

Children ‘disappeared’ at the United States/Mexico border: a symptom with consequences for the United States

Gerald Gray^{1,2,3*}

¹MSW, MPH Clinical Social Worker, Co-Director, Institute for Redress & Recovery,, Santa Clara University School of Law, ²Center for Justice and Accountability, ³Survivors International, San Francisco, CA, United States

*Editor’s Note: Since this article was written a judge has ordered that the children must be reunited with their parents, however, as of going to press, few children have been returned and some children, it appears, are ‘lost’ in the system.

Abstract

‘Disappearing’ people as an act of torture has an ordinary language meaning, such that the United Nations could describe it and various torture treatment centres that address it as torture. The present United States policy of separating families into different prisons at its border with Mexico results in many such disappearances, and therefore is torture of both children and the families they are separated from. This article follows the United Nations description.

Keywords: Children, disappearance, torture, United States border family separation, United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement prisons

INTRODUCTION

Since 1990, I have worked with refugee survivors of torture from many countries. My work on this issue has been as psychotherapist, social worker, founder and administrator of clinics, and presently as a volunteer on the United States (U.S.)/Mexico border with a border watch, community group. I have joined the Hope Border Institute partly because of my recognition of the torture of children and parents at the hands of the U.S. government.

The Hope Border Institute released a well-documented professional paper called ‘*Sealing the Border*’ in January of this year (Hope Border Institute, 2018), which reveals the progress of the present U.S. Administration to do just that. While I have written elsewhere (Gray, 2018) about this issue, for those not familiar with the government’s attempt to exclude people of colour from entering the U.S., or to prevent those already citizens from voting, I may just remark here that the attempt is thoroughgoing and constant and has dangerous consequences for many. The current president’s election campaign, and his remarks since election, have been overtly racist in an effort to appeal to a white populace faced with the well-reported fact that in about 25 years people of colour will equal the number of whites in the country (Colby & Ortman, 2014).

For those attempting to escape danger or poverty in the south, the Wall is being built already as a physical fence and is shown on U.S. television, but also administratively at legal entry points. El Paso in Texas is one of those points and appears to be part of an experiment, probably selected because of its remoteness, to close the border while giving the appearance of being open.

TORTURE BY ‘DISAPPEARANCE’

Torture by ‘*disappearing*’ people is well-known in Latin America (Gandsman, 2008; Munczek & Tuber, 1999). However, it is appearing now on the U.S. side of the border with Mexico, not yet noticed in the U.S. – perhaps in part because this country has not signed onto the United Nations International Convention for Protection of all People from Enforced Disappearance (UN General Assembly, 61st session, 2006). The convention definition requires both that those disappeared have whereabouts unknown, and that the kidnappers have no record of those taken (Convention Articles 1, 2, 8, 9, 10). Both conditions hold that in the case of the many children disappeared at the U.S.

Address for correspondence: Dr. Gerald Gray, PO Box 8053, Berkeley, CA 94707, United States.
E-mail: ggraycal@gmail.com

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

For reprints contact: reprints@medknow.com

How to cite this article: Gray, G. (2018). Children ‘disappeared’ at the United States/Mexico border: a symptom with consequences for the United States. *Intervention*, 16(2),66-68.

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:
www.interventionjournal.org

DOI:
10.4103/INTV.INTV_48_18

southern border, and while neighbours in the south have that experience, it is only now appearing north of the border – inside the U.S. (Grover, 2014; Nixon, 2018). Equally important, however, these disappearances have not been noticed because they have been concealed even while public, through desert isolation, language and psychology.

As readers of this journal must know, 'torture' is the intrusion of great pain for control by one party over another, for no benefit to the tortured – we are not here talking about a hospital stay. And 'disappearing' is the capture and hiding of one or more person from significant others – family or otherwise – without the latter knowing where the disappeared have gone, if they are alive, how they are, or when – if ever – they might be reunited. It has been used, for instance, as a weapon of war, of extortion or of control – in short, of control to force certain action or inaction (Dewhurst & Kapur, 2015).

