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Growing Up in Fear:
How the Trump Administration's Immigration Policies Are Harming Children

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Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to this important hearing. As a developmental psychologist who strives to do policy relevant work in the area of child health and education, this is truly an honor. I commend you all for your focus on this important issue. I hope you find my testimony today useful.

I come before you today to share findings from my research with prekindergarten and kindergarten-12th grade educators, school-based mental health professionals and parents from several regions across the country. This qualitative research is intended to add to our understanding of the adverse impact of immigration enforcement activity, and the threat of enforcement activity, on children and school communities.¹ The data I am gathering through my research corroborates the growing literature base documenting the negative impact of immigration enforcement activity and threat of activity on children and school communities.²⁻¹²

The immigration-related rhetoric that preceded the 2016 elections and subsequent immigration policy changes and enforcement practices have left many children and families with feelings of deep anxiety.^{11,13} I began this line of research, which consists of interviews with parents, educators and mental health professionals, after teachers - with whom we had been working with for five years as part of a longitudinal study of Latino child development- started asking for resources to address the fearfulness and angst they were seeing in their classrooms.

From my own research and decades of existing work in developmental science, it is clear that the perceived hostility of current immigration policies, the communication about these policies, and the enforcement of these policies are having a negative impact on children and school communities.^{2,11,13-15} To illustrate this impact, I share some narrative from participants in my study around children's fears regarding their immigrant parents' safety. I then briefly discuss the way fear and uncertainty arising from the threat of immigration enforcement is having an adverse impact on children, teachers and school personnel, and mental health professionals. Finally, I discuss what teachers, school administrators and mental health professionals say they need to address the distress caused by immigration enforcement activity, and threat of activity, in their school communities.

Children and youth who perceive their parents to be vulnerable to immigration detention, regardless of parents' documentation status, are enduring various degrees of fear and anxiety at home, in their communities and at school.^{1,2,12} Because children's perception of their own safety is closely linked to the perceived safety of their caregivers¹⁶ many children with immigrant parents across the nation are not feeling safe. Children's anxiety and fear are being fueled by chronic uncertainty about their own safety and their rights, and by a persistent and pervasive fear of losing their parents.^{2,12,17}

Given the negative pre-election immigration-related rhetoric, when the results of the 2016 presidential election were announced, some children believed that their parents would be immediately taken away by the police or by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. An 8-year-old said to his mother, "Mommy, when do you have to leave? Today or tomorrow?" A 10-year-old asks his parents, "Am I going to have to take care of my sisters? When do you have to go? Where are your suitcases?" In July 2019, after threats of national ICE

raids, an 8-year-old panicked when she learned that her mother was going to leave the home to buy groceries, and begged, “Don’t go outside mommy – I don’t need to eat.” I share these examples to illustrate that children of immigrants believe that their parents are in danger of being taken away from them at any moment. Children are not only worried about their parents, but are also fearful for their own safety and that of their siblings.

What does this daily fear, uncertainty and anxiety mean for children’s learning and well-being?

Children’s perceptions of the current immigration climate may have an impact on their learning and well-being in at least 3 ways: (1) an inability to make it to school (greater absenteeism); (2) an inability to stay in school; and (3) an inability to fully focus when in school.

Greater absenteeism

When children are extremely scared for their safety, they may experience separation anxiety reactions, and want to be with their primary source of care - their primary caregiver.¹⁸ For children, extreme worry and fear about their parents being detained may lead them to not want to do things that require them to be separated from their family - like going to school. For example, one mother of a 3rd grader shared her child’s rationale for staying home, “It’s better to stay in the house, that she wouldn’t go to school, that she would stay with me to take care of me so they (immigration) wouldn’t take me [...].”

