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Under Siege: The Disturbing Impact of Immigration Enforcement on the Nation's Schools

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Immigration Initiative
AT HARVARD

ISSUE BRIEF SERIES

The IIH supports the production and dissemination of rigorous, non-partisan, and non-ideological research on immigration issues across a broad diversity of disciplines and perspectives, and the application of this research to local, regional, and national policy issues.

KEY FACTS

- As of 2017, there were an estimated 600,000 children and youth under the age of 18 who were undocumented. However, an additional 4.5 million children are U.S. citizens with at least one parent who has unauthorized legal status.
- It is estimated that 88% of the children of immigrants are, in fact, born in the U.S. and have U.S. citizenship.
- Schools affected by immigration enforcement are not able to offer an equitable education to all of their students.

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Under Siege: The Disturbing Impact of Immigration Enforcement on the Nation's Schools

Jongyeon Joy Ee, *Loyola Marymount University*
Patricia Gándara, *University of California, Los Angeles*
Immigration Initiative at Harvard Policy Brief 2.



Background

A great deal has been written recently on the topic of immigration enforcement and its impact on families and communities. The outcry over family separations at the border was frontpage news for weeks in the early summer of 2018. But little attention has been focused on how extensive the effects are or how they are experienced by the schools that enroll immigrant students.

Immigration was a central pillar of Donald Trump's campaign for the presidency. In an effort to send a message to would-be immigrants, as well as those already here, he has ordered random raids and arrests of people who have lived here peacefully for years, and even decades. The current administration's immigration enforcement makes no distinction between someone with a felony conviction, and someone who has simply committed the crime of crossing the border without documentation).¹ Thus, when in July of 2017 a man who had lived in the Los Angeles area for more than 20 years and raised his U.S. born children there was arrested as he dropped off one of his daughters for school, it sent shock waves through the immigrant community. Now, seemingly, no one and no place is safe. In this context, the present study sought to answer the following questions:²

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“ Current immigration policies have made many ... students feel unwelcome and thrust them into the center of an excruciatingly difficult situation. ”

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- How do teachers, counselors, administrators and other school personnel perceive the effects of the new immigration enforcement regime?
- To what degree do the effects of immigration enforcement vary by region and by urbanicity (urban vs. suburban schools)?
- To what extent is impact of immigration enforcement associated with school characteristics, including student demographics and school type (elementary, elementary/secondary, and secondary schools)?
- Is immigration enforcement affecting students who are not the targets of enforcement activity?

Immigration Context in American Public Schools

It is important to note that the schools that serve the poorest children in the nation are also the most likely to enroll immigrant students.³ These are largely Title I schools that have struggled the most to narrow achievement gaps. Therefore, some would argue that the immigration enforcement regime places an unreasonable additional burden on these schools. It is also important to note that although referred to as “immigrant students,” it is estimated that 88% of the children of immigrants are, in fact, born in the United States and have U.S. citizenship.⁴ This means they possess all the rights and privileges of all citizens regardless of their parents’ immigration status. Moreover, the small percentage of students who are foreign-born also have the right to a free and equal public education through high school, guaranteed by the Plyler v Doe Supreme Court decision in 1982, which found that “promoting the creation and perpetuation of a subclass of illiterates within our

boundaries” did not serve the interests of the “children, the state or the nation.” Yet current immigration policies have made many of these students feel unwelcome and thrust them into the center of an excruciatingly difficult situation.

