

Children in immigration detention

Experiences and perspectives of children who have been in immigration detention

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For this research, data were collected from twenty-three children and adolescents who have been in immigration detention, via interviews with the children, their parents or volunteers who counsel them. Detention duration varied from two weeks till 9 months, with a mean duration of 4 months.

The age of the children and adolescents who were interviewed, or whose mothers were interviewed, varied from two years to twenty-four years. For some children more than one year has passed since release. Except one seventeen years old boy, all the children were at least seven years in the Netherlands or were born here.

This research has been carried out under supervision of a university supervisor, Defence for Children International and the Johannes Wier Foundation for Human Rights and Healthcare.

Summary of the main findings

The main findings are fourfold. The first one is that the children who have been in immigration detention are already vulnerable for developing psychological and developmental problems because of their history as migrant or refugee, their long lasting asylum procedures and because of the fact that after release they were left as undocumented migrants without any rights on shelter or social services and with ongoing uncertainty about their future.

The second one is that the fact that they were being detained was incomprehensible and degrading for them. They still can not understand that they and their parents, innocents, were imprisoned like criminals. They were at once cut off from their normal daily life and separated from friends, school and their own environment. This together with the uncertainty that was surrounding the detention contributed to the extreme stress the children felt and had a negative effect on their coping strategies. The uncertainty was due in particular to the facts that people in immigration detention don't know for how long they will be there and what will happen afterwards with them, whether they will be expelled or left to the streets.

The third finding was that the way their arrest took place and the prison conditions were not suitable for children and were harmful to their well-being. The arrest was for the children a traumatic event. Although the arrest was not unexpected to everybody, all children were overcome with severe feelings of uncertainty about what was going to happen with them. For example, one child was arrested on his bed, children were fetched in the classroom without having time to say farewell and sometimes they couldn't fetch their personal belongings. All were transported with prison buses, what had a profound negative impact on the experience of arrest. The circumstances in the detention centres were not suitable for children, despite the recurrent assurances of the government that the regime for children did take into account these needs. Here follow a few examples:

- They were locked up in their cells during evening and night, when having meals, during fire-alarms and during incidents with other detainees.
- Appropriate education was not offered. Children below the age of twelve in Uitzetcentrum Rotterdam could do three hours weekly some simple supervised exercises like learning to tell time and in Detentiecentrum Zeist only educational software was available. For children above the age of twelve educational and recreational programs were not offered.
- Recreational programs were offered for children below the age of twelve, for a very limited amount of hours, for example six hours per week in Uitzetcentrum Rotterdam. The remaining time they have to keep themselves busy. So most children spent the whole day by watching TV.

- Children were restricted in playing, sometimes they were punished when they were not quiet enough, for example running through the corridors or shouting. They had to sit on a chair for a quarter of an hour or were being sent to their cells.
- Sometimes children were woken up with a start because guards shone with a torch into the cells where they slept or made a lot of noise with opening the hatches during the nightly checks.
- Even the small children were subjected to the degrading practice of body searches, and the adolescents were searched internally.
- Possibilities for being in the open were restricted. In Detentiecentrum Zeist children did not have free access to open air, only two times a day for an hour. In Uitzetcentrum Rotterdam they could go 'outside' (in an air cage) during the time they were not locked up and children below the age of twelve were sometimes taken outside to a play field.
- The centres where children were held for months have the appearance of prisons, with high walls, barbed wires and window bars.

The fourth finding is that as a result of everything mentioned above, all children and adolescents suffered from stress symptoms during detention, like fear, distress, loneliness, boredom, sleeping problems, apathy, and feelings of inferiority, depression and feeling like being mad. After being released, these stress symptoms decreased over time, but during most of the interviews it was clear that their detention experiences were still very painful for the children. Most children are still afraid when they see police or prison buses and are reminded of their bad experiences in prison. Some children who did not participate in the research show behavioural or developmental problems or are not able to talk about their bad experiences, according to volunteer counsellors.

Summary of the recommendations

- The government should lay down in law that children can not be put in immigration detention, not even for a short period of time.
- The government should acknowledge that the policy of the last years concerning children in immigration detention was a violation of children's rights and should therefore compensate the children.
- All people involved with children who have been in immigration detention like parents and school teachers, should be aware of the possible psychological consequences of such a traumatic experience and help children with their coping strategies or refer them to professional help.
- The government should lay down in law that children (and their families) can not be left on the streets without documents and basic services like shelter, food and appropriate health care because this is a breach of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. If they are not able to return to their home country, they should get a residence permit.
- If the government sticks to her opinion that children sometimes have to be kept in centres as part of immigration procedures, than these centres must not have the appearance or regime of prisons, e.g. children must have access to education of good quality, freedom of movement and staff must be trained to guide children instead of guarding prisoners.

The Dutch full-text of the thesis can be downloaded from

<http://www.defenceforchildren.nl/ariadne/loader.php/dci/nieuws/Dingendiegebeuren/>