

Canada's Bill C-31 to change immigration act could severely affect mental health of refugees

July 9 2012

The Canadian government's proposed Bill C-31 to change the country's immigration act could have serious negative impacts on the mental health of refugees, states a commentary in *CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal)*.

Under the proposed Bill C-31, the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act, which targets refugee claimants, children under age 16 will be separated from their parents or held informally in a detention centre with their mothers. Family reunification for recognized refugees will be delayed until five years and detention reviews will not occur for six months after the initial two-week review.

In Canada over the past five years, more than 650 children have been imprisoned under current [immigration laws](#).

Because research indicates high levels of depression, anxiety and other [mental health disorders](#) in detained refugees, Bill C-31 is potentially damaging to the psychiatric health of vulnerable people. In 2010/11 in Australia, where all refugee claimants without visas are detained until their cases have been resolved, there were over 1100 incidents of self-harm and six suicides in a population of about 6000 people detained for a median of 10 months. This is about 10 times the suicide rate in the general population in both Australia and Canada.

"Three years after release, [refugees](#) who had been detained for more than six months and then granted temporary status were still very distressed, with half still experiencing clinical levels of both depression and post-traumatic stress disorder," writes Dr. Janet Cleveland, McGill University Health Centre, Montréal, with coauthor. "Temporary status, which implies lengthy family separation and limited job access, was a strong predictor of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, with an even larger negative impact than premigration trauma."

"As health professionals, it is our responsibility to urge the government to minimize harm to children, pregnant women, trauma survivors and other vulnerable people," the authors conclude. "Children should not be incarcerated or separated from their parents. Detention of all refugee claimants should be limited to the shortest possible time required for identity and security checks and should generally be in noncarceral accommodation, especially for vulnerable individuals."

More information: www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.120282

Provided by Canadian Medical Association Journal

Citation: Canada's Bill C-31 to change immigration act could severely affect mental health of refugees (2012, July 9) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-07-canada-bill-c-immigration-severely.html>

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