UNIVERSITY of
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Im/migrant Well-Being Research Center

Behind Immigration Policies: The Current Realities Facing Immigrant Parents and US-Citizen Children in Florida

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Florida's current immigration landscape is shaped by overlapping state and federal actions that have expanded surveillance and enforcement into everyday life in recent years. In 2023, Senate Bill 1718 was signed into law, requiring employers with 25 employees or more to use E-Verify, criminalizing the transport of undocumented people into the state, invalidating out-of-state driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, and mandating that hospitals that receive Medicaid funds ask about prospective patients' immigration status, among other measures. The implementation of this law coincided with newly elected President Donald Trump's 2025 executive orders (EOs) that called for mass deportations, removed protections that shielded sensitive locations such as schools, hospitals, and churches, from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and dramatically increased collaboration between ICE and local law enforcement through 287(g) agreements.

This report draws on 53 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between May and July 2025 with immigrants and US-born adult children of immigrants in Florida. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 65; immigrants came from a multitude of regions including Africa, the Caribbean, South and Central America, and North America; and their legal statuses ranged from undocumented, to those holding temporary statuses as well as Lawful Permanent Residents, and US citizens. The interviews were designed to document how SB 1718 and current federal policies and practices are experienced inside homes, schools, churches, and workplaces.

SB 1718
(enacted in 2023)

About:

State immigration law that increases enforcement measures and limits access to state services for undocumented individuals in Florida.

Key Provisions:

Requires employers to use E-Verify.

Makes it a felony to transport an undocumented person into Florida.

Bars certain out-of-state IDs issued to undocumented immigrants.

Requires hospitals accepting Medicaid to ask about immigration status.

Research findings illustrate that:

- Employment has become more precarious, and immigrants are forcibly abandoning seasonal jobs for less reliable ones.
- Housing and settlement decisions are being reshaped by enforcement, with some families moving in with kin, or considering leaving Florida, though most are opting to remain in the state.
- Fear and surveillance now rule people's lives from how they drive to where they worship, resulting in immigrant families having to socially isolate to avoid being detained or deported, with negative consequences for US-citizen children's social and emotional development.
- Fear of law enforcement and ICE officials is leading to patterns of police avoidance and raising serious concerns about calling police when they might be needed.
- There is abuse at every stage of the traffic-stop-to-detention-pipeline, with long-lasting health and mental health effects for detained immigrants released on bond.
- Health and healthcare use are declining out of concerns that immigrants' legal status may be questioned while seeking care in hospitals or other medical facilities, which could attract enforcement actions.
- Young adult children and youth, who are US citizens, are taking on adult responsibilities and protective roles in their families—which at times, conflicts with their educational plans, and fear of enforcement is negatively affecting children's social, psychological, and emotional development.
- Faith spaces, mutual aid, and families remain central sources of strength and resilience.

Executive Order 14159
(*signed in 2025*)

About:

A federal order directing US government to strictly enforce immigration laws, declare an "invasion" at the southern border, and prioritize removal, detention, and enforcement against unauthorized immigrants.

Key Provisions:

Establishes Homeland Security Task Forces nationwide.

Expands expedited removal authority.

Directs civil fines and penalties for undocumented immigrants.

Calls for detention facility expansion.

Promotes state-local cooperation.

The following themes emerged from our data:

Work and Participation in the Economy

Work is becoming less reliable and more informal. Interviewees have moved from construction, agriculture, and other industries to become delivery drivers, open small-scale reselling stores, or opt into lower-paying, potentially exploitative jobs close to their homes to minimize driving. Others report discrimination at work and scams that prey on immigrants' vulnerabilities.

Housing and US Settlement

Rising rents, reduced mobility, and the detention of breadwinners are leading to parents and adult children moving in together or considering relocating to a different state or country. At the same time, most struggle with the overwhelming choice of staying or leaving the country, choosing to remain despite the hardships.

