

Detention of fathers in the immigration system

Families routinely split by the immigration detention and enforced removal of foreign national fathers

Dr Melanie Griffiths and Candice Morgan, University of Bristol

About the research

Immigration enforcement affects people beyond the individuals directly targeted. Couples and families are routinely split by the immigration detention of a family member, potentially permanently when it results in removal from the UK. Both detained and non-detained family members find this profoundly distressing, with significant, sometimes irreversible psycho-emotional and financial harm to individuals, families and relationships. Although the emotional damage suffered by detained men tends to be overlooked, men make up 85% of the 28,000 people held in British Immigration Removal Centres (IRC) each year and 90% of the 12,000 forcibly removed. A large number have dependants in the UK, including British citizens.

Research examined the intersection of immigration enforcement and family life for couples consisting of migrant men with precarious or irregular immigration status, and their British or EEA-national partners. Half the couples had experienced separation through detention, sometimes for several years. There is no time limit to detention in the UK.



Policy implications

- **Detention decisions:**
 - » Home Office (HO) caseowners must demonstrate meaningful assessment of potential damage to family units in their decisions to detain (and re-detain) individuals.
 - » Community-based alternatives to detention should be the norm.
 - » There should be a maximum time limit of 28 days detention.
 - » Social Services should be informed of separations. Their monitoring of children should feed into HO decision-making on initial and continuing detention.
- **Family contact:**
 - » Individuals should be detained as close as possible to their families.
 - » The HO should establish a Family Fund to reimburse visit travel costs.
 - » The HO should contractually oblige detention providers to support detainees maintain relationships, including through family-friendly visit days and ample visiting options outside work/school hours.
 - » Government should commission pilots of good practice from prisons, including story-recording schemes and Home Leave opportunities enabling attendance of key family events.
- **Communications technology:** All IRCs must assure adequate mobile phone coverage. Social media and video chat programs such as Skype should be accessible.
- **Re-integration:** The HO should house individuals released from detention with, or close to, their families.

Key findings

- **Harm:** Separation is deeply distressing for detainees and their families. Repeat and lengthy detentions and the absence of a time limit cause particular harm. Separated children develop emotional, behavioural and educational problems, including anxiety, depression and attachment difficulties.
- **Location:** Detention decisions are not made with families in mind. Individuals may be detained far from families, repeatedly re-detained or transferred between IRCs without notice or explanation.
- **Relationships:** Little policy exists supporting detainees to maintain familial relationships, especially compared to prisoner provision. Visits are limited by travel costs and distance. Visit halls are not private or child-friendly, with seating rules that can limit play and intimacy.
- **Post-detention:** Deportation often results in permanent separation. But even those released may continue to experience separation, due to distant housing, stringent tagging or reporting conditions, prohibition against work and damaged mental health.



- **Tension:** The HO's emphasis on removals creates an institutional reluctance to strengthen or sometimes even acknowledge family life, reflecting its potential role in challenging removal.
- **Biases:** Foreign national men's emotional and private lives are commonly undervalued, or mistrusted as 'opportunistic'.

Detainees and their families find separation profoundly distressing. 85% of detainees are men and many have dependants in the UK.

Further information

Project webpage: www.bristol.ac.uk/ethnicity/projects/deportability-and-the-family/

AVID (for signposting to IRC visitor groups): www.aviddetention.org.uk/

Detention Action (community-based alternatives to detention pilot): <http://detentionaction.org.uk/>

Contact the researchers

Dr Melanie Griffiths (University of Bristol) melanie.griffiths@bristol.ac.uk

Candice Morgan (University of Bristol) candice.morgan@bristol.ac.uk