CHILDREN SEPARATED FROM PARENTS

Among a number of anti-refugee practices, it has been a publicly announced U.S. government immigration policy that families bringing children to legal crossing sections will be imprisoned (U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, 2018). Under previous federal administrations, refugees were free to await the outcome of their application inside the U.S. Under the present administration, adults are made to wait in prison as long as it takes for them to give up and return to their countries of origin – and danger, while children are imprisoned elsewhere. The children are thus used as tools to increase pressure on the adults who brought them (Gray, 2018; Hope Border Institute, 2018).

In this period of months of separation, the public's attention so far has been focused through wording of the issue such as from President Trump or other members of his administration; 'if they don't want their children taken from them, they shouldn't bring them. It's the parents' fault'. By framing administrative action in this way, the public's attention is drawn to the adults and the experience of the children is ignored. Disappearance is an act of torture and there are two sets of victims here; children into one prison, parents or other caretakers into another. Parents may sometimes have an approximate record of where their children are, but surely most children cannot reasonably be said to have or understand a record of where their parents are, and immigration authorities have stated they have no idea where more than 1500 children are (Nixon, 2018).

The children's experience of torture through disappearance is much harder on them and of longer duration, even if reunion is ever achieved. Some differences: the children lose those who have protected them, they are less apt than parents to know the guards' language, they are less apt to know what is happening, how to protect themselves in prison, where they are in the country and who to trust. And so, we can understand any of the 24 post-traumatic stress symptoms and the deep depression kidnapped and isolated children experience in being imprisoned. Among the symptoms: distrust of adults, crying for long periods, withdrawal

from others, eating problems, lack of appetite leading to weight loss, nightmares, increased aggression, physical pain and self-harm (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, DSM-V, p. 277; Gandsman, 2008; Munczek & Tuber, 1999).

UNACKNOWLEDGED AS TORTURE

The fact that decent people in the U.S. do not understand they are looking at a form of torture is evident in the fact that their objections to treatment of families at the border almost uniformly condemn the practice with moral words such as 'inhumane', rather than with a more specific word such as 'torture'. 'Disappearing', as one type of torture, has a clearer definition and range of resulting behaviours that can be named, with symptoms that occur in survivors (Munczek & Tuber, 1999; UN General Assembly, 61st session, 2006). Disappearing people is indeed inhumane, but precisely because it is torture.

Nonetheless, disappearing people, especially children on a large scale, is new. That the U.S. government does not want it revealed that it is torturing is not new; its behaviour is disguised in the fact and the term 'black sites', where it tortures prisoners in other countries rather than on U.S. soil; or further wordsmithing, such as calling asphyxiation 'waterboarding' and prisoners are called 'detainees' held in 'detention centres', rather than prisoners in prisons. Now we have 'family separation' without reference to psychological research on effects known to this author and subtly ignoring those effects on children, as if whatever happens to the children is not where we should be focussing attention.

If we do not look for these uses of language embedded in government behaviour, we risk gradually being eased in the direction of being bystanders. Moreover, we can expect further attempts at torture if the torture of children, of all things, passes by. A great deal is at stake for this administration, which clearly believes that it will lose control of the country because its supporters will be outnumbered by poor people of colour (Colby & Ortman, 2014).

And at the same time, there are internal parallel state (provincial) efforts encouraged by the administration at voter suppression of people of colour (Badger, 2013; Brennan Center for Justice, 2017; Davis, 2016).

CONSEQUENCES

The present border policy of imprisoning children and parents in the desert parts of the U.S., remote from the rest of the country, of building new prisons there that now are mentioned in the media, of misnaming 'disappearing' people as 'family separation', these and other moves can grow in the U.S. a country of bystanders, of gradually accepting, under one name or another, the loss of human rights. This recalls the issue of bystanders in Germany in the Second World War (Barnett, 1999). So, the watch on the border becomes very important, for if a government can torture children, surely it will go on to act against others: journalists, human rights activists, teachers, health workers – and that action can lead

