



The Immigration Humanitarian Crisis Is Not Going Away—And Social Work Needs to Step Up

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When the family separation crisis at the southern U.S. border hit the news in May, social workers, like most Americans, were appalled. The National Association of Social Workers¹ and similar associations across the country released statements condemning the federal government's practice of "zero tolerance" that was separating parents seeking asylum from their children and placing them in detention. While the uproar was welcome, it was also painful to watch because the outcry over detention, separation and treatment of families should have been happening for decades and social workers should be actively leading that outcry. This humanitarian crisis is one of many related to immigration and it is far from over.

As long time social workers and scholars at the intersection of immigration and child welfare issues, a few things have become clear to us during this crisis. First, there is a lot of misinformation coming from the media, and even from social work experts, around the laws and processes being followed, and the conditions for children and families on the ground. As an example, the media has been camped outside non-profit shelters along the border to get a glimpse of "baby cages." However, the baby cages so decried in the media are actually border patrol holding facilities and they are not new. The non-profits under attack are caring for children so they do not have to stay in inhumane holding facilities.

Our second observation is that the voices of social workers have been few and far between in the crafting and organizing of responses to this crisis, both at the level of advocacy and on the ground. The profession in the forefront of this

response has been law, which is not entirely surprising as lawyers have access to detention centers that social workers do not. However, at this point in history, social workers seem to be lacking expertise in both immigration and child welfare policy, which is ironic given that the roots of social work are in child welfare and immigration. We were all taught about Jane Adams and Hull House, and about little Mary Ellen and the child abuse case that helped establish children's rights. Yet, fewer and fewer social workers have expertise in child welfare these days, and immigration is not even an emphasized area of social work curriculum. In social work, even when we talk about trauma, we teach about adverse childhood experiences which do not include migration trauma. We pride ourselves on our commitment to social justice, but immigration is arguably the social justice issue of our time and we are not a visible force in this discourse.

A third issue that has become apparent is the lack of understanding of systems. Granted, it is complex, but as social workers, we should have a basic grasp of how things work. At the intersection of immigration and children's issues, that there are multiple federal systems involved. Adults turning themselves in at the border, and children traveling with adults, fall under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which includes Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). When families cross the border and present themselves to DHS authorities, they are placed in border patrol holding facilities (the cages you see on TV). Some are released with ankle monitors and some are moved to detention centers run by private corporations on behalf of ICE. When children cross the border alone, they are considered unaccompanied minors and they are placed in non-profit facilities run by the Office of Refugee and Resettlement (ORR), which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). When children were separated from parents at the border, they were placed in these ORR facilities. Since the facilities don't serve young children, foster families are contracted

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¹ NASW statements from May 30, 2018 and June 22, 2018.

through the non-profits in accordance with ORR guidelines to house young children. Many of the same non-profits that provide foster care for state child welfare systems also have contracts with ORR based on their expertise and capacity to care for children. However, state foster care systems are completely different from the federal ORR system.

A Call to Action

In the short term, as social work advocates, we have an ethical duty to speak to what we know—we must not insert ourselves as experts in areas we don't fully understand. The situation at the border is so in flux that legal agencies have to coordinate with each other on weekly calls to figure out next steps, 1 day and 1 week at a time. The government doesn't notify the helping professions about changes in policy. It simply makes changes, leaving us scrambling across disciplines to coordinate a response. So, unless you are in the middle of the chaos, you won't know from day to day what is happening. And the potential for creating misinformation can do more damage than good. But you can speak to what you do know. You know that children need their caregivers. We can all use our knowledge of human development, attachment and trauma to explain to anyone why separation of children and families is harmful. That said, when commenting on systems, policies, and procedures, tread with caution. We should have a clear understanding of those systems and/or articulate the limits of our knowledge.

As social workers, we need to support the organizations doing the hard work on the front lines because in most cases, these organizations are trying desperately to provide humanitarian relief. At this time, there is not one agency directing traffic. Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services and the United Conference of Catholic Bishops are coordinating agencies dedicated by the federal government, and these agencies have wide networks of non-profits and faith-based organizations helping them to serve families in localities. If you want to help, approach shelters and non-profits and ask how. Schools might also coordinate groups of students to volunteer and first-hand what it's like working along the border for a week. As social workers, we should also be doing critical cross-disciplinary work by partnering with law schools and legal clinics. We have unique skills that can assist in helping clients learn to tell their stories for their legal cases while also educating them about trauma. A

worthy use of your time might be to volunteer at an immigration clinic to help attorneys with their assessments and with their clients' many needs that attorneys struggle to meet.

Finally, we need to think beyond this immediate crisis, and start strategizing within academia, organizing bodies and professional associations to intentionally increase expertise in immigration in social work. As academics, we could easily make this happen by designing more curriculum and training opportunities for social workers in immigration issues. Many resources already exist, as a small national group of experts have been working on these issues for over a decade. The Center on Immigration and Child Welfare website serves as a hub for all sorts of research, policy, and practice resources on these issues, and is updated bi-weekly (<http://www.cimmcw.org>). We also need to be creating more opportunities to recruit and support bilingual and bicultural students into our programs to develop expertise in working with immigrant and refugee families. Although employment needs for immigrant-serving non-profits somewhat depends on migratory flows, social work schools should be establishing relationships and staying connected with immigrant advocacy organizations, legal services organizations, and shelters that can keep us up to date on needs, so that we can be at the table and use our organizing, assessment, and casework skills when crisis hits.

As researchers, part of the ongoing challenge is that there is very little funding support to conduct research in immigration and child welfare. Within our discipline, the use of secondary data on racial and ethnic disparities is common, but there does not seem to be enough of us who are willing to get our hands dirty, organize advocacy campaigns, work on the front lines, and do the community-based participatory research without funding. Despite the demands of our institutions, we are not just academics and researchers. We are social workers, and we need to start leading the charge in this humanitarian crisis.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Neither author declares that she has a conflict of interest.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.