



The Day That ICE Came: How Worksite Raids Are Once Again Harming Children and Families

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Recent efforts to ramp up immigration enforcement in the interior of the United States, and drastic changes in policies—such as prioritizing parents of U.S. citizen children for deportation—have separated many American families. The reemergence of worksite raids is an example of the Trump Administration’s enforcement-heavy approach that harms not only workers, but also families and communities. The nationwide reach of these raids, their unpredictable nature, and the excessive force with which they have been carried out has raised concerns, once again, about the high human cost of such operations.

In 2019, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) visited three locations that experienced worksite raids during the Trump Administration—Allen, Texas; Sandusky and Salem, Ohio; and Canton, Carthage, Forest, and Morton, Mississippi. Notably, each of these represented the largest worksite raid in more than a decade at the time they occurred. Researchers met with immigrants and their families, lawyers, educators, community responders, and faith leaders to learn how these raids had altered lives, livelihoods, and communities.

What the researchers found was, in a word, devastating. The impact of raids on families, communities, and children—many of whom are U.S. citizens—was the complete devastation of family economic security and mental and physical wellbeing. Specifically, they identified several disturbing consequences for children and families already affected by the stresses of poverty, increased anti-immigrant discrimination, and constantly changing immigration policies.

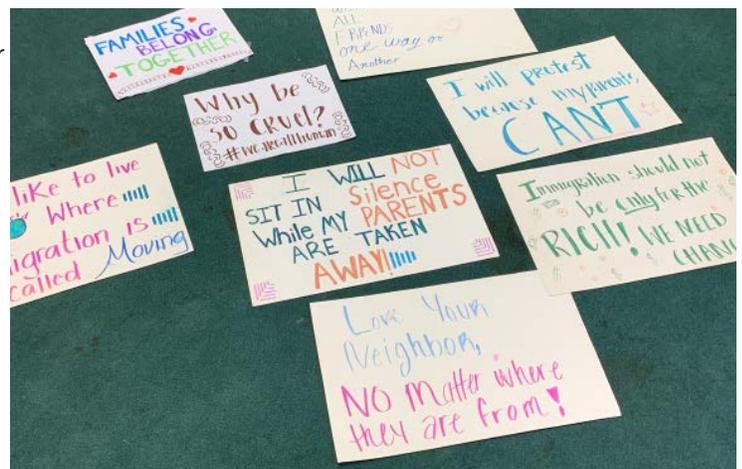
As a legal service provider in Ohio put it: “Family separation is family separation, whether it’s a border agent prying a baby from its mom’s arms or leaving a kid at school with no one to pick them up. It’s the same crime against humanity I would say.”

Family Separation

Children experienced separation from parents ranging from several hours to months and longer, including potentially permanent separation due to deportation.

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency guidelines on worksite raids require timely screening and release of those who are sole caregivers of minor children or have another “humanitarian concern” such as pregnant women, nursing mothers, individuals with a serious medical condition, or parents needed for the care of sick or special needs children or relatives. ICE must also coordinate with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and notify local social service agencies when possible—like schools and child welfare agencies.ⁱ

This study revealed that ICE did not notify local social service agencies or schools in advance of the raids. For example, several of the Mississippi raids were carried out on the first day of school in August 2019, and news reports showed children stranded overnight at a local gym, sleeping on the floor, and crying for their parents.ⁱⁱ Several days following the raids, after having been notified by the schools, Child Protective Services reported that it had received calls about children who had still not been located.ⁱⁱⁱ





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Parents were often held in detention centers or jails located hours away from their families. Several were deported after exhausting options for relief or were forced into accepting deportation rather than facing more time in prison or paying impossibly high immigration bonds.

One mother was detained several hours away from her young children, including a baby who was still breastfeeding at the time of her arrest (despite the ICE guidelines to release nursing mothers). She was finally able to see her two oldest sons, ages three and nine, briefly during her final court hearing, where she was left no choice but to accept deportation.

Harm to Children's Mental and Physical Health

In other studies, children whose family members had been subjected to worksite enforcement actions showed immediate signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as trouble sleeping, crying more often, and increased fear. In the longer term (more than six months following a raid), adverse behavioral changes—including regressions or delays in developmental milestones for young children and withdrawal and increased aggression in older children—were most common in cases where parents had been detained for more than a month and/or were ultimately deported.^{iv} These findings were replicated in our study.

