

Head Start ICE Survey Summary Report

May 2026

Executive Summary

Overview and Background

The Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP (WSA), alongside the Pennsylvania and Wisconsin Head Start Associations, conducted a survey to evaluate the impact of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) actions on Head Start programs. Gathering data from **277 respondents** (directors, staff, and parents) across seven states—California, Florida, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin—the report highlights widespread trauma, operational disruptions, and heightened fear impacting both immigrant and non-immigrant children.

Key Findings

- **47%** of respondents observed negative behavioral changes in children, matching clinical symptoms of anxiety, stress, and trauma.
- **Prevalence of ICE Activity: 52% of program leadership** reported at least one instance of ICE activity near their facility within the past 12 months, with 6.3% specifically noting activity during vulnerable pickup and drop-off times.
- **Widespread Attendance Impact: 78% of staff** reported that ICE enforcement activities had a noticeable impact on student attendance.
- **Enrollment and Retention Losses:** On average, programs experienced a **7% unenrollment rate** due to immigration fears, while **14% of directors** faced definitive delays in new student registrations.
- **Operational Strain: 76% of leadership staff** received employee requests for guidance on handling ICE encounters, prompting **71% of programs** to actively alter their systems or security operations.

Core Takeaways - ICE Actions Hurt Children

1. Behavioral and Psychological Toll on ALL Children

Nearly half (**47%**) of respondents observed negative behavioral changes in children, matching clinical symptoms of anxiety, stress, and trauma. Staff reported developmental regression, hypervigilance, withdrawal from unfamiliar adults, and a fear of playing outdoors. Notably, this climate of fear extends to non-immigrant children, manifesting in play scenarios and racially charged friction between peers.

If you have any questions about the survey, please contact

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Executive Summary (continued)

Core Takeaways - ICE Actions Hurt Children (continued)

2. ICE Actions Erode Family Engagement and Routines

Immigration fears have significantly restricted families' mobility, causing them to leave home only for absolute essentials.

- **Staff Observations:** Radical drops in parent meeting attendance, workshops, and classroom volunteering.
- **Parent Perspectives:** Over **26% of parents** altered their daily drop-off or pick-up routines to avoid exposure. Additionally, **33%** expressed severe anxiety regarding public spaces and traveling to the centers.

3. ICE Actions Create Widespread Absenteeism and Long-Term Educational Risks

While localized chronic absenteeism rates varied drastically (ranging from 0% to 62%), programs averaged a **7% chronic absenteeism rate** explicitly tied to ICE fears. The combined effects of sudden unenrollment, skipped outreach, and delayed applications threaten to send vulnerable children to kindergarten without essential preschool experience, undermining broader community school readiness.

4. ICE Action Diverts Scarce Resources to Crisis Response

Head Start facilities are increasingly shifting from strictly educational spaces to crisis-support hubs.

- **Systemic Modifications:** 71% of programs upgraded security infrastructure (e.g., locked doors, video doorbells, controlled entry) and created formal response protocols in case ICE agents arrive.
- **Resource Deficits:** Staff and leadership noted a critical need for localized legal rights education (31.3%), protocol training (29.4%), emergency safety plans for children of detained parents, and temporary remote-learning or basic-needs provisions.

Conclusion

Despite immense stress and widespread requests for guidance, **95% of Head Start staff** refused to reduce their hours or take leave, demonstrating profound workforce resilience. Head Start Staff are deeply committed to supporting children and families. The pervasive climate of fear ultimately compromises Head Start's foundational mission to support children and their families.

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Survey Context and Background

Programs like Head Start are built on the belief that every child deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive in a safe and nurturing environment, regardless of where they were born or the language they speak at home. For many immigrant families, Head Start is far more than an early learning program—it is a trusted community space where children receive healthy meals, developmental screenings, mental health support, and strong early education that prepares them for success in school and life. Head Start also helps families connect to health care, parenting resources, and social services while building relationships with caring teachers and staff who understand their cultures and experiences.

When families fear immigration actions in or around schools and early learning centers, children can experience anxiety, trauma, disrupted attendance, and loss of the stable routines that are essential for healthy development and school readiness. Protecting Head Start and other early learning settings as safe spaces ensures that all young children—including children from immigrant families—can continue to learn, play, and feel secure during the most important years of brain development.