Emerging studies confirm that immigration policies and immigration enforcement practices are linked to absenteeism.^{19,20} Absenteeism may either increase or decrease, depending on whether schools are perceived as safe places in times of increased risk of deportation or arrest.^{19,21} Analyses using the newly available Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA),²² a dataset with average county achievement indicators across the U.S. for schools years 2008-2009 through 2012-2013, indicate larger gaps in chronic absenteeism between non-Latino White students and Latino students in the years that districts had more deportations occurring within 25 miles.¹⁹ Analysis of student attendance data in a high school district that serves an immigrant-dense community indicates that between 2013-2016, 27 unique incidents involving ICE arrests led to ~50,000 days of missed school among all high school students across four years. Effects were strongest for Latino students, students with a disability, students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, English learners and migrant students.²⁰

Inability to stay in the classroom due to unmanageable distress

When children do make it to school, they may not be able to stay in their classroom due to their distress. Several of the mothers I interviewed shared that they have been called to school to console their young children because of children’s inconsolable crying. For example, one mother shared, “there was one day the teachers called us, ‘you know, you should come speak to your children because they are crying and crying, there is no one that can help them stop.’” The mothers end up having to take the children home from school because the children could not function apart from their mothers.

Difficulty focusing on curriculum when at school

When children are at school they are not able to fully engage in learning activities, given their constant worry about their parents' safety, and by extension, their own safety. Children are vigilant toward threat in their daily environment. For example, one elementary school principal shared with me, "I was outside doing supervision and then there was an airplane and a helicopter in the playground and all of a sudden all these kids started running and crying. Because they flew over the playground and they thought it was immigration watching them to come and pick them up. All of a sudden we have all these kids, one starts crying and [then] the other. We sent the first ones to the counselor and the next bell is ringing and there was another group of kids still playing, but they came in running. I remember bringing them back to the counselor and the counselor comes to me and says, 'they're afraid that the helicopter is going to pick them up.'"

In addition to principals, teachers and school based mental health professionals also shared with me that many children are having difficulty focusing in school due to worry and fear.¹⁴ One school-based mental health counselor that I interviewed stated, "The upper grades, I want to say third, fourth and fifth grade, kind of similar reactions. Children kind of shutting down in class and wanting to talk to someone about it and wanting to share their fears. Some children crying in class because they're just really fearful about what's going to happen to their parents."

Older students who are able to self-report are also reporting difficulty focusing in school due to concerns about their parents' safety.¹³ After the 2016 election, an adolescent shared, "I am not as happy. I live in fear. [My fears] don't let me concentrate in school. I'm always thinking if my parents are still with me if they haven't been deported."¹³ Youth are also describing how increased fear and anxiety influence their behavior, acknowledging that they are more cautious and hyperaware. In describing how she has been impacted by the 2016 presidential election, one 15-year-old describes "I have also become scared of cars that slowly roll by from where I live or cars going slowly wherever I'm at because I think it may be the immigration police...at some point I just won't be able to step outside of my house [because] of how bad my fears have gotten."¹³

Absenteeism, inability to stay in school due to distress, and inability to fully concentrate in school due to fear about immigration enforcement are all being noted by educators and mental health professionals. Some mothers shared with me that their children's grades have dropped. Educators participating in surveys after the 2016 election also note a drop in achievement.^{10,14} Given the length of time required to conduct and publish studies that can quantify the impact of immigration policies and enforcement since the 2016 election on academic achievement, there currently no published studies regarding the period since 2016.

Published studies examining immigration policies and enforcement practices and associations with indicators of achievement are using data from 2000-2016, if not earlier. That small, but growing, literature indicates that in addition to absenteeism, immigration policies and immigration enforcement practices are also related to grade retention and school dropout,²³ lower school enrollment,²⁴ and lower academic achievement.^{19,25} Studies indicate that immigration enforcement policies and practices may differ in their effects on student schooling based on the

magnitude or type of enforcement activity (e.g. a worksite raid in the community versus local partnership of police officers with immigration enforcement officers), proximity of immigration enforcement activity to schools, age of the students, and strength of partnership between local police officers and ICE agents.