to impoverishment, imprisonment, even to disappearance. Somewhere along the line of such losses, we have to remember the fate, in these same deserts, of 110,000 Japanese American citizens imprisoned without trial during World War II (Inada, Wakida, & Hohri, 2000; Lange, Gordon, & Okihiro, 2008). And what of Mexico, what of the other side of the border? The plan for the wall along the border is revealed by the apparent experiment in El Paso: there will be a physical wall between each urban legal entry point like El Paso, but the legal entry points will only be for U.S. public reassurance, while in fact there will be an administrative prison wall at these points, so neither political asylum nor immigration will exist. The field director who designed this in remote El Paso, Corey Price, has been promoted in Washington, DC, by the Department of Homeland Security to be assistant director of its Enforcement and Removal Operations for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Hope Border Institute, 2018).

Mexico will be trapped inside itself, with no way out of its boundaries to a dangerous south nor to an imprisoning north. It will become what, in the U.S., has been called an Indian reservation – unless those watching human rights at the border succeed in making government behaviour public, thus giving the public an educated choice about action. This is not impossible – there have been worse times than these so far. This is what intervention is for, such as our intervention here and now.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5*. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association. p. 277.
- Badger, E. (2013, June 28). *12 very real voter-tactics experts now worry will come back*. *City Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2013/06/12-very-real-voter-suppression-tactics-experts-now-worry-will-come-back/6057/>
- Barnett, V. (1999). *Bystanders: Conscience and complicity during the Holocaust*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Brennan Center for Justice. (2017). *Voting laws roundup 2017—Overview of legislation to restrict voting access*. Retrieved from <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/voting-laws-roundup-2017>
- Colby, S.L., & Ortman, J.M. (2014). *Projections of the size and composition of the U.S. population: 2014 to 2060, Current Population Reports*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. 25-1143. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>
- Davis, R. (2016, October 31). *8 voter suppression tactics to look out for on election day*. *Essence*. Retrieved from <https://www.essence.com/news/politics/election-day-voter-suppression-tactics>
- Dewhurst, P., & Kapur, A. (2015). *The disappeared and invisible – Revealing the enduring impact of enforced disappearance on women*. New York, NY: International Center for Transitional Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Global-Gender-Disappearances-2015.pdf>
- Gandsman, A. (2008). *Reclaiming the past: The search for the kidnapped children of Argentina's disappeared* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/21787221/Reclaiming_the_Past_the_search_for_the_kidnapped_children_of_Argentinas_disappeared
- Gray, G. (2018). Sealing the border: US refuses asylum torture survivors. *Torture*, 28(1), 128-129. Retrieved from <https://irct.org/publications/torture-journal/141>
- Grover, S. (2014). *Chapter 5: The enforced disappearance of children as torture*. In *The torture of children during armed conflicts – The ICC's failure to prosecute and the negation of children's human dignity*. Berlin, Germany: Springer. 127-153.
- Hope Border Institute. (2018). *Sealing the border the criminalization of asylum seekers in the Trump era*. El Paso: Hope Border Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.hopeborder.org/sealing-the-border>
- Inada, L. F., Wakida, P., & Hohri, W. M., California Historical Society. (2000). *Only what we could carry: The Japanese American internment experience*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books.
- Lange, D., Gordon, L., & Okihiro, G. Y. (2008). *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the censored images of Japanese American internment*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Munczek, D., & Tuber, S. (1999). Political repression and its psychological effects on Honduran children. *Social Science & Medicine*, 47, 1699-1713. doi:10.1016/S0277-9536(98)00252-4
- Nixon, R. (2018, April 26). *Federal agencies lost track of nearly 1, 500 migrant children placed with sponsors*. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/us/politics/migrant-children-missing.html>
- UN General Assembly (61st session: 2006–2007). (2006). *International convention for the protection of all persons from enforced disappearance: Resolution*. New York: UN. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CED/Pages/ConventionCED.aspx>
- U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Public Affairs. (2018, May 7). *Attorney general sessions delivers remarks to the association of state criminal investigative agencies (Remarks as prepared for delivery.)* Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-sessions-delivers-remarks-association-state-criminal-investigative>