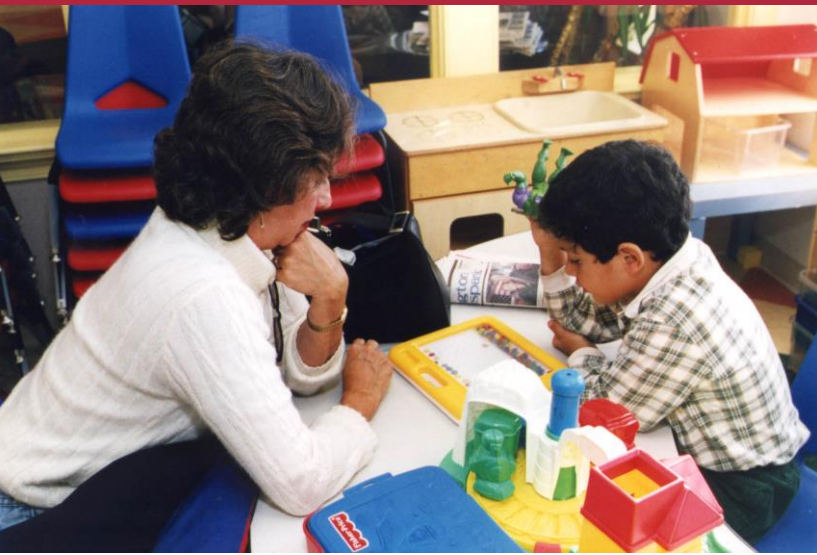
As of 2017, there were an estimated 600,000 children and youth under the age of 18 who were undocumented.⁵ However, an additional 4.5 million U.S. citizen children have at least one parent who is unauthorized. Thus, more than 5 million children are at risk of being directly affected by immigration enforcement policies. Unauthorized immigrants are of all nationalities, but the majority is Latino who have been the focus of apprehensions and deportations. Moreover, as once the Latino population was concentrated in a few areas of the United States, today the greatest growth in the Latino population is in the Southeast to Midwest where they reside alongside immigrants and refugees from all over the world.⁶ Therefore, when we decided to study the impact of immigration enforcement on the nation’s schools, we considered it important to assess the impact on all regions of the U.S.



The Data and Sample

The survey was administered twice; first between late October 2017 and mid-January 2018, and then again between August 2018 and September 2018 through an online survey tool. The survey was completed by over 3,600 educators from 24 districts and two educator networks with more than 760 schools in 13 states across the nation. In selecting districts to invite, we were first guided by our concern to have representation from all

