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Family Separations: What science tells us about family separations and why ALL Nebraskans should care: Blog post

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On April 6th of this year, the United States Department of Justice announced a “Zero Tolerance Policy for Criminal Illegal Entry.” Shortly after this announcement, Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE – an arm of the Department of Homeland Security) separated approximately 2,000 immigrant families. It is worth

noting that many of these undocumented parents had not committed any crimes, including illegally crossing the border. Some were [asylum seekers who lawfully presented themselves when arriving at the border](#). Moreover, many of these families still await reunification even though the parents are no longer being detained. While this policy has been rightfully condemned by professional organizations (e.g., [Society for Research in Child Development](#); [National Association of School Psychologists](#); [American Medical Association](#); [American Academy of Pediatrics](#)) because of the short- and long-term health consequences to children and families, the reality is that precarious family situations have had documented and undocumented immigrants living with a great deal of accumulative stress for much, much longer.

What science tells us about the harmful effects of family separations.

Based on research from as far back as World War II, parent-child separations have been tied to a host of deleterious effects. These include increased stress, higher rates of depression and impaired cognitive control and learning. Even after being reunited, these children show noticeable deficits to their physical and psychological health. The reasons for this are not a mystery. Children separated from their parents experience an extraordinary stressor and, ironically, often it is only the child's parents that can best help them cope with such extreme stressful conditions.

The negative impact of family separations on local communities and U.S. and non-U.S. citizens

In the U.S. right now, [a quarter of youth under 18 are Latino](#) (95% of whom are U.S. citizens). There are, as well, approximately [4.5 million children](#) living with a parent who is undocumented whereas 5.9 million children (U.S. citizens under the age of 18) live with at least one family member who is undocumented, according to the most recent estimates available. A sizeable proportion of these youth will have a parent detained or deported at some point during their formative years. U.S. citizens of Latino descent in particular are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, behavior problems, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder due to these family separations.

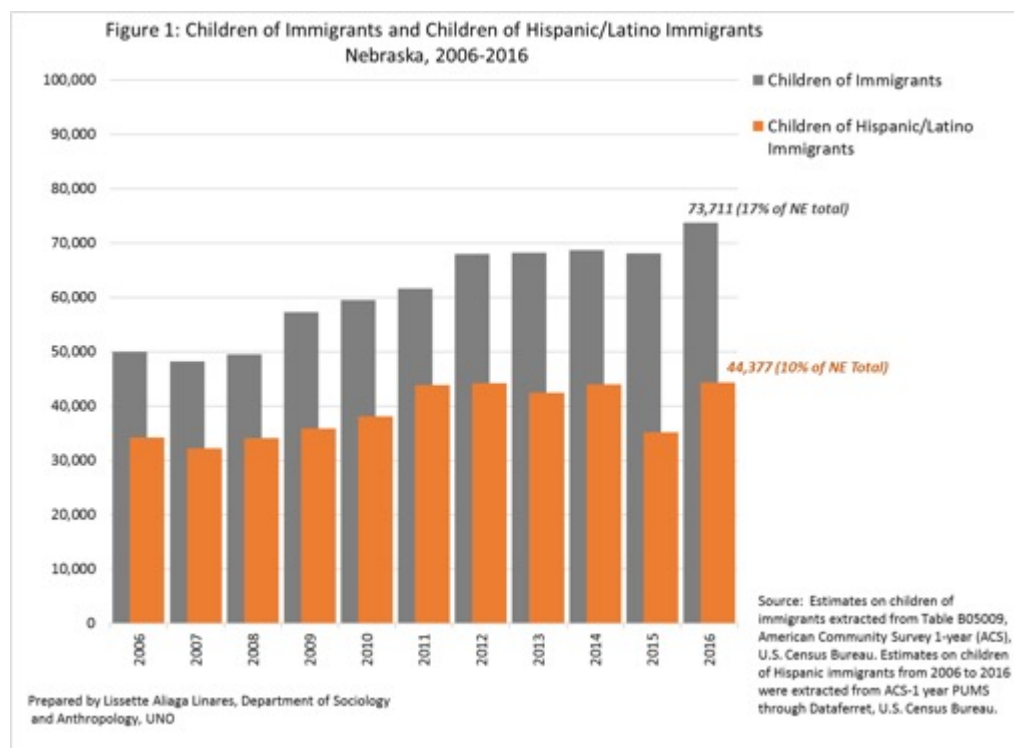
The impact of deportations and forced family separations can be felt [within our communities](#). Undocumented immigrants own homes, lease cars, contribute to their local economy such that being detained or deported also affects other people who live in their community. Moreover, U.S. citizen children can end up in the child welfare system [following the detention or deportation of a parent](#). These significant disruptions in family stability, including exposure to the child welfare system, are associated with a number of negative developmental outcomes including significant emotional and behavioral difficulties, mental health issues and academic difficulties in school. In fact, following raids by ICE, schools show [increases in absenteeism among U.S. citizen children of immigrants](#).

Moreover, the burden on the remaining family members to take care of children of a parent who has been detained or deported are [substantial](#). These burdens translate to missed work and additional difficulties financially supporting already struggling families leading to more reliance on welfare and supplemental nutrition assistance programs (i.e.: food stamps). On the other hand, some low-income families are canceling their food assistance for fear of being deported which results in [U.S. citizen children of legal immigrants going hungry](#). Finally, parents with a final deportation order have to contend with the choice of whether to bring their children (again including children that are U.S. citizens) back with them putting them in harm's way, which can include gang violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, poverty and oppression in their parents' country of origin.