For example, the first study to examine the relation between immigration enforcement and student achievement with administrative test score data from all U.S. counties was published October 2019.²⁵ That study uses math and English language arts test scores from school years 2008-2009 through 2012-2013, from the SEDA. Findings indicate a significant association between removal of individuals due to ICE activity and reduced achievement for Hispanic students, with counties experiencing higher levels of removals having larger decreases in achievement among Hispanic students. Given the drastic shifts in federal approaches to immigration enforcement since January 2017,²⁶ the link between greater immigration enforcement practices and absenteeism, achievement gaps, and lower academic achievement promises to be strengthened if students continue to be chronically fearful for their safety or for their families' safety. For example, in March, 2017, nearly 2,000 students stopped going to school in the days after ICE raids in Las Cruces, New Mexico.²⁷ Following the biggest ICE raid in U.S. history in August, 2019, more than 25% of a Mississippi school district's Latino student population was absent.²⁸

What is the impact of the perceived hostile immigration climate on educators and mental health professionals?

Teachers, school administrators, and mental health professionals indicate they are being impacted in at least 3 ways: (1) Teachers and administrators spend extra time trying to manage children's distress given a shortage of mental health professionals, (2) teachers and mental health professionals spend extra time connecting to students who are absent, and (3) teachers, school personnel and mental health professionals feel anxious due to the immigration climate.

Teachers and administrators spend extra time trying to manage children's distress given a shortage of mental health professionals

In some districts, school communities (defined as teachers, administrators, mental health counselors, paraprofessionals and support staff) are working with an "all hands on deck" approach to help manage the needs of children threatened by the current immigration climate. A principal shared with me, "We generally in a way need additional support to deal with the trauma of this. We have at our school 2 full-time counselors. Our school population is very close to 1000, just under a thousand, so our counselors are working very, very hard to address the needs of our kids. You know, that trauma manifests itself in different ways, so we have kids who are very sad when they come to school or they want to avoid coming to school. Many kids, some of them they're afraid to come and they are afraid mom and dad won't be there when they get back. We support families to help keep the kids to stay here, but all those personal interactions with kids who are having those types of trauma require a lot of time from admin and counselors."

Teachers and mental health professionals spend extra time connecting to students who are absent

A teacher shared, “It has become a challenge to work with students excessively absent due to immigration fears; contact numbers are constantly being changed.” This challenge is echoed in larger survey studies of school personnel gauging the impact of the 2016 election.^{14,15}

Teachers, school personnel and mental health professionals feel anxious and uncertain due to the immigration climate

Teachers, administrators and mental health professionals share that they are also experiencing a range of emotions¹⁵ due to the current immigration climate including anxiety, guilt, stress, uncertainty and hopelessness.

A school mental health counselor I interviewed shared, “[...]but I really don't have hope that, you know, people won't be deported. It's kind of hard to, you know, to help people when you also feel like, well this is horrible and you may really have to have to go [...] So having to help people when I'm also stressed out about it, of course, not as much as they are. Not at all, you know, don't pretend that that's the case, but it's just, it's, you know, it's sad and it hurts.”

One teacher shared, “I was having really severe anxiety for most of like around my children. It was so much triggered from the media, from the separation of families, from seeing the shootings, a mass shootings in the mall, to the extent that I saw children crying, mothers crying, families like on the media in the photos, to the extent that I was losing-my worry and fear around losing my children was like heightened to the extreme.”

Mental health professionals are impacted in two additional ways: (1) their work load has increased and (2) their work is harder as the children already in treatment are getting harder to treat.

Mental health professionals are noticing that some children who are already in treatment are getting harder to treat because the children do not want to engage in social activities or are no longer disclosing as much about their home lives in an effort to protect their family. For example, a social worker shared, “This 8-year-old that we were talking about, she was already having some academic anxiety and then she was having a difficult time navigating peer relationships. One of the things that mom was doing, she was trying to get her involved in a sport like outside so that she could cultivate other relationships outside of school and it was a soccer team in the community [...] and she didn't want to go because it was in the park which was a public place and had more visibility [...] She doesn't want to be outside because like the police could be outside just coming through the park [...] Then a situation happened where I guess she saw on the news, I don't know if it was a specific raid or if somebody got picked up outside of a house of worship, then she didn't want to go to church. So that actually warranted a conference [...] about how fear can be paralyzing and can cause you not to engage in your day to day activities and things that you enjoy and the things that you enjoy are also what helps you cope with feeling anxious.”

