



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION
Services, Inc.

Testimony Submitted June 8, 2021
On behalf of Katherine B. McGuire, Chief Advocacy Officer
American Psychological Association Services, Inc. to
The United States House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

For the Hearing Entitled, “A Humane Response: Prioritizing the Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children”

On behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA), I submit this statement for the record for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing, *A Humane Response: Prioritizing the Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children*, on June 9, 2021. APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States with more than 122,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students. Many APA members serve immigrant children and adults in a wide range of settings, including schools, clinics, community centers, hospitals, and refugee resettlement centers.

Unaccompanied immigrant children face many unique challenges. These challenges are critical stressors and put these children at higher risk of experiencing emotional distress and developing mental health disorders.¹ Studies have found high levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal ideation among unaccompanied children.² These children are also susceptible to chronic stressors such as neglect, poverty and discrimination and acute stressors such as kidnapping, sexual assault and seeing extreme violence.³

Based on these findings, first, we want to underscore the importance of mental health care for unaccompanied minors, many of whom are suffering from posttraumatic stress and other mental health challenges. It is essential that these minors have access to mental health care while they

¹ Paris, M., et al. (2019). Vulnerable But Not Broken; Psychosocial Challenges and Resilience Pathways Among Unaccompanied Children from Central America, (47).

² Paris, (48).

³ Paris, (55).

are being held in federal facilities and that they are aware of opportunities to gain access to community-based mental health services after they leave the facility. APA has been working to provide specialized training to our members and will continue to pursue collaborative efforts with the Office of Refugee Resettlement within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and community-based providers. We respectfully request your support to improve accessibility to mental health services for immigrant children and their families.

While the length of time migrant children are held in federal facilities has decreased over the last few months, psychological research emphasizes the importance of holding children for the least amount of time possible, keeping families together, and reuniting unaccompanied minors with their families as quickly as possible.

The mental health problems that children and families experience because of family detention are well documented. Evidence shows that often children who are detained have experienced trauma prior to arriving at the immigration facility.⁴ We cannot underscore enough the importance of considering the mental health of the child detainees and the strong possibility that the longer they are held in detention, the more likely their mental health will suffer.⁵ If children and families must be detained, we strongly urge that they are held no longer than the statutory limit of 20 days.

APA also calls upon the federal government to provide sufficient funding to ensure these important health services are provided. In the 2019 policy statement of our governing Council of Representatives, APA expressed its support for practical and humane immigration policies that consider the well-being of immigrants and their families, including the provision of appropriate physical and mental health services.⁶

Thank you for holding this important hearing on caring for unaccompanied minors. If you have any questions, please contact Serena Dávila, APA's Senior Director of Congressional and Federal Relations, at sdavila@apa.org.

⁴ Cervantes, W. (2015). Family detention: The harmful impact on children, *First Focus*, <https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Family-Detention.pdf>.

⁵ Cervantes, W. (2015).

⁶ APA (August, 2019). APA Policy Statement on Immigration. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/about/governance/council/actions-summer-2019.pdf>