

## Family Experiences of Detention for Migratory Reasons



### What this research is about

Over 82 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2020, including 4.1 million asylum seekers. However, in recent years, Western host countries, such as Canada, Australia, and the United States, have implemented restrictive immigration measures targeting irregular migrants (those who enter a country without the required legal status). These strategies include holding them in detention centres with hostile environments. For families, detention adds further hardship to an already traumatic migratory journey, especially when it leads to separation and instability.

Given the projected increase in global displacement and the ongoing reinforcement of migratory policies in several Western countries, it is essential to understand how detention leads to harmful effects on families. Therefore, this study aims to describe the experience of migrant families with detention.

### What the researchers did

The researchers conducted a qualitative systematic review of peer-reviewed empirical studies published in English, French, or Spanish. Studies had to report the experiences of families detained for migratory reasons. The researchers screened 897 articles and included 21 studies published in 22 articles that met the inclusion criteria. These studies captured the experiences of 958 persons exposed to detention for migratory reasons (approximately 305 children and 650 adults). The participants' countries of origin varied, with Latin America and the Caribbean being the most common region represented. The length of detention varied from less than 48 hours to up to three years.

### What the researchers found

The researchers identified four themes that describe how detention affects families:

1. **Altered Family Structure:** Family members were often physically separated due to detention policies,

### What you need to know

Governments in many countries use immigration detention as a tool to manage irregular migration, but little is known about how this affects families. This study reviews qualitative evidence from 21 studies published in 22 articles to understand how detention impacts families. The findings show that detention disrupts family structures, weakens instrumental and emotional functioning, and undermines family identity. Parents and children experience forced separation, financial hardship, emotional strain, and uncertainty about their future. Detention not only compromises day-to-day caregiving but also undermines families' sense of self-worth and identity. Based on the profound harms caused by immigration detention on families, the study calls on policymakers to end detention practices.

with fathers separated from mothers and children, or children separated from both parents. These enforced separations destabilized the family structure and family boundaries. Across the studies, such rules were identified as factors that increased the vulnerability of all family members.

2. **Disruption in Instrumental Functioning:** Families experienced severe disruptions in daily life routines, including access to income, food, health care, and education. Detention often removed the main breadwinner, plunging families into financial crisis. Living conditions in detention centres were characterized by overcrowding, inadequate nutrition, and poor-quality food and water. Families also faced significant challenges in accessing legal, medical, and educational services, especially for children.

3. **Disruption in Emotional Functioning:** The hostile environment of detention caused distress in children and parents and heightened feelings of sadness and frustration. Parents felt powerless as the detention rules restricted their ability to meet their children's basic needs or maintain caregiving roles. In some cases, children assumed adult responsibilities, such as caring for siblings or emotionally supporting parents who experienced severe psychological burden.
4. **Weakening of Family Identity:** Families felt they were treated like criminals within the detention system. This experience undermined their sense of self-worth and identity. Some family members saw themselves as powerless against an unjust system. Many began to doubt their agency and identity, and questioned whether they could keep their family together in the future.

### How you can use this research

This research provides insight into the profound harms caused by immigration detention on families. It urges policymakers to end detention practices and to adopt alternatives such as community-based programs. Teachers and school professionals have an important role in screening, evaluating, and minimizing the negative impacts on children's education. Health and social professionals need to help immigrants overcome the multiple barriers they face in accessing care. This can be achieved by developing trusting relationships and providing culturally sensitive care. Future research should explore the long-term impact of detention on family structure and functioning, as well as on resettlement.

### About the researchers

Christine Gervais and Pierre Pariseau-Legault are affiliated with the Nursing Department at Université du Québec en Outaouais, Quebec. Sophie Lampron-de Souza is affiliated with the School of Psychoeducation at Université de Montréal, Quebec. Grace Chammas and Isabel Côté are affiliated with the Social Work Department at the Université du Québec en Outaouais, Quebec. Karolane Cliche is affiliated with the Psychology Department at Université du Québec à Montréal, Quebec. For more information about this study, please contact Christine Gervais at [christine.gervais@uqo.ca](mailto:christine.gervais@uqo.ca).

### Citation

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*Research Snapshot by Patrick Chi Kai Lam*

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