HOME | NEWS

Scientists Say DNA Can Reunite Separated Migrant Families

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Detained children within a caged area at the U.S. border in McAllen, Texas. | U.S. Customs and Border Control

Nearly three years after the Trump administration's "Zero Tolerance" policy went into effect in 2018, more than 445 children remain separated from their families, largely due to insufficient

identifying records and U.S. immigration officials' failure to plan, track and reunite separated families.

In a Perspective published in the May 28 issue of *Science*, lead author Elizabeth Barnert, professor of pediatrics at University of California, Los Angeles, and an interdisciplinary group of physicians, scientists and human rights advocates propose a DNA-led framework for safely and ethically reunifying the hundreds of migrant families forcibly separated at the U.S. border.

Given the Biden Administration's recent executive order to end the Zero Tolerance policy and expressed commitment to reunite migrant children separated from their families by previous administrations, the authors argue that a well-defined, replicable, and sustainable framework to collect and manage sensitive DNA data is urgently needed.

This call to action is particularly timely considering the upcoming release of the Biden Administration's Family Reunification Task Force's initial report, due on June 2.

"As far as we know, the Task Force is not preparing any implementation of DNA data, although it is very likely to be considered as a tool, as it was in 2018," said co-author Sarah Katsanis, research assistant professor at Lurie Children's Hospital and Northwestern University.

"It has been our hope for three years that DNA would not be necessary for the reunification of the 400-plus children still disconnected from their families — that they would be reunited as soon as possible." However, she added, this unfortunately has not been the case.

To address this need, Barnert, Katsanis and international collaborators from the United States, Latin America and Europe — the DNA Bridge consortium — are seeking to develop a scientific, DNA-led approach that adopts existing tools and infrastructure to support the swift reunification of parents and children.

"It is our new hope that our approach will be informative for the Biden administration and the advocacy organizations working to reunify migrant children," said Katsanis.

LINGERING IMPACTS OF SEPARATION

Forced family separation — whether through armed conflict, repressive regimes, natural disasters, or draconian immigration policies — is traumatic for children and parents and can have long-lasting impacts on their health and well-being.

A growing number of studies have reported clinically significant symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress and post-traumatic stress disorder in separated children and caregivers, and a number of pediatricians and advocacy groups have documented sub-standard living conditions and limited access to medical care in immigration detention facilities operated by the United States. What's more, other studies indicate that exposure to traumatic and adverse experiences early in life is also linked to a number of physical and developmental consequences, including reduced longevity.

Routine separations of undocumented migrant families at the U.S. border have occurred since 2017, largely driven by previous administrations' immigration policies. As a result, hundreds of

children remain separated from their parents — many of whom were younger than 10 years old when separated. In some cases, their parents were deported, making reunification a significant challenge.

GLOBAL PROTOCOL FOR REUNIFICATION

Katsanis hopes that, eventually, the group will expand to represent other nations around the world — anywhere that children are separated from their families.

While protocols and standards already exist for using DNA-based strategies to identify the deceased safely and ethically, following a fatal plane crash or natural disaster for example, a global protocol for using DNA to reunite the living has yet to be established.

According to Katsanis, similar infrastructure could be leveraged to manage sensitive DNA.

"The International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) has the infrastructure, legal protections, scientific capabilities and excellent track record for managing sensitive DNA samples in human rights cases," said Katsanis.

Because the data surrounding separations — DNA, names, locations — could be used to exploit families for alternative purposes by governments or law enforcement, Katsanis says it is important that any approach be managed outside of government control.

According to Katsanis, the ICMP is currently the only intergovernmental organization with the scientific and data protection strategies to manage anonymous data as well as the protected legal status, ensuring that it cannot be required to release information to any governments.

Since migration often involves multiple nations, a centralized, international database is critical.

"If governments or parties do not cooperate in building this system, then this will not work. The science, the tools and the privacy protections do exist — political will is what is needed," said Katsanis.

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