Methodology and Scope

- **Participation:** This report analyzes data from **277 respondents** across seven states: California, Florida, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. To ensure data integrity, responses from states with fewer than 5 submissions were excluded.
- **Target Audience:** The survey gathered perspectives from three distinct roles: Head Start directors/ leadership, staff, and parents/caregivers. The staff and parent sections were fully translated into Spanish.
- **Representation:** The findings do not reflect any single state or locality; instead, they present an aggregate summary of trends observed across all participating regions.

ADDENDUM

Question answered by Directors and leadership Staff

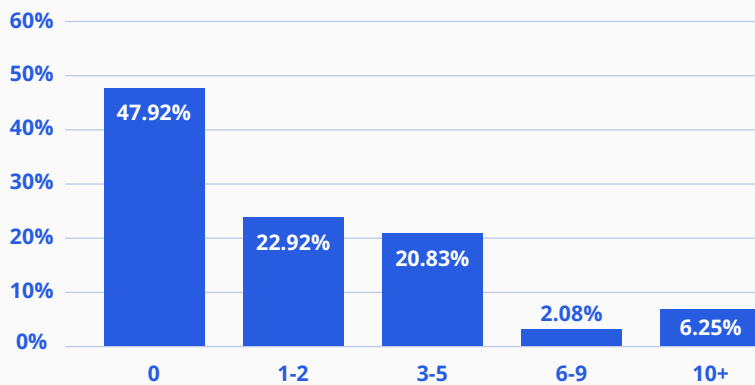
Question: How many instances of ICE activity around your Head Start program have you encountered in the past 12 months?

About 23% of respondents indicated '1-2'; about 21% indicated '3-5'; and about 6% indicated '10+' instances.

Altogether, 52% of respondents indicated that there has been at least one instance of ICE activity around the Head Start program within the past 12 months.

When asked where this activity occurred, respondents mostly indicated ICE in surrounding neighborhoods. **Of greatest concern for the safety of Head Start programs and families is that 6.3% reported activity during pickup or drop-off.** Pickup and drop off are among the most routine and vulnerable points of interactions for families.

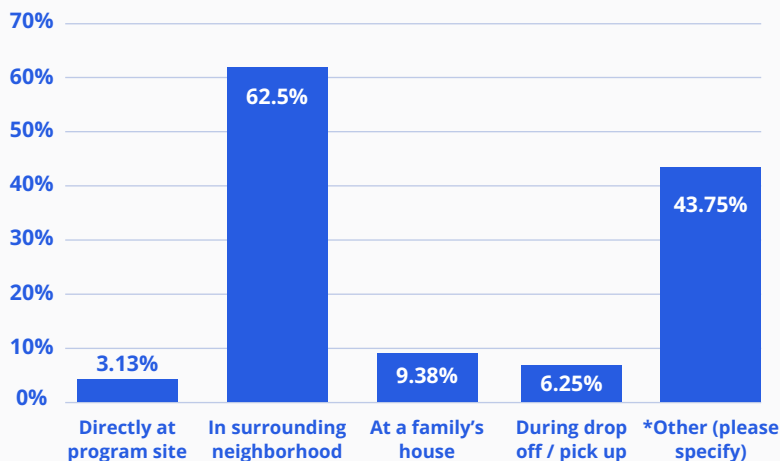
How many instances of ICE activity around your Head Start program have you encountered in the past 12 months?



While 52% of respondents reported at least one instance of ICE activity, the distribution of responses shows that this is not just occasional, it is reoccurring and, in some cases, frequent. Even when ICE is not entering program facilities, its presence in nearby communities is still highly visible and impactful to those around to witness it or hear of it.

“Staff have been heartbroken that families ask them if they will be the emergency contact for the child if the parent is picked up.”

Where did ICE activity occur (referring to the question above)?



*Answers in the 'Other' category mostly included specific instances and not common locations.

Question answered by Head Start Directors, leadership, and staff

Question: Have you noticed any noticeable changes in children's behavior due to ICE activity in your community? Immigrant or non-immigrant.

47% of respondents indicated that there have been noticeable changes in children's behavior. Responses describe behavioral changes consistent with **anxiety, fear, and stress**. Children were reported to be quieter and more withdrawn, particularly around unfamiliar adults, and some were described as having more frequent tantrums. Some responses note that children are expressing worry that a parent could be taken and show reluctance to go outside.

There is an emotional toll that includes sadness and nervousness. Staff have described increased vigilance amongst children and signs of developmental regression.

"Children are afraid to leave their homes thinking that they won't see their parents again."

