



# Family Reunification: What Needs Are Still Unmet?



Silvana Navia '24 & Nara Milanich & Fanny Garcia | The Laidlaw Research Program

## Background



Photograph of a sign demanding the end of the Zero-Tolerance policy. Santa Clara University School of Law, www.law.scu.edu/experimental/thrblog/clinic-asks-un-human-rights-body-to-review-us-zero-tolerance-policy-and-monitor-abuses-in-for-profit-immigrant-detention-centers/

2008: A drastic increase in migrants from Central America arriving to the U.S border. Includes asylum seekers from Mexico and Northern Triangle region of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras who are fleeing rising violence, poverty, corruption, and joblessness. Although I am starting this timeline with the year 2008, the southern border humanitarian crisis has been ongoing for years.

April 2018: U.S Attorney General Jeff Sessions announces Zero-Tolerance Policy on behalf of the Trump administration. This allowed for all migrants entering the U.S illegally, including those seeking asylum, to be criminally prosecuted. As adults were imprisoned and detained in detention centers, thousands of families were separated. Due to the Flores Settlement of 1997, children cannot be held for longer than 20 days. Forceful removal of children was also meant to deter migrants from crossing the border.

July 2018: A month after, thousands of families remained separated. Parents continued to wait to be reunited with their children. Difficulties emerged as parents deported back to their home countries were unable to be tracked down and the total number of children separated remained unknown. The Zero-Tolerance policy was not officially rescinded until January 2021 under the Biden administration.

June 2019: Inhumane conditions inside of detention facilities where children and adults were being detained became public. Reports revealed outbreaks of sickness, a lack of sanitation, overcrowded cells, and insufficient amounts of food, water and supplies such as diapers and toothbrushes. These conditions brought about various protests demanding the closure of immigrant detention centers.

2014: Influx of unaccompanied children arriving to the U.S border during the Obama administration. Adults and children are taken to detention centers which soon became overcrowded. Southern Border Program is put into action in an attempt to decrease the number of migrants arriving to the border, but instead ends up putting migrants in greater danger.

June 2018: Following a lawsuit set out by the American Civil Liberties Union regarding family separation, U.S District Judge Dana Sabraw ordered the Trump administration and U.S border authorities to reunite separated families. He specified that families could only be separated if the parent put the child at risk. This ruling and heavy criticism of the Zero-Tolerance Policy by the public led to former president Trump signing an executive order to end the separation of families.

March 2019: Reports by the Trump administration to a federal court revealed families continued to be separated at the southern border for minor offenses, demonstrating violations of separation guidelines by government officials.

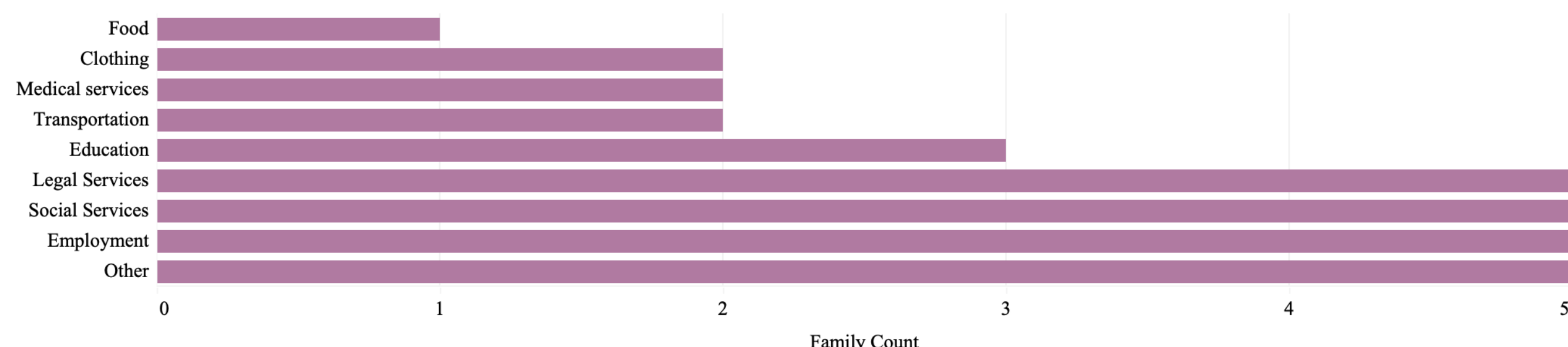
February 2021: President Joe Biden established the Interagency Task Force on Reunification of Families to identify families separated by the Zero-Tolerance Policy and facilitate their reunification in the U.S. Separated legal guardians and children who qualify for reunification can apply for humanitarian parole with support from the International Organization for Migration. If their application for parole is approved, individuals are allowed to live in the U.S for 3 years.

## Methods

- ◆ With the help of my mentors, I designed an intake form used to collect information from families who have been reunited through in-person and phone interviews.
- ◆ The information gathered consisted of the socioeconomic and cultural background of families, the social and legal services provided to them, their experience with reunification, remaining concerns and questions about their situation, as well as pending needs that have not been met.
- ◆ A total of 5 families were interviewed, 4 are originally from Guatemala and 1 is from Honduras. They are now located in states all over the U.S. including New York, Virginia, Texas and Florida.
- ◆ The process of outreaching to families and scheduling interviews was done by my mentor, Fanny Garcia. She had already developed relationships with these families when working on a storytelling project that collected the stories of separated families at the U.S-Mexico border, in collaboration with Nara Milanich, Barnard College, and the Women's Refugee Commission.
- ◆ Our goal was to use this information to find out where there are gaps in the services these families have already received and to better understand what support is still missing. Our intention with this project is to help improve the family reunification process and strengthen the services provided to immigrant communities.