Fear of Family Separation and Social Isolation

Immigrant parents in mixed-status families describe living with the constant threat that detention or deportation can result in family separation. This fear is not limited to the undocumented, as Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), and people with pending asylum cases also worry that heightened enforcement can still reach them. US-citizen children of immigrants fear that their parents could be detained or deported by ICE. Many families have adopted self-protective isolation strategies by not going to church, parks, restaurants, or avoiding driving altogether.

Relations with Law Enforcement

Because Florida leads the nation in 287(g) agreements, traffic stops, and local police presence are now read as potential immigration encounters. Immigrants and US-citizen kin are rerouting their daily commutes, have stopped traveling north for agricultural work, and even stopped planning vacations. Some participants describe moral dilemmas about calling the police if they need help or if they are victims or witnesses to crime because doing so could expose them or their families to ICE.

Detention and Its Lingering Effects

Participants who have spent time in detention report abuse by enforcement officials, including the assault and detention of US citizens. Conditions in detention centers are described as inhumane, with little opportunity to eat,

sleep, shower, or to receive medical attention. Once released, those who have been detained report symptoms associated with depression, anxiety, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Health and Healthcare Access

Participants report embodied stress in the form of insomnia, appetite loss, hair loss, fatigue, and anxiety, directly linked to enforcement news, social media videos of arrests, or local detentions. At the same time, immigrants and their US-citizen children skip doctor's appointments because seeking healthcare is now associated with surveillance and seen as a threat.

Children's Education and Mental Well-Being

Children, many of whom are US citizens, are stepping into adult roles and responsibilities such as driving parents to work, running errands, translating more often for parents, and being attentive to police on the roads. Some young adults are postponing college plans because they choose to remain home and protect their parents. Parents reported children showing anxiety, appetite problems, and sleep disturbances.

Resilience, Resistance, and Community Bonds

Even as many immigrants have stopped attending church out of fear, others insist on continuing to worship. Pastors, churches, and community organizations are repeatedly named as sources of comfort, support, food, and information. Many participants reject criminalizing narratives, affirming that they work, pay taxes, and raise children who contribute to US society.

This report highlights the lived experiences and testimonies of individuals who are being affected daily by the consequences of enforcement-first measures. These policies reach into every aspect of personal and public life, from labor markets and housing to public health and education, not only tearing apart the fabric of immigrant communities but also negatively affecting US citizens.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Florida has emerged as one of the most aggressive testing grounds for restrictive immigrant legislation in the United States. The signing of Senate Bill 1718 (SB 1718) into law in 2023 signaled a new chapter in the state's long trajectory of exclusionary policies, introducing provisions that intensified immigration enforcement across multiple sectors. Among its most controversial measures, this law requires private employers with 25 or more employees to use E-Verify to confirm work eligibility, criminalizes the transport of undocumented individuals across state lines (even by family members), does not recognize undocumented immigrants' out-of-state driver's licenses, and compels hospitals that receive Medicaid funding to collect patients' immigration status.[1]

Florida leads the nation in the number of 287(g) agreements—which authorize local law enforcement to perform federal immigration functions.

Florida's strategy has developed in the context of a nationwide trend toward heightened immigration enforcement that intensified at the beginning of 2025 with the inauguration of President Donald Trump. Trump has used executive orders (EOs) to broaden detention and deportation initiatives, remove schools, hospitals, and churches from "sensitive locations" protection, and strengthen collaboration between Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement agencies.[2] Florida leads the nation in the number of 287(g) agreements—which authorize local law enforcement to perform federal immigration functions—holding nearly half of all such agreements nationwide.[3] Reports also note that the first US citizen detained by ICE under these

[1] The Florida Senate. 2023. "SB 1718: Immigration." The Florida Senate. https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2023/1718/BillText/er/HTML.

[2] The Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS). 2025. "Summary of Executive Orders and Other Actions on Immigration - the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS)." February 14, 2025. https://cmsny.org/publications/essential-but-ignored-low-earning-immigrant-healthcare-workers-and-their-role-in-the-health-of-new-york-city/; McTiernan, Caitlin. 2025a. "Protected No More – How states are responding to immigration enforcement in sensitive locations - American Immigration Council." American Immigration Council. April 11. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/how-states-respond-immigration-enforcement-in-sensitive-locations/.