"One child didn't want to go to the playground"

"Child is very reserved. We have another child with very big behaviors - he is hypervigilant, and defensive. The child repeats all that he hears on the news. He is afraid of adults."

"I have had 4 instances (between HS children) where 4 individual, separate white children have told Latino children in their classroom that either the police were coming to shoot them or telling them that they were going to report them and have them sent away."

"Children have been seen referencing ICE in play scenarios"

Question answered by Head Start staff

Question: How has family engagement decreased in the past 12 months due to ICE? Respond "n/a" if this does not apply.

Respondents expressed an increased **fear of leaving home**, making it the top theme in responses. Results indicate that many families only leave for essentials (i.e. work, groceries). This has resulted in decreased attendance at events and meetings; there have been **sharp drops in participation in parent meetings, workshops, school events, social activities**. Due to ongoing ICE concerns, parents/caregivers quickly drop off their kids and avoid staying, volunteering, or interacting.

Reduced interaction weakens relationships with staff and limits access to supportive services. This ultimately will impact both program effectiveness and child outcomes.

"There are less parents attending socials due to being afraid."

"Family engagement has decreased due to there being multiple raids within the community. Parents are scared to step out their house and in fear of being detained."

"We have seen a decrease in playgroups/socialization. Families are not as willing to hang out during drop-off/pick-up to speak with teaching teams. More families are requesting transportation for their child, limiting their exposure at the center."

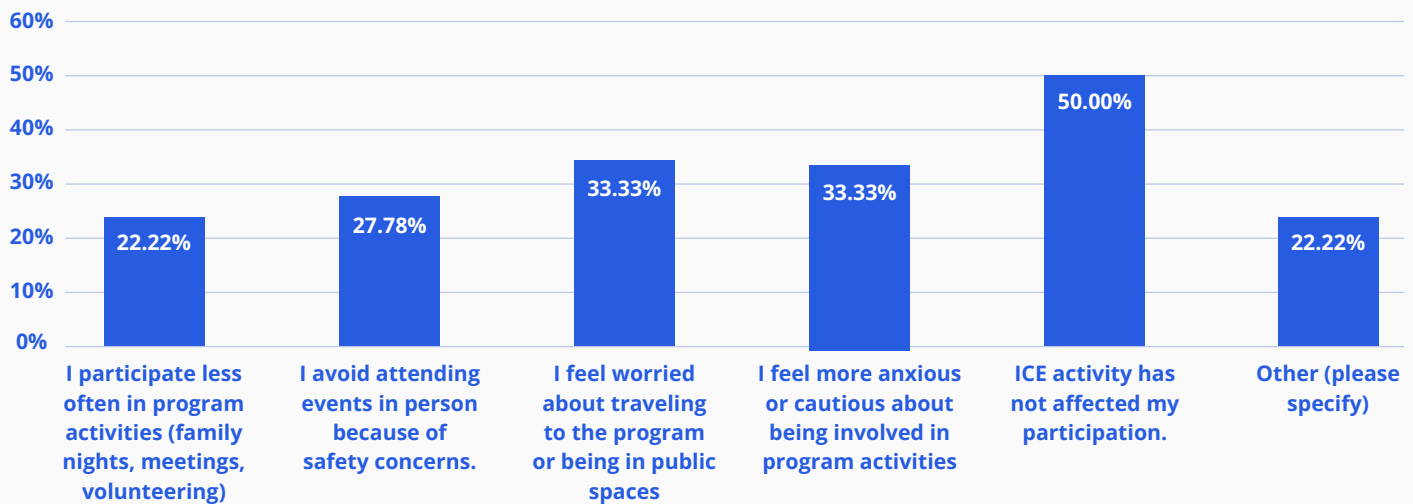
Question answered by parents/caregivers

Question: How has ICE activity in your community impacted your participation in your Head Start program?

- **33%** of parents responded feeling **more anxious or cautious** about being involved in program activities;
- **33%** also reported feeling **worried about traveling** to their Head Start program or being in public spaces;
- 28% of parents/caregivers avoid attending events in person because of safety concerns. Notably, we see that half of the parents/caregivers who responded indicated that ICE activity has not affected their participation. This may reflect differences in geographic impact and varying levels of support systems. The fact that substantial portions of respondents still report fear, avoidance, and anxiety suggests that the impacts are meaningful even if not universally experienced.

Results here may not be universal due to the low number of parent respondents. Some responses named more than one answer choice.