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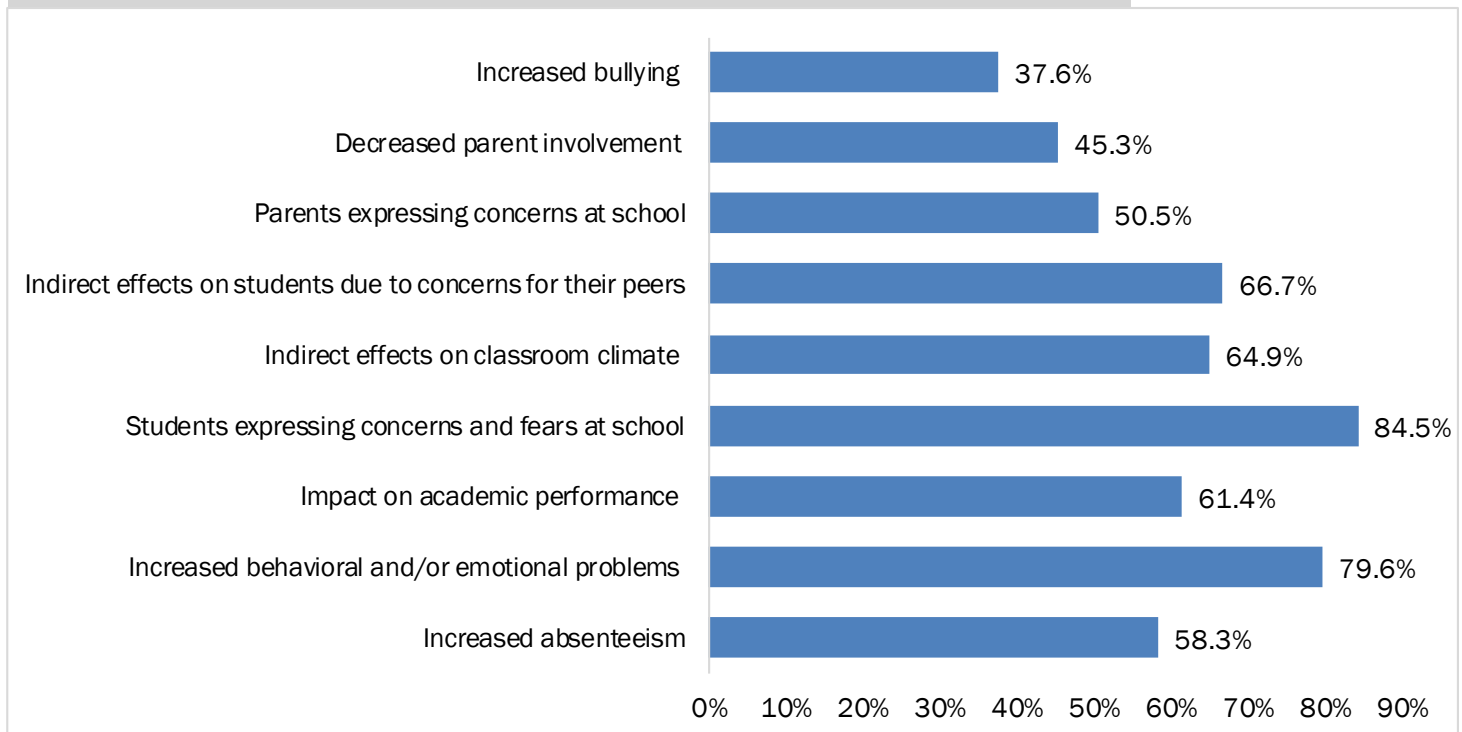
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four U.S. census regions (West, Midwest, Northeast and South). We also wanted representation from both elementary and secondary schools, and designed data collection with the goal of one-third secondary and two-thirds elementary, since there are many more elementary schools and they have fewer educators. We were also interested in knowing how responses might vary by percent of immigrant students in the school. With this in mind, we used a percentage of Hispanic students as a proxy⁷ for “immigrant students,” as schools do not collect information on families’ immigrant status.

Guided by the above, we provided a suggested list of schools to each district with proportional allocation. Many districts followed the plan offered, but some wanted to include schools that they felt were most heavily impacted by immigration. Consequently, about half of the districts used our suggested sampling, and about half chose to sample from the schools that they thought would be of greatest interest. This resulted in a heavy representation from Title I (low-income) schools (90.3%). In terms of school level, we received responses from a broad representation of schools: 38% of the respondents were from elementary schools; 12% from Pre-K-8 or K-12; and 50% from secondary schools, which included both middle and high schools. The survey was entirely anonymous and was intentionally brief to help ensure that respondents would complete it. Specifically, the survey examined educators’ impression of the impact of immigration enforcement on students and parents regarding the following topics:

1. Absenteeism
2. Behavioral/emotional problems
3. Academic performance
4. Students’ overt expression of concerns and fears at school
5. Indirect effects on classroom climate
6. Indirect effects on peers
7. Parents’ expression of concerns
8. Parental involvement
9. Bullying

Figure 1: Percentage of Educators Who Observed the Immigration Enforcement Impact by Topic



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“ The empty seats are a reminder to everyone in the class that some of their classmates are missing . ”

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For these questions, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they observed a specific behavior as a problem on a 5-point scale with 1 being “no” and 5 being “extensive.”

Given that responses are inherently subjective and individual, it is impossible to determine to what extent responses are “accurate” in any objective sense, or how perceptions of the same event may differ among individuals. For this reason, in the discussion of the descriptive statistics we group responses according to those who reported any impact (2-5 on the scale), and those who reported a large impact (4-5). In one open-ended question, respondents were able to share specific concerns that students in their school addressed. The survey also investigated educators’ responses to the overall immigration enforcement activities, such as the necessity to discuss issues with the community, and individual- and school-level attempts to respond to immigration issues.

