

PRESS RELEASE

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FIRST UK STUDY FINDS IMMIGRATION DETENTION SERIOUSLY DAMAGES CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Medical experts demand an urgent review of the Government policy of detaining children in immigration removal centres, after finding clear evidence indicating that detention is "harmful to children's mental and physical well-being".

In the first UK study of its kind, published this week (15 October) in *Child Abuse & Neglect the International Journal*, a team of doctors examined 24 children detained at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre.¹ They found that the majority were experiencing mental and physical health difficulties related to being in detention. Many of these children had come to the UK seeking asylum.

Although the UK Border Agency claims the welfare of children is "a number one priority"² the doctors found that children detained with their families had developed depression and anxiety as well as physical problems related to their stressful and traumatic detention experiences.

Twenty children were assessed by paediatricians, who found that whilst in detention two children had been taken to hospital and eight had lost weight. Six children had missed follow-up appointments for previous health concerns including HIV testing and disability.

Eleven children, aged between three and 11 years old, were seen by a clinical psychologist. All 11 had symptoms of depression and anxiety since being detained. All of these children presented as being confused and frightened by the detention setting and eight had developed severe emotional and behavioural problems. The majority were suffering from sleep problems, headaches and abdominal pain. None had previously required support from a mental health professional.

All the mothers interviewed raised concerns about the impact of detention on their children's development or behaviour. Four children began bed-wetting, although they had previously been dry for a number of years, and 2 children started day time soiling and wetting, indicating severe stress.

Nine parents were also assessed by the clinical psychologist. Five reported being survivors of torture or rape. All nine were experiencing severe psychological distress and six had contemplated suicide.

The report raised serious concerns relating to the safeguarding of children in detention. Of the children seen by a paediatrician, at least 12 had been separated at some point from the person who was normally their main carer; one 20 month breast-feeding baby was separated from her mother for three weeks.

¹ Thirteen children were seen by a paediatrician alone, four by a psychologist alone, and seven by both professions using semi-structured clinical interviews, between February and August 2006. The psychologist also used standardised self-report questionnaires to measure psychopathology. None of the families were prioritised on the basis of known medical needs.

² <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/newsarticles/keepingchildrensafefromharm>

The authors conclude the report by calling on health commissioners, professional bodies and practitioners in the UK to ensure that a comprehensive prospective study into the mental and physical well-being of children in detention is now conducted, following this small-scale pilot study. They also call for the detention of children for immigration purposes to be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

Dr Ann Lorek, author and Consultant Paediatrician at the Mary Sheridan Centre for Child Health, Lambeth Community Health, comments:

“Our study contains evidence that children in detention have worsening physical and mental health, and express worrying levels of trauma and sickness, despite well intentioned staff. They are locked up with family members for indefinite periods of time, often on several occasions. As doctors, we ask for safeguards to protect these vulnerable children from further harm in detention.”

Dr Kim Ehntholt, author and Clinical Psychologist at the Traumatic Stress Clinic, Camden & Islington NHS Foundation Trust, comments:

“Our findings support previous Australian studies showing the negative impact of detention on the mental health of both children and their parents. The detained children’s mental health is likely to have been negatively affected by a combination of factors including a recent deterioration in their parent’s mental health, increased fear after being suddenly placed in a detention facility which children often believe is a prison, anxiety over returning to their country of origin where they may have previously experienced traumatic events, as well as the abrupt loss of home, school and friends.”

The families involved in the research were referred to the authors by the charity Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID). Bail for Immigration Detainees and The Children’s Society are currently campaigning to end the immigration detention of children and families, under the banner OutCry!

Amanda Shah, Assistant Director of Policy at Bail for Immigration Detainees comments:

“As the findings of this study demonstrate, immigration detention is intrinsically damaging and detrimental to children and can never be in their best interests. The shocking cases in this report are not isolated incidents. Children and families continue to suffer deteriorating mental and physical health in detention and are not able to get the treatment and support they need. The Government must immediately end the inhumane and unnecessary practice of detaining children and parents for immigration purposes.”

Lisa Nandy, Policy Adviser at The Children’s Society, comments:

“The Government recently introduced legislation to protect children seeking asylum from harm. Yet, as this report states, holding children in immigration detention can be viewed as state-sanctioned neglect, if not abuse.”

For more information, please contact Rachael Bruce, The Children's Society, tel: 020 7841 4422 email rd@childsoc.org.uk

For requests regarding a full-text copy of the article please contact the press office of *Child Abuse & Neglect the International Journal*: newsroom@elsevier.com.

Notes to editor:

The researchers are employees of the NHS but this research was conducted independently of the NHS, outside NHS working hours, and has not been sponsored or endorsed by the NHS in any way.

OutCry! campaign

The Children's Society and Bail for Immigration Detainees are currently campaigning to end the immigration detention of children and their families. Funded by the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, we are campaigning together under the banner OutCry!

The Children's Society

The Children's Society is a leading children's charity committed to making childhood better for all children in the UK. Visit www.childrenssociety.org.uk

Bail for Immigration Detainees

Bail for Immigration Detainees is a human rights charity challenging immigration detention in the UK. It provides free legal advice to detained asylum seekers and migrants to help them secure their release and it campaigns to end arbitrary detention. Visit www.biduk.org

The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund

The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund continues the Princess' humanitarian work in the UK and overseas. By giving grants to organisations, championing charitable causes, advocacy, campaigning and awareness raising, the Fund works to secure sustainable improvements in the lives of the most vulnerable people in the UK and around the world. Visit www.theworkcontinues.com