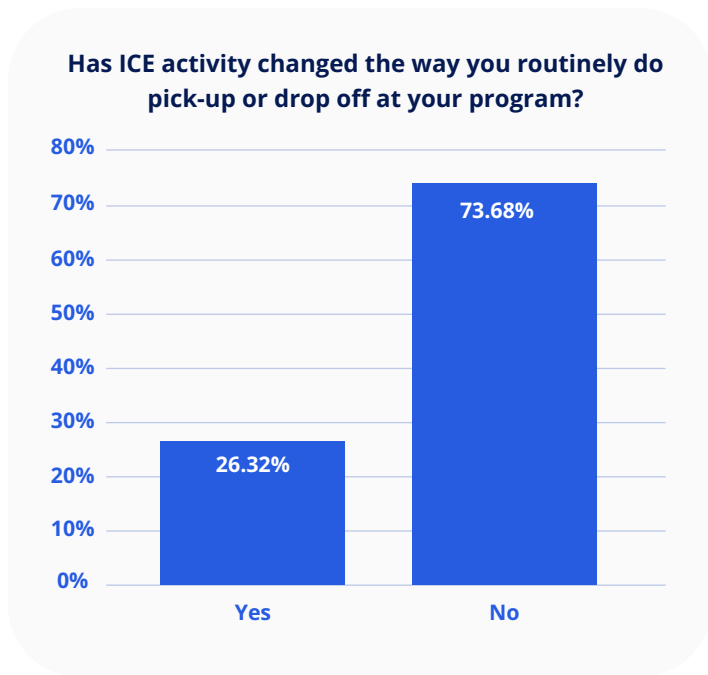
How has ICE activity in your community impacted your participation in your Head Start program?



Question answered by parents/caregivers

Question: Has ICE activity changed the way you routinely do pick-up or drop-off at your program?

26% of parents reported 'yes'. This means that over 1 in 4 families are changing daily routines. This is a significant behavioral shift, not a marginal one. Even when families remain enrolled, their ability to fully engage with programs is being disrupted.



Questions answered by Directors and leadership Staff

Question: Based on your program data and experience, what % of your children are chronically absent (absent 10% or more days) due to immigration/ICE/etc. concerns?

Please see similar question given to staff.

Respondents reported that, on average, nearly **7% of children** across Head Start programs were chronically absent due to ICE related fears, but the results are clearly localized. The range was very large – from 0 to 62%.

Families are avoiding school, moving frequently, or leaving programs suddenly, often without explanation, leading to increased absenteeism and enrollment instability. Overall, the quotes below highlight how ICE activity is creating a climate of fear that directly impacts children’s access to consistent care and education.

“We have had Family Advocates report that migrant parents expressed concerns in bringing their child to Head Start classes and/or had abruptly left the program with no prior notice and learned later a family member had been deported.”

“We have several families afraid to leave their apartment to come to school. Ice Agents were making regular visits to their apartment complex”

“Families do not always directly tell us that their absence or change of address is due to immigration fears. What we DO know is that in neighborhoods with a higher number of first-time immigrant population, we have a much higher absenteeism and movement than we have ever experienced before.”

Question: Have you experienced delays in new enrollments due to immigration concerns?

About 14% of respondents indicated ‘Yes’. About **33%** indicate ‘Yes, but hard to determine if it’s solely ICE related’. Immigration-related fear is likely creating barriers to enrollment. Families may delay in applying, avoiding outreach, or becoming less responsive to Head Start programs following up with them. Those children, very few of whom are thought to be undocumented, will arrive at kindergarten without critical preschool experience, illustrating that the effects of immigration activities extend beyond immigrant families and can undermine access, continuity, and school readiness across the broader Head Start population.

Question answered by Directors and leadership Staff

Question: Based on your experience, approximately how many families have unenrolled due to immigration-related fears?

Respondents reported that, on average, **nearly 7%** of Head Start families unenrolled due to immigration-related fears.

