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Illinois Psychological Association Statement on Separation of Families at the Borders

The Illinois Psychological Association (IPA) and its Social Responsibility Section are gravely concerned by the current United States policy on immigrant families entering the United States at the southern border and the impact of this policy on the immediate and long-term mental health status of these families. The unconscionable acts of disruption to these families are likely to cause long-lasting traumatic grief and undermine parent-child attachment bonds. These effects are well documented in social science and scientific literature in the US and internationally, with uniform agreement about the severity of the immediate and long-term outcomes. Such concerns include the long-term effects of toxic stress on children and families, along with the importance of young children being held and touched by their parents and caregivers. Disruption of these early childhood attachment bonds is likely to lead to ongoing insecure attachments, anxiety, depression, longstanding trauma, and significant dysregulation of emotions and behaviors, putting children at risk for academic underperformance, substance abuse and difficulty with interpersonal relationships (https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/humanrights/pdf/Brabeck_Lykes_Hunter-2014-J-OrthoPsychsocialKidsYouthMigration.pdf).

This statement reflects our expertise as Licensed Clinical Psychologists in the State of Illinois and reflects current published research. By taking this stance on such a disturbing issue we hope to promote the ethical position of doing no harm and to benefit the public by avoiding further damage to families affected by these policies, as well as issue a call for our country's policies to reflect our highest morals as a nation.

An Executive Order was signed by President Trump on June 20th changing the policy of separating children from their parents when parents are detained at the border. The harm caused by this traumatic act has already been perpetrated and there is no clear date or plan to reunite those children currently being held without their parents. The treatment of these children and families is inhumane. There needs to be an immediate response and efforts made to reunite these children and families and to provide ongoing supportive services while they are proceeding through the immigration process.

The House Minority proposed the following four principles to guide our nation's immigration policy: 1) Families should not be separated; 2) Services for children and families should be informed by research on trauma-informed care; 3) Culturally competent mental health services should be available; and 4) The same standards of care should be applied for immigrant children in U.S. custody as for children in our child welfare system. Further, the IPA supports the statement made by the American Psychological Association regarding the damaging impact of such separations (<http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2018/05/separating-immigrant-families.aspx>).