Disturbing Impact of Enforcement on the Nation’s Schools

Almost 85% of respondents reported observing students’ overt expressions of fear of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) intervention in their lives, with nearly 44% saying this was “extensive.” Such concerns stood out particularly in urban schools. This paints a picture of relatively pervasive fear and concern in the schools we surveyed, and was consistent across regions. Nearly as many respondents reported observing emotional and behavioral problems among their immigrant students (79.6%) that many described as interfering with students’ ability to attend to lessons. Moreover, very many high school educators mentioned their best students giving up on the idea of going to college, and reducing their commitment to school, even quitting school to get a job to help family because their futures had become so uncertain. It must be remembered that these are overwhelmingly U.S. citizen students. Nearly one-third (31.5%) of respondents

reported that these emotional responses were extensive.

There was considerable variation among the regions with respect to declining achievement. In both the Northeast and the South, more than two-thirds of respondents reported observing a drop in achievement among their students. Another very tangible way in which all students are affected by this enforcement regime is in the increase in student absenteeism. If students do not come to school they cannot learn. If they are absent for days or weeks at a time, they fall so far behind they often cannot catch up, become demoralized and even quit school.

Absences also affect the schools in many ways. Schools lose funding and resources, they find it impossible to improve their test scores and narrow achievement gaps, and are labeled as failing schools, creating a vicious cycle of underachievement. Teacher assignments are disrupted and teachers can lose their job when a class becomes too small to sustain, and the empty seats are a reminder to everyone in the class that some of their classmates are missing. Finally, two-thirds of respondents reported indirect effects on other students of having peers threatened by immigration enforcement.



Like absenteeism, these threats appear to be affecting all the students in a classroom as peers worry about the fate of their friends and classmates. The overall picture is one of schools serving immigrant students under siege.

A series of in-depth analyses also show that educators in Title I schools with more English Learners enrolled were more likely to express increasing concerns about enforcement activities. This unsurprising result reflects the incredibly arduous reality of the nation’s most challenging schools in which educators already face multiple layers of demanding conditions other than

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immigration issues, which will also exacerbate the chronic achievement gap. Additionally, educators in schools with more white students enrolled tended to report higher levels of impact of immigration activities. Finally, educators working with high school students were more likely to report salient impact of immigration issues than their counterparts in elementary schools. Yet, this result requires careful interpretation. Some parents may not share their concerns with their young children so as not to frighten them. Or, young students may have not developed sufficient verbal skill to express their emotions;⁸ therefore, the mental and emotional distress they are actually experiencing might not appear evident to many educators.



Perhaps the most ironic finding was that there was a clear consensus across educator roles and regions that schools need to reach out to their communities with information and support for immigrant students' families. More than 88% reported this need, but relatively few had done so, either individually or at a school-wide level. It was clear that most people in the schools simply didn't know what to do, and many mentioned the need for good legal advice. Urban school educators, in particular, reported needing such advice and support more urgently than did their suburban counterparts.

on the part of students has become a feature of these mostly Title I schools. All students experience the disappearing classmates, the empty desks, and the behavioral responses of those students whose families are being affected. Teachers and administrators must also respond to the fears among both parents and students and the disruption in teaching and learning that this entails. This was evident in the overwhelming belief by almost all educators that the schools must address these concerns with their community.

Classrooms as a whole are being affected by the immigration enforcement as teachers struggle to teach in an atmosphere of stress and fear. Many hundreds of educators reported that their immigrant students found it nearly impossible to concentrate on instruction as they worried about their parents or other family members being taken away while the student was at school.

This presents a huge challenge for teachers who are trying to teach students whose attention is elsewhere, and still reach all of the students in the class. It is impossible to believe that instruction is not affected by this. And many educators confirmed this in follow-up interviews that are reported elsewhere.