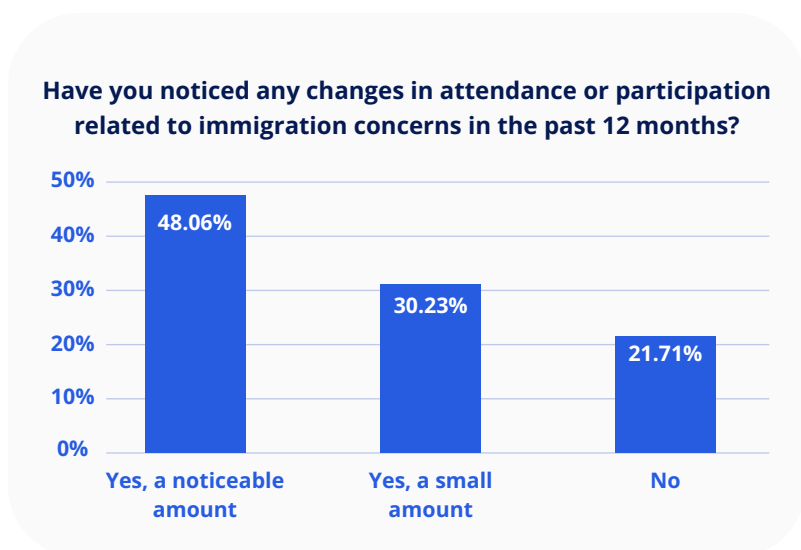
Fear of immigration activities is leading families to make extreme decisions to protect their children, including sending them to live in other countries, fleeing communities, or leaving programs entirely.

Disruptions to attendance and enrollment during early childhood years may affect school readiness, developmental progress, and long-term educational outcomes.

Question answered by Head Start staff

Question: Have you noticed any changes in attendance or participation related to immigration concerns in the past 12 months?

Directors were asked about 'chronic absenteeism' only, but staff were asked more broadly about changes related to immigration concerns that they had observed, applying to both the classroom and family events. To this question **48%** of staff indicated 'Yes, a noticeable amount'. **Over three quarters of respondents (78%) are seeing some level of impact**, indicating this is not an isolated issue, but a widespread trend among Head Start programs. This shows a consistent chain of impact:



Questions answered by Directors and leadership Staff

Question: Have staff expressed concerns or requests for guidance regarding how to respond to immigration enforcement activity or situations?

76% of leadership staff responded 'Yes'. The high percentage indicates that ICE concerns are not isolated, instead they are system-wide challenges that affect people beyond the children and families. This highlights a strong need for consistent guidance and support.

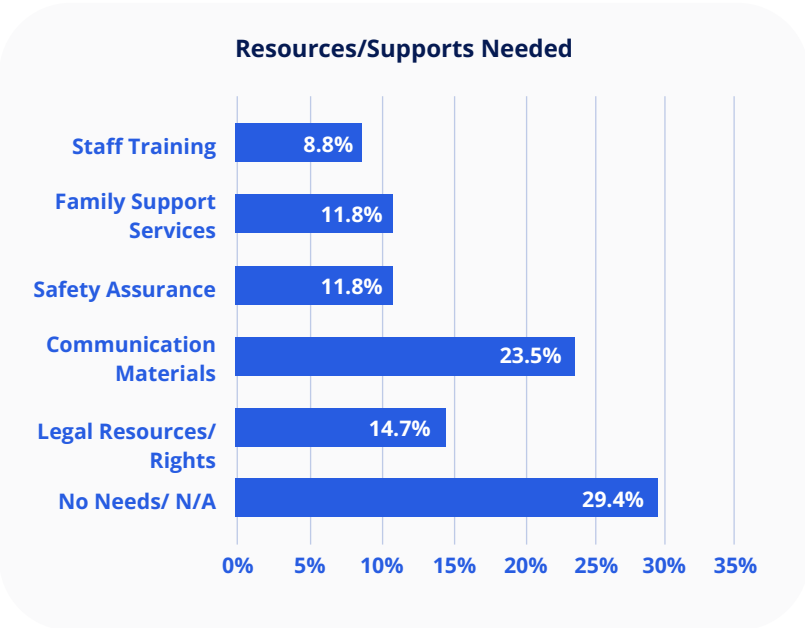
Question: What resources, guidance, supports do you need to support families and staff as they navigate immigration enforcement?

Please see similar question given to staff.

Most responses indicated no support is needed at this time. This may be because Head Start programs have received much guidance from their state associations and partnering community organizations in their communities that have given a substantial amount of supports and resources during this time. Responses also indicate a need for **communication materials** (for both staff and parents/caregivers). Some respondents have specifically mentioned informational flyers, rights flyers/information that explain family rights and “what they can say and should not say”, and program guidance for staff as situations arise. Responses also point to **legal resources**, which could potentially include access to an immigration attorney or legal advice.