I quote a psychiatrist supervising the work of social workers, “the secrecy- they become - becoming electively mute a little bit. They don't want to share, they are afraid to share. And let alone when they see, for example, there was a situation one time when we call one of those codes-someone an aggressive patient-and the kids that were terrified. They saw some hospital police forget it. They were crying and I didn't know why at that time. I then found out, of course, it's like a PTSD phenomenon. Flashbacks, you know, they see someone, hear someone knock on the door without knowing for fear that it would be *la migra* [immigration enforcement agents]. And they're terrified. So they live in a constant state of fear. This is pervasive in them and it has become more difficult to treat because of the secrecy.”

Mental health professionals and school personnel are also noting concern about students not receiving treatment they may need, given protocols prioritizing attention to children who disrupt the classroom.

The impact of our current immigration climate on students' well-being can look dramatically different. Some students express their fear, anxiety, and inability to regulate their attention outwardly,⁸ with behaviors that can't be missed, while others quietly struggle to process their lived experiences. Some mental health professionals are voicing concerns that much needed resources are not getting to all those in need. For example, a social worker shared, “Ok so if I think about the cohort of students that I know from my experience working directly with who are manifesting some of the impacts of how immigration would impact them or would impact their family - how they're outwardly manifesting them is still lower, observationally, than students who may or may not have the same needs but they have other academic, mental health, or development needs. So they're under the radar for lack of a better term. Traditionally, if we're thinking about safety and we have a kid that's throwing chairs you have to make sure like everybody's safe. But if we have a kid in the back of the room that's like writing down all of these really difficult feelings he's feeling about his family, about himself, that's not a thing that we know because we don't observe it. You know we see, ‘oh Juan is a diligent student. He's always writing in his notebook. He's always you know so thoughtful and intentional’ but we don't know what that thoughtful intentional practice contains. And we're not going to think about looking at it because right now he's in a safe space writing in his notebook; whereas, Jorge out here is throwing chairs. So we need to deal with that right away. That's the struggle.”

What are school communities' needs to help address the adverse impact of the immigration climate?

Parents, teachers, administrators and mental health personnel are all indicating that schools need more mental health professionals and supports for these professionals. Several mothers I spoke with shared feelings of despair and frustration at not being able to get mental health supports for their children who were demonstrating symptoms of anxiety, despite their multiple attempts to do so at their child's school. In an interview, a school counselor talked about the need for more support given the diverse mental health needs of students, in addition to the anxiety from the immigration climate, “The other I think, which is just normally even though I have great support systems, looking into the future, I think burnout, it's tough. Sometimes it's tough to hear all these different things. For example, these last three weeks, we've had a really

big increase and self-harm and suicide in our students. It's not necessarily this topic, but numerous other ones that also come up as well". This counselor is the only counselor for 750 students. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250-to-1.²⁹

School personnel are voicing a need for more professional development training around trauma informed approaches to teaching. Schools need more mental health professionals that understand that the behaviors being expressed by children who are constantly fearful about their safety and that of their family are normal given the current immigration climate. Not wanting to leave your mother's side when your father was just deported, fearing the sounds of helicopters, avoiding soccer games because of fear of ICE raids at the park – all of these behaviors are normal in the face of perceived threat. Mental health professionals and professional development that focuses on social emotional supports for children are needed to help learning communities manage distress. Mental health professionals need training and support to deepen their own trauma informed practice and to support the educators around them.

Teachers and mental health professionals are voicing a need for more training around implicit bias, noting that some school personnel are unaware of how their own interactions with children are causing children distress. A middle-school teacher I interviewed shared, "I think, um... the number one thing I can think of is like, like I know teachers are thought of generally as they care and stuff but I think teachers need their own, like school-wise training on checking their bias - like being more empathetic towards students who are going through that because, at least for my school, I work with a lot of white colleagues and I think sometimes they are not aware of their privilege, and their privilege can negatively affect the students that we're working with."