## Findings

### Needs of Families Interviewed



The responses collected revealed all 5 families shared a pattern of unmet needs in the following categories: legal services, social services, employment, and other.

It is important to note that each family had individual needs specific to their situation, but these were categorized into nine categories to develop the figure on the left.

Specific Needs Shared by Families
<p><b>Legal Services:</b> The first family needs help obtaining legal status for their son and securing a social security and work permit for their youngest daughter.</p> <p>The fourth family explained they do not have a lawyer. They need assistance applying for a work permit and social security.</p> <p>The second and fourth family have questions about obtaining permanent residency in the U.S.</p> <p>All families expressed interest in being connected to a lawyer to receive clarification on their humanitarian parole and what happens after 3 years.</p>
<p><b>Social Services:</b> Four families mentioned they need financial support with paying rent.</p> <p>The third family explained rent is really costly for them and they could have benefited from support on finding an affordable apartment.</p> <p>The first family needs help making appointments, such as the biometrics required for their daughter.</p> <p>The fourth family needs support finding a home, their time at the shelter they are currently staying in will be ending soon.</p> <p>The first and fifth families need support accessing medicine, applying for health insurance, and locating mental health resources.</p>
<p>Three families are relying on others for assistance with the translation of documents, this support is not received directly from social workers or lawyers.</p> <p><b>Employment:</b> All families described the difficulty of finding stable work. Many families feel they are being taken advantage of. Other families face struggles such as limited availability due to caring for their children and being illiterate.</p> <p>Families have no resources to help them find employment. Often they rely on relatives, friends or neighbors to help them but some have no one nearby.</p>
<p><b>Other:</b> Outside of relatives, friends and neighbors, all families shared having a small to no community of support.</p> <p>Four families have had no contact with local organizations in their area, many do not know about them. The fourth family has had some contact with local organizations but explained it is difficult because one has to go in person.</p> <p>All families shared having little to no connection to a broader community of Latino migrants or people from Guatemala/Honduras in their area.</p>

Specific Needs Shared by Families
<p><b>Food:</b> The fifth family reported needing support with food. * Although the figure only shows one family reported being in need of food, this is a need shared by all families as they struggle to find secure employment. *</p> <p><b>Clothing:</b> The second and fifth families need support with clothing.</p> <p><b>Medical Services:</b> The first family needs help getting medicine for a health condition and assistance accessing psychological services, especially for their children.</p> <p>The fifth family mentioned needing support to apply for health insurance.</p> <p><b>Transportation:</b> The third family explained that financial assistance to help cover transportation costs for commuting to work would be helpful.</p> <p>The fifth family needs information on how to obtain a drivers license, as a car is needed to commute to work due to the significant distance from home.</p> <p><b>Education:</b> Three families shared needing more information on educational resources. Two families want to know more about helping their child obtain a high school diploma and the process for applying to the army. Families are also struggling to enroll their kids in school and would like assistance with the process and paperwork.</p>
<p><b>Additional Patterns Found in Family Experiences</b></p> <p><b>Separation:</b> 4 families were separated for 4-5 years. During that time, their children were sent to live with relatives/friends of family in the U.S while the parents remained in detention centers or were deported back to their country of origin.</p> <p>All families expressed how hard it was to be separated from their children.</p> <p><b>Reunification:</b> All families received some type of support from organizations to help with the reunification of their families.</p> <p>Even though all families described reunification as a beautiful and joyful moment, the parents shared the fear that the relationship with their children would be impacted as a result of the separation they had experienced.</p> <p><b>Separation Impact on Families:</b> Three families described how they and their children were impacted by the traumatic experience of separation. For many this includes struggling to bond again with the child they were separated from and noticing changes in the behavior and mental wellbeing of their children.</p>

## Conclusions

1. Reunited families are isolated. They are not being connected to local organizations in their community once relocated to the U.S. Many are not aware of these organizations and are not receiving information about them. As a result, they often do not have larger communities of support to rely on.
2. Families are not being provided with resources and support to help them find secure employment, despite their humanitarian parole making them eligible for work authorization.
3. Reunited families are in need of mental health resources due to the trauma experienced from separation. Psychological services are not being provided to these families, nor being made accessible.
4. Families continue to need urgent financial assistance with paying rent, this is a result of many families not receiving support with finding affordable housing when arriving to the U.S.
5. The need for employment and assistance with rent, clothing, and food in these families is all interrelated. A lack of support with finding and securing employment has resulted in families being unable to afford housing and essential needs.
6. Families have many remaining questions about the process of reunification they are experiencing and require further clarification about the humanitarian parole provided by the Biden administration for qualified families. Many do not know what follows after their three year authorization to live in the U.S ends. A lot of these unanswered questions are specific to the circumstances of families, highlighting the need for case managers.
7. Families need instruction and guidance on how to engage with professionals assisting with their cases.
8. Families would greatly benefit from having advocates they can rely on to help voice their questions and needs.

## Next Steps

- ▶ Revisiting the funding the government has allocated for the reunification process of families, as this is crucial for the success of the Family Reunification Task Force in their efforts to support migrant families impacted by the Zero-Tolerance policy.
- ▶ Engaging in interviews with directors, workers, and lawyers who are part of the work of organizations assisting with reunification to gain insight on what areas more support is needed in and what limitations are impacting their work with families.
  - Identifying opportunities for these organizations to grow and strengthen their services through the development of new programs and access to additional resources.
- ▶ Combining the experiences of reunited families with that of organizations assisting with reunification to develop recommendations aimed to tailor the services offered by these organizations to meet the specific needs of immigrant families.
- ▶ Supporting reunited families and organizations with identified needs.