Quote from a Director on what their families and staff need

“Assurance that our buildings are safe and we are safe”



Another common theme is wanting **practical family support services** (i.e. food assistance, job help, language interpreters, in-home services) and staff training and knowledge. Programs expressed a need to **train staff on how to respond to ICE situations and support families effectively**, especially under situations of high stress.

“Our concern is the level of knowledge of staff to assist families”

“More help so they do not have to leave the house... via groceries and maybe in home schooling temporarily”

“During training at an offsite, several staff members were anxious about being at training due to ice related activities taking place no more than 1 mile away from the facility. Similar instances have taken at our schools, and office.”

Question answered by Directors and leadership Staff

Question: In light of increased immigration enforcement activities, what changes have you made to your systems/operations?

71% of respondents took action, by making at least one change to their systems/operations. **Security** rises as the top priority (i.e. locked doors, video doorbells, controlled entry points, etc.). Directors/leadership staff also report that **their staff preparation** has become critical. This looks like developing new protocols on what to say and do if ICE were to show up. Respondents also have **reinforced family-centered approaches**, which includes providing families with available resources about rights, creating safety plans in the case a parent is detained, and translating communication materials.

Question answered by Head Start staff

Question: What resources, guidance, supports do you need to support families and children as they navigate immigration enforcement?

The most frequently identified needs centered on **legal rights education and ICE-related guidance (31.3%)** and **staff protocols and training (29.4%)**, indicating a strong demand for clear procedures, legal information, and practical response strategies. Additional themes included family protection and safety (15.7%), basic needs support (13.7%), and mental health support (6.9%), suggesting that immigration activity concerns are affecting both the immediate safety and broader well-being of children, families, and staff. While nearly one-fifth of respondents indicated that no additional support was needed, many of these responses reflected organizations that had already implemented protocols and resource systems.

Some responses named more than one theme.

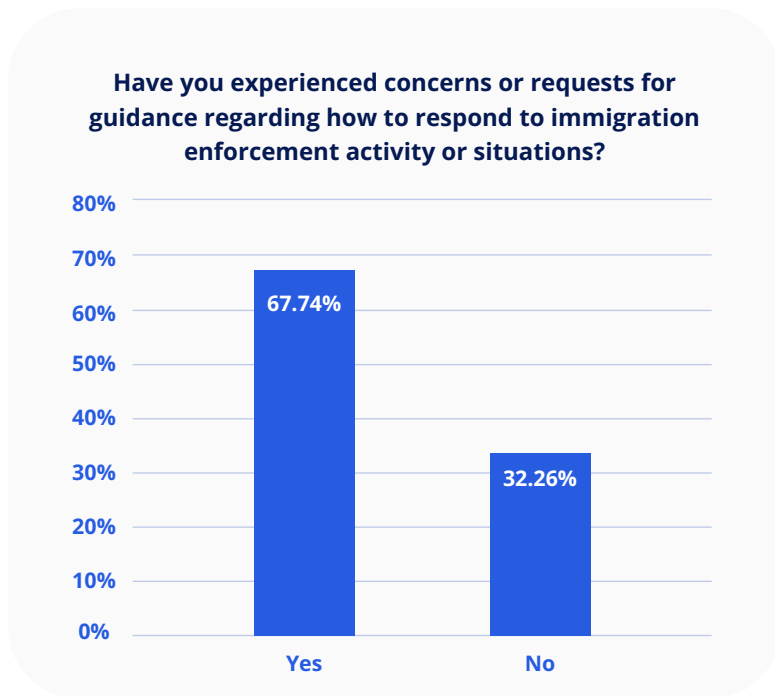


Question answered by Head Start staff

Question: Have you reduced hours or taken leave due to immigration-related concerns?

95% of Head Start staff responded 'No', the data indicates a high level of workforce commitment despite current challenges. Retaining this workforce is essential, as disruptions could significantly impact the broader early learning system.

About **68% of staff respondents reported concerns or a need for guidance on responding to ICE**, suggesting that although they plan to stay in their roles, there is a strong demand for training and clarity on how to handle these situations.



Addendum | Survey Response Details

State	# of Responses
California	99
Florida	30
Pennsylvania	45
Virginia	11
Washington	52
West Virginia	9
Wisconsin	31
Total	277

Role	# of Responses
Head Start Director / Leadership	90
Head Start Staff	165
Parents / Caregivers	22
Total	277

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