Finally, we questioned if there was evidence that these schools were at risk of not being able to offer an equitable education to all of their students. As we have noted, the schools these students attend are overwhelmingly the least resourced, most challenged (Title I) public schools. Recent research⁹ shows that in spite of receiving additional Title I federal funds, in state after state they actually have less funding than middle class schools to meet the needs of students in poverty.

“ Classrooms as a whole are being affected by the immigration enforcement as teachers struggle to teach in an atmosphere of stress and fear. ”

Conclusion

Our data allow us to conclude that immigration enforcement is affecting all students—both those from families that are targeted by these policies as well as those that are not—because the overt expression of fear

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With fewer counselors and health professionals, fewer parents with social capital, and less ability to mount specific programs, these schools struggle disproportionately to also meet the urgent needs of students and families targeted by immigration enforcement. Thus, we must conclude that under these circumstances it is indeed the case that most of these Title I schools are simply not able to provide an equitable education to their students.

Actions Required: A Call for Policy Discussion

It is critical that policymakers understand that these students are overwhelmingly U.S. citizens—our children—but as long as their parents are targets of enforcement, much of the burden of these policies will fall on the children. And to the extent that they are not able to access an equitable education—or even any education at all—their futures and their communities' futures are at risk.

The Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) program was introduced by President Obama in 2014 to address this problem. It would have operated much like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), providing protection from deportation and work authorization for a defined period. However, the federal courts decided it was not within the power of the President to establish the program.

As it stands now, Congress must act to create such a program, or something like it, that can protect these students. We also urge that district- and state-level support be available to offer essential and imminent resources to schools to help them outreach to families impacted by the increasing immigration enforcement activities, and to provide counseling to students and educators caught in this vise. Until then, millions of low-income children and children of immigrants will not be able to access an equitable education, and their schools will be blamed. Our study suggests that these policies are misguided, poorly reasoned, and extremely harmful to millions of students. It also suggests that the harm caused will reverberate into other sectors of the society. To avoid such harm in the future, immigration policy should be informed by child and education policy.

¹ The Economist (2017, December 17). Rhetoric and reality. <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2017/12/14/donald-trump-is-deporting-fewer-people-than-barack-obama-did>

² This policy brief is based on a research article entitled “The Impact of Immigration Enforcement on the Nation’s School” published in July 2019 in the American Educational Research Journal. Please refer to the original research article for more details about this study: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219862998>

³ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Our nation's English learners: What are their characteristics? Retrieved from: <https://www.ed.gov/datastory/el-characteristics/index.html>; Kirby, S. N., Naftel, S., Berends, M., & McCombs, J. S. (2002). The same high standards for migrant students: Holding Title I schools accountable. Volume I: Title I Schools Serving Migrant Students: Recent Evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Schools. (Doc. #2002-15). U. S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/title1-accountable/exec-sum.doc>

⁴ MPI (Migration Policy Institute) (2018). Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Data. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca-profiles>

⁵ MPI (Migration Policy Institute) (2018). Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Data. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca-profiles>

⁶ Gándara, P., and Mordechay, K. (2017). Demographic change and the new (and not so new) challenges for Latino education. *The Educational Forum*, 81(2), 148–159. DOI: 10.1080/00131725.2017.1280755

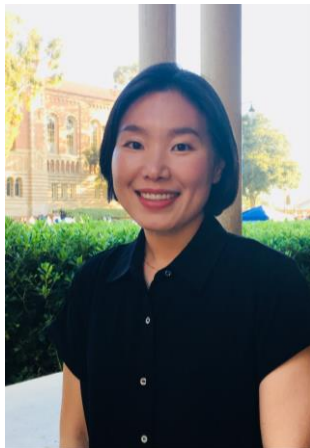
⁷ Group 1: % Hispanic <20; Group 2: 20 ≤ % Hispanic <50; and Group 3: % Hispanics ≥ 50

⁸ Saarni, C. (1999). *The Development of Emotional Competence*. The Guilford Series on Social and Emotional Development. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

⁹ Stadler, Z. (2014) *Resource Inequality: Shortchanging Students*, Washington D.C.: EdBuild. <https://edbuild.org/content/resource-inequality-2014/shortchanging-students.pdf>

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Jongyeon Joy Ee is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning, School of Education at Loyola Marymount University. Her research is concerned with developing policies that promote equitable educational opportunities for emergent bilingual students, and immigrant students. Her research also explores varying patterns, and trends of school segregation in different contexts.

