

Position Statement on Growing Fear over Coronavirus Spread and Mental Health Impact in ICE Detention Centers

Approved by the Board of Trustees, December 2020

Approved by the Assembly, November 2020

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Issue:

The coronavirus pandemic has created a global crisis. The detention of children and adults by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) can lead to negative mental health outcomes, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and increased anxiety. With thousands of immigrants detained at ICE detention centers across the country during this pandemic, there is a serious risk of exacerbating detainees’ mental health conditions. Even without the fear of contagion, studies have shown that children, adolescents, and adults experience adverse mental health outcomes during and following detention. In addition, these detention facilities are not isolated from the community, which could lead to uncontrolled spread of the virus. Both detainees and staff are vulnerable to infection, and many have tested positive for the virus. Practicing social distancing is impossible in this environment. The spread of COVID-19 could overwhelm our fragile health care system, which is already facing a critical shortage of lifesaving resources and mental health clinicians.

APA Position:

The American Psychiatric Association urges the Department of Homeland Security in conjunction with ICE to consider supervised release of detainees or to find an alternative for those detainees charged with an immigration violation. Detaining children and adults during the coronavirus pandemic gravely threatens their mental and physical health and endangers their lives. Most of these detainees present a low public safety risk and will be humanely served by being released. Special consideration should be given to the elderly, pregnant women and those with chronic medical conditions, including psychiatric disorders. In addition, procedures to ensure adequate screening, testing and isolation, as well as limiting transfers of detainees, will help slow the spread of the coronavirus and protect the children and adults in custody, those whose job it is to care for them, and the public-at-large.

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