In Mississippi, several children on their way home from school saw their parents handcuffed in lines outside the plant and shoved into vans. Parents and relatives recounted the screams and uncontrollable crying among children and youth who witnessed this. Some developed nose bleeds and hernias due to uncontrolled sobbing after seeing a parent taken away.

Children had immense feelings of loss for the missing parent. Remaining parents talked about how children were not looking forward to the holidays, because their family was no longer together. Several providers and parents talked about how it was now common for children to come home, toss their backpacks, and spend the rest of the afternoon sleeping. One mother shared that her youngest daughter, only nine years old, mentioned suicidal thoughts, saying that if her father wasn't released "she was going to kill herself."

Children of all ages dramatically changed their daily routines. Children stopped playing outside and often begged their parents not to leave the house. In both Mississippi and Texas, children missed several days of school following the raids, and their grades suffered (in Ohio, school was not in session when the raids occurred). Some parents and youth noted an increase in bullying at school, with both students and teachers making anti-immigrant statements to those whose parents had been arrested.

Older youth took on additional household responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings and working one or two jobs to help make up for the loss of a breadwinner. Some reported forgoing college to help provide for their families. A 16-year-old in Ohio, who was handcuffed and placed in a van during the raid despite being a U.S. citizen and a minor, said: "I'll be 18 soon... If my parents get deported, I'd fight to have my brother and sister stay. I'd have to drop out of school to get a good job—labor job—or be able to pay rent, food, everything. I'd become the new parent for the family."

Harm to Parents' Mental and Physical Health

Parents who were detained suffered mental and physical health impacts, even several months following the raids, as did their partners who remained at home. Child development research tells us how closely intertwined parents' mental health is with that of their children. From birth, secure relationships with parents provide a strong social-emotional foundation for children, promoting positive self-esteem and the complex social and cognitive skills necessary for success in school and beyond.^v



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For parents, the first thing that came to mind as the raid happened was their children. One mother in Texas said, “All I could think about is who was going to take care of them, and if I was ever going to see them again.” Mothers who were separated from babies and toddlers, including those who had been nursing, suffered additional emotional trauma and painful conditions such as mastitis, which is often caused when a mother is unable to breastfeed on her regular schedule. Again, these nursing mothers were detained despite ICE guidelines advising against it.

Parents who were trying to cope with the sudden absence of a partner found it incredibly difficult to provide the emotional support and stability their children needed as they dealt with their own emotional pain and additional stressors. Many reported not being able to sleep, loss of appetite, constant headaches, and panic attacks. One mother in Mississippi shared that it wasn’t until her eldest daughter told her that her nine-year-old sister was not doing well and “needed her” that she was able to even notice and attempt to address her daughter’s signs of depression.

Parents whose partners got detained were often also paralyzed by fear, drastically changing their routines, and hiding out in their homes, sometimes for several days or even weeks. One father in Mississippi stayed locked inside the house with the blinds drawn for almost two weeks, often breaking down in tears in front of his three young daughters, and would not come out until several neighbors finally convinced him it was safe.

Economic Hardship

Prior to the raids, most of the families had low incomes and struggled to make ends meet. They worked for low wages and were often exploited by landlords who charged high rents. For a family to survive, both parents had to work, splitting day and evening shifts to avoid the extra cost of child care. Following the raids, parents and other family members—including older youth—urgently needed to find new or additional employment to meet basic needs like rent, food, and utilities, yet they faced real challenges given the scarcity of employment options.

While families relied on donations and community organizations or churches to address the sudden loss in household income, this support was often not enough. Families also had to cover legal expenses for the parent in detention, including high immigration bonds. Legal expenses quickly added up to thousands of dollars for families earning low wages, with little savings. In Mississippi, the bonds were as high as \$18,000 due to the felony charges related to identity fraud. Families also faced the high costs of staying in touch with a detained parent—through expensive jail phone minutes or paying drivers to take family members for visits. Some individuals in the community took advantage of the situation by charging excessively high fees or offering fraudulent services.