Patricia Gándara is Research Professor and Co-Director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. She is an elected Fellow of the American Educational Research Association and the National Academy of Education. Her most recent books are *The Bilingual Advantage: Language, Literacy and the US Labor Market* (with R. Callahan) and the forthcoming *The Students We Share: Preparing US and Mexican Teachers for Our Transnational Future* (with B. Jensen).

How to cite:

Ee, J. and Gándara, P. (2020) "Under Siege: The Disturbing Impact of Immigration Enforcement on the Nation's Schools," *Immigration Initiative at Harvard Issue Brief Series no. 2*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University.

This issue brief is also available in Spanish.

THE MISSION OF THE UCLA CIVIL RIGHTS PROJECT

The UCLA Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles' objective is to create a new generation of research in social science and law, on the critical issues of civil rights and equal opportunity for racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Our work contributes to desegregation efforts, reduction in discrimination in special education and racial disparities in school suspensions, and it documents inequality in college access, language policy, high school graduation, and immigration policy, among many other aspects of civil rights. We are asked often by federal, state and local officials as well as by leading civil rights groups and other advocates, to share our research documenting the impacts of education and other policies on underrepresented students.

Although a considerable amount has been written about the plight of immigrant and refugee families under the current administration's aggressive immigration enforcement policies, little was known before our study about the specific impacts these policies were having on the nation's schools. This study sought to understand and bring awareness to the effects that aggressive immigration policy has on millions of students – the majority U.S. citizens – and their school communities. We believed it critical to speak out on these unconscionable policies harming all students and educators in low income schools serving immigrant populations, thereby compromising students' constitutional right to an equal education.

Website: www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu

ABOUT IIH

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.



Immigration Initiative
AT HARVARD

Also in this series:

Shonkoff, J.P. (2019) “Toxic Stress: Issue Brief on Family Separation and Child Detention,” Immigration Initiative at Harvard Issue Brief Series no. 1, Cambridge MA: Harvard University. Available at: <https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/toxic-stress-issue-brief-family-separation-and-child-detention>



Toxic Stress: Issue Brief on Family Separation and Child Detention

Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
Immigration Initiative at Harvard Policy Brief 1.



Photo courtesy of Leiva Jusorova

Background

The separation of children from their parents and their prolonged detention for an indefinite period of time raise profound concerns that transcend partisan politics and demand immediate resolution. Forcibly separating children from their parents is like setting a house on fire. Preventing rapid reunification is like blocking the first responders from doing their job. And subjecting children to prolonged detention (even with their parents) is like dripping gasoline on smoldering embers that will keep the fire going.

When children are separated abruptly from their families and detained in institutional settings, the high likelihood of serious consequences is not difficult for the average person to comprehend. Pediatricians, mental health clinicians, child welfare experts, and educators bring a deeper perspective based on their knowledge of both the immediate and lifelong effects of childhood trauma. And above and beyond the distress that anyone can see “on the outside,” scientists understand that significant adversity triggers a massive biological response “inside” the child, which remains activated until a sense of safety and security is restored. This biological response is known as “toxic stress” and the most potent antioxidant is the protection provided by the reliable availability of a nurturing parent or other familiar caregiver.

Toxic Stress and Its Long-Term Consequences

The physiological assault of toxic stress produces serious disruptions of the developing brain and other biological systems that can lead to a wide range of problems in health and development. Persistently

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