

Reuniting and Detaining Migrant Families Pose New Mental Health Risks

June 27, 2018

The chaotic process of reuniting thousands of migrant children and parents separated by the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy poses great psychological risks, both short- and long-term, mental health experts said on Friday. So does holding those families indefinitely while they await legal proceedings, which could happen under the president's new executive order.

The administration has no clear plan to reunite migrant families, which is sure to carry a psychological price for migrant parents and more than 2,300 children separated from them at the border in recent months. More than 400 are under age 12, and many are toddlers.

But the alternative of keeping those families in camps, on military bases and in other facilities for long periods of time while they work their way through the legal and asylum systems will quite likely impose its own trauma, as it did for families of Japanese descent held by the United States in internment camps during World War II.

"People have been very focused on technical pieces of this process, and the egregiousness of children in cages," said Jennifer Rodriguez, executive director of the Youth Law Center, an advocacy group based in San Francisco and focused on protecting the rights of children. "But they're not thinking about most basic fundamental trauma we're inflicting on people."