Stress on Providers and Community Leaders

Legal service providers, faith leaders, and other immigrant-serving organizations were forced to quickly respond in the aftermath of the raids by ensuring children were taken care of and that families could meet their basic needs and get legal services. While they felt a responsibility to give families a sense of safety and stability, the providers themselves were struggling with the enormity of the situation and the dire outlook for many of the families who had little hope of being able to remain together in this country.

Community leaders were also outraged by the militaristic nature and massive scale of the raids, as well as the lack of concern or planning for children’s welfare. “I felt like I was floating,” said the secretary of a Mississippi church where families could gather, identify whether their loved ones had been arrested, and speak to legal service providers. “Sometimes I didn’t know what to say to the children to calm them or make them feel better, because I myself was broken.”



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A mental health therapist added: “It was so massive that I still don’t have words to describe it. A list of 30 people were suicidal—they were there with their children, and all they could do was sob. It was mass hysteria.” She faced her own considerable health challenges, including a stroke, within a couple of months after the raid in Mississippi, which she attributed in part to the stress of supporting families during that time. “It feels like I’m fighting a massive wave that’s coming at you and you’re just watching it. You’re just paralyzed, waiting for the wave to grab you.”

A More Hopeful Vision for Our Future

The images of hundreds of workers, most of whom are parents working to support their families, being handcuffed and shoved into vans—alongside children weeping and begging for their mom or dad to come home—do not reflect our country’s basic values. And the cumulative effect of these actions on children’s development means that an entire generation of children is being denied the ability to achieve their full potential, with dire consequences for them and our nation’s future.

When asked if they thought their life was better here in the United States or back in their country, three parents—all indigenous Guatemalans—paused for a long time. One father reflected, “It’s a hard life here and there. Here we are discriminated against and are persecuted by ICE. In our country we are discriminated against and persecuted by poverty and crime.” After contemplating a few minutes, they all passionately agreed on the answer: “The reason we endure the suffering here is for our children. For them and their future, the sacrifice is worth it.”

An alternative and more hopeful vision for our future is represented in the remarkable resilience of the families impacted by the raids as well as the heroic community members who stepped forward to do the right thing by renouncing the raids and working together to support the families whose lives were turned upside down. We are facing a critical crossroads as a country, and it is evident that we must unite around a vision for our future that recognizes the value of all our children to the nation’s prosperity and prioritizes their wellbeing in policy decisions, including the 1 in 4 children growing up in the United States who are members of immigrant families.

ⁱ “Guidelines for Identifying Humanitarian Concerns among Administrative Arrestees When Conducting Worksite Enforcement Operations,” National Immigration Law Center, last modified November 2015, <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ice-hum-guidelines.pdf>; “Worksite Enforcement Strategy,” U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, April 2009, https://www.ice.gov/doclib/foia/dro_policy_memos/worksite_enforcement_strategy4_30_2009.pdf. Extended worksite enforcement guidelines under Obama administration.

ⁱⁱ Edward Helmore, “They Cry for Their Parents’: Mississippi ICE Raids Spur Pleas from Children,” *The Guardian*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/08/mississippi-ice-raids-children-video>; Sarah Fowler, “Where are Mom and Dad? School on Standby to Help Children in Aftermath of ICE Raids,” *Clarion Ledger*, last modified August 8, 2019, <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2019/08/07/what-happens-children-people-detained-ms-ice-raids-immigration/1947642001/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alissa Zhu, “Mississippi Child Services: Some Children Still Not Reunited with Parents After ICE Raid,” *Clarion Ledger*, Aug 12, 2019, <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2019/08/12/mississippi-ice-raid-agency-says-some-children-still-without-parents-immigration/1987877001/>.

^{iv} Ajay Chaudry, Randy Capps, Juan Manuel Pedroza, Rosa Maria Castañeda, Robert Santos, and Molly M. Scott, *Facing Our Future, Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement*, The Urban Institute, 2010, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/28331/412020-Facing-Our-Future.PDF>

^v National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *Children’s Emotional Development is Built into the Architecture of Their Brains — Working Paper No. 2*, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2004, <https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Childrens-Emotional-Development-Is-Built-into-the-Architecture-of-Their-Brains.pdf>; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, “How Children’s Social Competence Impacts their Well-Being in Adulthood,” Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, July 16, 2015, <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2015/07/how-children-s-social-competence-impacts-their-well-being-in-adu.html>.