report Sexual Abuse At Detention Centers,” interview by Lynn Neary, *National Public Radio*, January 19, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Torres, “Immigration Policy, Practices, and Procedures,” p. 843.

<sup>22</sup> Brabeck et al., “The Psychosocial Impact of Detention and Deportation,” p. 498.

these children are being affected as well. Their mental health is also tormented by the constant worry that their parents may be deported. When a parent in a mixed-status family is deported, parents are faced with the decision to either leave their children in the care of another or take them to the parent's country of origin. In either case, there is an immense amount of stress being placed on the child. Erika, a child who recalled her parents' deportation to Mexico and how her mental health was affected due to her starting a new life in Mexico, explained, "When I see the problems that we have, I get sad. Sometimes, we don't have anything to eat. My mom doesn't have work, and my father starts telling her things. I don't feel that it's fair that he says these things to her because it isn't her fault" (Gulbas et al., 2014, p. 225).<sup>23</sup> Her parents were the ones deported, and Erika did not have the choice to either stay in the U.S or leave to Mexico. Her family was going through financial and family hardships which can be very difficult to deal with when one is in a country unknown to them. It should be noted that "persistent poverty has been linked to negative mental health outcomes including depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, and delinquency/drug use among youth" (Torres, 2018, p. 848).<sup>24</sup> When experiencing poverty, children run the risk of suffering from mental health problems which are not helped by their financial situation, which makes it difficult to secure medical attention. For example, Erika demonstrated the multiple stressors children may experience when finding themselves in a new environment. Many other children exemplify similar feelings toward their parents' deportation, especially since the lives of their undocumented parents are impacted alongside the lives of the children. The support she once received in the United States, which helped ease issues she was encountering at home, was not being received now in Mexico.

Latinx communities are suffering because of U.S. immigration policies and practices. Regardless of one's legal status, a cloud of worry hovers over the entire community. Everyone in the community knows someone who is being directly affected by immigration policies. Outsiders do not understand how all these experiences

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<sup>23</sup> L. E. Gulbas et al., "Deportation Experiences and Depression among U.S. Citizen-Children with Undocumented Mexican Parents," *Child: Care, Health and Development* 42, no. 2 (2014): p. 225.

<sup>24</sup>Torres et al., "Immigration Policy, Practices, and Procedures," p. 848.



regarding immigration can be detrimental. More attention should be placed on how these practices are affecting the entire community and specifically on what can be done to help. When considering detention centers, there is so much that needs to be done to better the entire situation within these facilities, such as having trained professionals within these facilities that are able to help detainees. As mentioned before, there are three stages of trauma a detainee experiences, from the beginning to the end of the immigration process; therefore, there needs to be help offered to them to deal with each stage and each type of trauma. Detention centers should train their staff to be better equipped when interacting with detainees. More psychologists and psychiatrists should be hired to be able to tackle these situations. Detainees should not be expected to deal with their trauma alone. There should be more advocacy work geared toward changing the entire detention center system.

This country needs to step away from its eagerness to deport Latinx people, as this instills fear amongst the Latinx community. Many individuals came with the goal of being able to provide for their families: they never meant to create any harm for others, and in fact, they have contributed greatly to America's society and economy. Nonetheless, a negative narrative about Latinx people has been spread among the general U.S. population, creating more hurdles for the Latinx community to overcome. Regardless, "Generations of Latino immigrants have gone to work with an abiding faith that, if they labor hard enough, they will earn their place here. They lift up the beams of new houses and office buildings, care for the children of strangers, keep restaurant kitchens spick-and-span, and harvest crops in sun and in rain" (Tobar, 2018).<sup>25</sup> This country offers opportunities that other countries do not, which is why people make the decision to come to the United States, but the United States should make policies that allow families to remain within the country and prevent separations. It can be extremely traumatizing, especially for mixed-status families, to go from the only place that their children have ever known to an entirely different country. A lot of Americans advocate for the rights of U.S. citizens— why not advocate for the rights of these U.S.-citizen

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<sup>25</sup> Héctor Tobar, "Trump's Ongoing Disinformation Campaign Against Latino Immigrants," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/trumps-ongoing-disinformation-campaign-against-latino-immigrants>.

children in their home country alongside their parents? The justifications the government gives for families being deported are never going to ease the actual trauma they are causing. There is a crude selfishness that can be seen throughout this country that needs to be addressed. The country will never truly prosper if there is a continuation of the lack of care for others' well-being.

In the end, the mental health of all is being affected severely: this needs attention. The well-being of immigrants is just as important as any other group of people. Detention centers and deportation practices are traumatizing for the entire community; therefore, something needs to change in order to protect immigrants.

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