



## **ABM Action Statement on Forced Separation of Breastfeeding Families**

The Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine (ABM) is an international organization of physicians and health professionals dedicated to supporting the health and well-being of breastfeeding families. We are deeply concerned by increasing reports of the forced separation of breastfeeding mothers and their babies during conflicts, civil unrest, and law enforcement actions around the world.

As experts in Breastfeeding Medicine, we strongly condemn any separation of a breastfeeding mother–infant dyad. Such separation can cause immediate and lasting harm to both mother and baby.

Breastfeeding is a basic human right.<sup>1</sup> Successful breastfeeding is widely recognized to provide optimal nutrition and immune protection, including substantial health benefits for infants, such as:

- reduced infectious and metabolic disease, improved brain development, reduced chronic disease, and lower infant mortality,<sup>2</sup>

and for mothers

- reduced risk of cardiovascular illness, postpartum depression, and breast and ovarian cancers.

Most families worldwide initiate breastfeeding after birth.<sup>3-5</sup> When breastfeeding is abruptly disrupted, mothers commonly experience significant psychological distress, breast pain and engorgement, risk of mastitis, and, within a period of hours to days, a potentially irreversible decrease in breast milk production.<sup>6-7</sup> Infants also experience the stress of separation from their primary caregiver. They are at risk of acute dehydration by refusing bottle feeding and refusing the breast, if or when they are ultimately reunited with their mother.<sup>8</sup> Beyond physical health considerations, infants rely on the presence of their primary caregiver for emotional security and healthy social-emotional development. Ensuring that separated infants receive nurturing, responsive care is essential to minimizing trauma and supporting their overall well-being.

We are aware of many cases of separation of babies from their parents related to law enforcement, civil conflicts, and war. We commend policies intended to limit such harm, including Articles 3 and 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989),<sup>9-10</sup> which affirm that children should not be separated from their parents unwillingly unless it is in the child's best interest. In the United States the Immigration

and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Directive 11032.4 (2021),<sup>11</sup> states that ICE should not detain, arrest, or take into custody individuals known to be pregnant, postpartum, or nursing for an administrative immigration violation unless release is prohibited by law or the individual poses a national security concern or an imminent risk of death, violence, or physical harm to someone else.

We urge all responsible leaders and agencies to immediately cease the forced separation of breastfeeding mothers and their babies and prevent such future separations through the enactment and enforcement of protective policies. When such separation is legally justified or necessary, provisions should be made to allow the nursing mother to safely express and store milk, and for the infant to receive adequate nutrition and medical care.

For evidence-based expert recommendations, we urge leaders and agencies to use the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine Position Statement: Breastfeeding in Emergencies: <http://bfmed.org/assets/DOCUMENTS/bartick-et-al-2024-academy-of-breastfeeding-medicine-position-statement-breastfeeding-in-emergencies.pdf>

Written on behalf of the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine by:

Julie Ware, MD MPH NABBLM-C FABM FAAP IBCLC  
ABM President  
Department of Pediatrics  
Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center  
University of Cincinnati College of Medicine  
Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

Casey Rosen-Carole, MD MPH MEd NABBLM-C FABM  
ABM President–Elect  
Associate Professor of Pediatrics and OBGYN  
Chief of the Division of Breastfeeding & Lactation Medicine  
Fellowship Director, Breastfeeding & Lactation Medicine, LILAC  
Consultant, Lactation Study Center, Finger Lakes Environmental Health Center  
University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry  
Rochester, New York, USA

Elien Rouw, MD FABM  
ABM Immediate Past–President  
Laren, North Holland, Netherlands

Mariana Colmenares, MD IBCLC  
ABM Secretary

Clinical Director Global Breastfeeding Clinic  
Community Paediatrician at Cheyne Development Centre  
Chelsea and Westminster Hospital  
London, United Kingdom

Rima L. Strassman, MD NABBLM-C FABM  
ABM Treasurer  
Medical Director, Lactation Services  
St. Luke's University Health Network  
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA

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