Teacher practices that elicit fear in students are also noted by some parents. For example, a parent shared that her son came home one day concerned about a "joke" his coach had made during soccer practice. Her son said to her, "You know what the coach said when we were practicing, there was a helicopter passing, like an airplane, he says 'Run! Run everyone, hide! Immigration is coming for you'. I said, 'what did you all do?', he said 'some of the boys threw themselves to the ground to hide'. I said, and what about him (referring to the coach), 'he was dying of laughter.'"

School communities want more legal resources.

Educators, parents and social workers indicate a need for more legal resources to help them navigate immigration changes in policy. A social worker shared with me, "One of the workshops they had I remember in early 2017 was an immigration workshop [...] I don't remember if it was legal aid, but it was some similar type of organization that came and was providing just general information because there was cause for concern. It was the largest turn out of a workshop that they've ever seen because people were very worried".

A school counselor shared with me, "we've had families come in, where especially recently, within the last few months, where a parent has been taken on their way to work. We have a lot of parents that work in landscaping and in the field. We've had, you know, if its dad that got taken, just the mom comes in, and will ask us, 'what do you guys think we should do?' Who do we turn

to for legal advice? We have some resources that we have just found. Now, as far if I have had uncertainty, absolutely.”

Qualitative data corroborates quantitative studies, adding to our understanding of the multiple ways children and school communities are negatively impacted by harsh immigration climates

A growing evidence base indicates that immigration policies and immigration enforcement practices – marked by the coupling of immigration with legality and the partnering of police officers with immigration enforcement officers over the past few decades^{3,30} – are associated with significant child and adolescent anxiety and mental health distress.^{2,31-34} For example, a study with 397 U.S.-born Latino adolescents found that nearly half of the youth participants worried at least sometimes about the personal consequences of the US immigration policy (n = 178 [44.8%]), family separation because of deportation (177 [44.6%]), and being reported to the immigration office (164 [41.3%]). Those with high (versus low or moderate) scores on the Perceived Immigration Policy Effects Scale (PIPES)³⁵ had higher anxiety scores and worse sleep quality scores. Moreover, youth with high PIPES scores had a statistically significant increase in levels of anxiety between the first time they underwent a health assessment (before the 2016 presidential election, at age 14 years) and in the first year after the election (at age 16 years).²

The fear, distress, and chronic uncertainty regarding safety, resulting from perceived hostile enforcement practices and the threat of enforcement activity in children’s daily spaces, merits concern from policymakers because the effects of living with chronic fear and uncertainty about one’s safety can harm the developing brain and impair cognitive control and learning.^{36,37,38} As the examples shared above illustrate, children’s immigration-related fears regarding their parents’ safety – and by extension, their own safety – are having a detrimental impact on their health.^{2,31-34}

Approximately 5 million U.S. born children, 7% of all children in K-12 schools in the U.S., are living with at least one undocumented parent.³⁹ An additional 675,000 children under the age of 18 are living in the U.S. without formal legal status.³⁹ Immigration policies and their enforcement have the potential to adversely influence millions of students in U.S. schools, particularly – but not only^{3,10,12,14} - immigrant-origin and/or Latino/a students.

As a developmental psychologist, I have come to understand that, for some children, the chronic uncertainty regarding safety and fear born from a perceived hostile immigration climate is a form of psychological violence.¹ It is with a violence framework that researchers, educators, mental health providers and policy makers can begin to understand both the short term and long-term impact of chronic uncertainty and fear on children’s well-being and academic achievement. The qualitative data I have shared with you today provides a deeper understanding of the potential breadth^{40,41} and depth of harm caused to students who are vulnerable, or perceive themselves to be vulnerable, to our national immigration policies. Further, this research provides insight into the challenges experienced by teachers, administrators and mental health professionals who work with communities that experience immigration enforcement activity or perceive immigration enforcement threat. School communities indicate a need for more mental health providers, more implicit bias training and trauma-informed supports, and access to legal resources to weather the negative impact of immigration enforcement activity, and threat of activity, on the lives of children. Thank you for the opportunity share this research with you.

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