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COVID-19 AND IMMIGRATION DETENTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

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Immigrants face a range of deleterious mental and physical health outcomes when held in detention facilities. Mental health professionals can use their expertise to respond to the needs of detained migrants, given increased risks during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

The United States has built the largest immigration detention system in the world. At the end of March 2023, 27,251 immigrants were being held in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities.² The vast majority of these individuals and families have no criminal records,² however they are forced to remain in prison-like conditions¹ until their hearings that determine whether they will be permitted to remain in the U.S. or face deportation. Currently, there is a staggering backlog of over two million immigration court cases in the U.S.³ As a result, many immigrants must wait several years before their case is adjudicated⁴ and the vast majority of families attend their hearings when they are not detained.⁵

Impact of Detention

Research demonstrates that detention is associated with deleterious outcomes for the health of immigrants, asylum seekers, and other forced migrants.⁶ Individuals who are detained may be survivors of violence, torture, or other human rights abuses, as well as have chronic medical and mental health conditions that are not able to be sufficiently addressed in detention settings.⁶ In addition, study results indicate that detained immigrants experience high levels of psychological distress, specifically symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁷ Furthermore, as the duration of immigration detention lengthens, the severity of mental health symptoms also increase.⁶ The effects of detention on migrants can be long lasting and continue to negatively impact their mental health even after they are released.⁶

COVID-19 Risks

Overcrowding, limited access to water and soap, and delays in medical care in prisons have long been associated with increased risk of transmission of infectious disease.⁸ Asylum seekers have reported inadequate health care, inability to socially distance, lack of access to masks and hand hygiene, and poor infection control while detained during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ They also report a deterioration of their physical and mental health.⁹ Researchers have suggested that increased stressors experienced by detainees during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a worsening of mental health and a significant increase in suicides in ICE detention facilities.¹⁰ Due to these factors, advocates have called for humanitarian parole and release of immigrants at risk for severe illness or death from a COVID-19 infection.¹¹

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Offer Pro bono Services

Clinicians are well-suited to leverage their knowledge of the impact of ill treatment on diverse communities to respond to these issues. Given the obstacles migrant clients may experience in accessing mental health care, pro bono service provision is essential. By the end of 2022, there were 5.4 million asylum seekers globally¹² and rates of forced migration are expected to increase.



Provide Trauma-Informed Treatment

Immigrants report that their experiences in detention negatively impact their health and wellbeing, even after release. Helping professionals can integrate a trauma-informed approach to assess for detention-related sequelae, as well as work to support client autonomy, control, and advocacy in mental health treatment.

Support Systemic Change

Psychologists can partner with clients, allied professionals, community-based agencies, and social justice organizations to lend their voices to support humanitarian parole, alternatives to incarceration, and immigration policies and reform that reflect the protection of the health, human rights, and dignity of forced migrants.



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