The Nebraska story

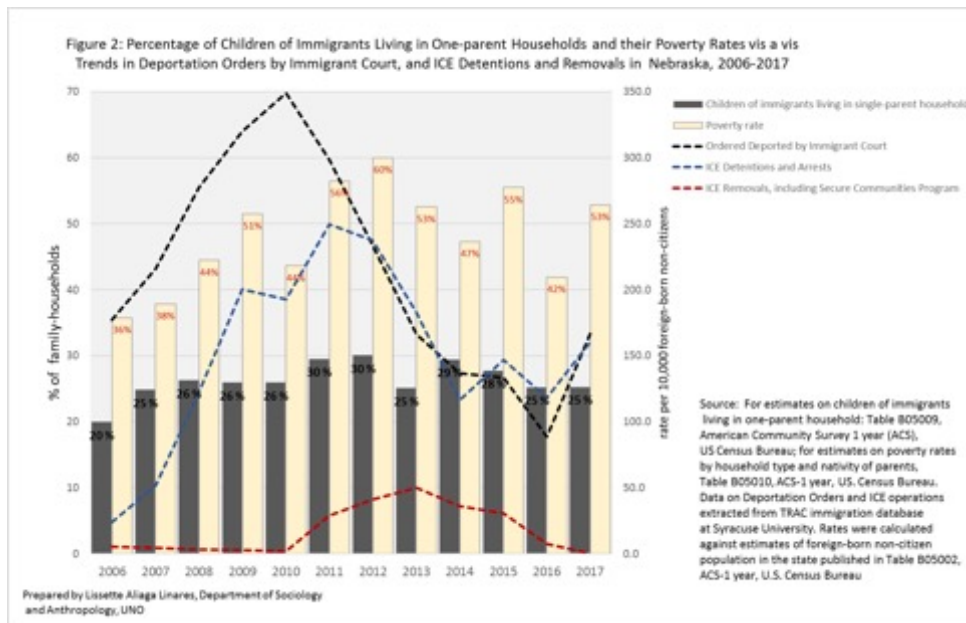
Even though almost all Nebraskans will track their origins to old and new waves of incoming foreign-born ancestors, immigration remains a contentious issue. In Nebraska, going as far back as 1910, children of immigrants made up 38% of children in the state, and only a negligible

proportion of less than a hundred children had at least one Mexican-born parent. Yet, Nebraska was not exempt of the anti-immigrant policies at that time. From 1929 to 1937, the Mexican Repatriation Act deported half a million of Mexican-origin population living in the United States. Two-thirds of those returned to Mexico were U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. While the effects of this policy in Nebraska on children of Mexican immigrants remain unknown, many historians have chronicled [the efforts of Nebraskan families of Mexican descent to stay together during these times](#). Nowadays, children of immigrants represent once more a growing share of the new generation of Nebraskans. In 2017, they made 17 % of the total children in the state. However, unlike the early 1900s, a significant number of this new generation of Nebraskans are of Hispanic descent. One in ten children in the state is a Hispanic/Latino child living with at least one foreign-born parent. The majority of Hispanic/Latino children of immigrants in the state are U.S. citizens (89%) and most likely Nebraskans by birth.



The increase of immigration enforcement across the state in the last decade have affected the living arrangements and socioeconomic prospects of many of these children. As shown in the figure below, the rise of one-parent households among children of immigrants is sensitive to increases of immigration enforcement operations reported by fiscal year. Fiscal years start on September 30 of the previous reported year and end on October 1 of the current reported year. Therefore, enforcement actions have a cumulative effect that are more noticeable the following year. In 2010, the deportation orders issued by the immigrant court reached a high point, and the subsequent year after, the share of children of immigrants, living in one-parent households reached its peak at 30%. A similar trend can be seen in 2014 when the rate of ICE removals peaked. While the share of one-parent households have declined in 2016, we could expect this number to rise again given the recent increase in enforcement operations.

Note again that these separations have wide spread consequences. For example, children who live in single-parent families are more likely to experience poverty. The poverty rate for children of immigrants in Nebraska has risen considerably following the pattern of immigration enforcement. In 2006, the poverty rate for one-parent immigrant households with children sat around 36%. During the highest points of immigration enforcement, poverty rates increased up to 50% or 60%. Although the need to guarantee public safety and remove criminals is not in question here, 43% of the 1,727 ICE removals in the state from 2005 to 2017 comprised cases of individuals with no prior convictions, or those who had only committed, traffic or immigration-related offenses. In 2017, only 11.6% of the new deportation proceeding cases filed in Nebraska corresponded to immigrants with a criminal background. This amplifies the effects of family separation in law-abiding families.



While the focus of this blog has rightfully been on the maladaptive outcomes of accumulative stress for children and parents based on precarious family situations, we would be remiss in not noting that many of these families also show amazing resiliency. While this is tougher in extreme situations such as forced family separations, many immigrant life-stories illustrate how situational stress can wane as adaptive mechanisms and new developmental competencies emerge. Their stories must also be told, not as a way of condoning poor policy decisions, but rather because there are important lessons for families who find themselves in these unjust situations.

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