

The Effects of Family Incarceration on Children

Leading pediatricians, physicians, and social workers have [described](#) the negative effects of immigration detention on children, which include **behavioral regressions, depression, anxiety, and suicidality.**

“The act of detention or incarceration itself is associated with poorer health outcomes, higher rates of psychological distress, and suicidality making the situation for already vulnerable women and children even worse.”

—[The American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

[Studies](#) show that children in immigration detention facilities have high rates of serious long-term psychiatric and physical symptoms, including, but not limited to:

- Depression and Anxiety
- Self-Harm
- Suicidal Ideation
- Developmental and Behavioral Regressions
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Lack of Appetite
- Weight Loss
- Frequent Infections and Gastrointestinal Symptoms

Children kept behind bars—even those who have been detained for just a few weeks—are anxious, sad or depressed, and engage in behavior such as pulling hair, fighting with other children, biting or kicking their mothers, or crying throughout the night. They also show [symptoms](#) associated with trauma and depression, including high levels of hypervigilance, hopelessness, fatigue, insomnia, bed wetting, weight loss, nightmares, clinginess, headaches, and gastrointestinal symptoms.

In many cases, mental health evaluations conducted by independent psychologists contain diagnoses of **post-traumatic stress disorder, perpetuated or exacerbated by incarceration.** Several children have [mimicked suicide](#) by grabbing the cords that hang around their necks to hold their ID cards and tightening them around their necks, saying they prefer to die than to continue life in detention. As one young boy [shared](#):

“It’s horrible to live here. You don’t see me crying, but my heart is broken.”

The [experience](#) of detention for children is **“acutely stressful and, in some cases, traumatic—even when detention is brief.”** Researchers [found](#) that **“any incarceration is damaging for immigrant children, especially those with high levels of previous trauma exposure.”**