[3] The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)'s Section 287(g) program, enacted in 1996, allows ICE to delegate state and local law enforcement agencies as authorities in identifying, detaining, and serving warrants to undocumented immigrants. (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. 2025. Delegation of Immigration Authority Section 287(G) Immigration and Nationality Act. February 25. https://www.ice.gov/identify-and-arrest/287g). At the time of this writing, across 40 states, ICE is partnered with over 1,000 agencies, with 325 of them located in Florida alone, making it the state with the most law enforcement and state agencies working with ICE (e.g., all 67 Sheriff's

expanded enforcement efforts occurred in Florida, highlighting the state's centrality in the current enforcement landscape.[4] While these measures have drawn national attention and controversy, for immigrants in Florida, their most direct impact is felt in daily life.


U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

This report focuses on the real-life effects of the persistent uncertainty and vulnerability that the current enforcement-first approach to immigration policy has created for immigrants and their US-citizen children. This condition has been referred to as legal precarity.[5] This state not only affects undocumented individuals, but also those with temporary protections such as Temporary Protected Status (TPS), Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and those with pending asylum and naturalization applications who have lawful status. Legal precarity even affects Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) when there are shifts in policy that create new risks and instability.[6] Legal precarity can become legal violence when laws and regulations harm immigrants and their families.[7]

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offices have signed 287(g) agreements). (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. 2025. "ICE awards Florida's state and local law enforcement with 287(g) funds to defend the homeland." September 26. https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ice-awards-floridas-state-and-local-law-enforcement-287g-funds-defend-homeland). Moreover, recent state laws have mandated that law enforcement cooperate with ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. 2025. "Delegation of Immigration Authority Section 287(g) Immigration and Nationality Act." September 8, 2025. https://www.ice.gov/identify-and-arrest/287g).

[4] Frelick, Bill. 2025. "Ten Harmful Trump Administration Immigration and Refugee Policies." Human Rights Watch, February 20. https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/20/ten-harmful-trump-administration-immigration-and-refugee-policies; Llanos, Jackie. 2025. "U.S.-born man held for ICE under Florida's new anti-immigration law." *Florida Phoenix*. April 17. https://floridaphoenix.com/2025/04/17/u-s-born-man-held-for-ice-under-floridas-new-anti-immigration-law/.

[5] Paret, Marcel, and Shannon Gleeson. 2016. "Precarity and Agency Through a Migration Lens." *Citizenship Studies* 20 (3–4): 277–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2016.1158356.

[6] Menjívar, Cecilia. 2006. "Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants' Lives in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 111 (4): 999–1037. https://doi.org/10.1086/499509; Martinez-Aranda, Mirian G. 2023. "Precarious Legal Patchworking: Detained Immigrants' Access to Justice." *Social Problems*, March. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spad009.

[7] Menjívar, Cecilia, and Leisy J. Abrego. 2012. "Legal Violence: immigration law and the lives of Central American immigrants." *American Journal of Sociology* 117 (5): 1380–1421. https://doi.org/10.1086/663575; Aranda, Elizabeth, Elizabeth Vaquera, Heide Castañeda, and Melanie Escue. 2024. "Normalized Expendability: Navigating Immigrant Legal Status During a Global Pandemic." *American Behavioral Scientist*, February. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642241229538.

This study was undertaken in this context. This report documents how both state and federal policies and practices reverberate far beyond their legal texts, affecting individual and family well-being, reshaping family life and household roles, and shaping the contours of social engagement and integration in immigrant communities.

Our findings reveal how economic exploitation, spatial and mobility restriction, and healthcare avoidance, among other factors, shape the lived experience of legal precarity among our participants, producing ripple effects that extend across households, communities, and generations, regardless of their legal status. From work and healthcare to family routines and community engagement, both SB 1718 and recent EOs have created environments of fear, increased surveillance, and uncertainty with detrimental effects for immigrants and their US-citizen children.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Building on a 2024 survey of 466 immigrants in Florida,[8] researchers at the Im/migrant Well-Being Research Center conducted a follow-up qualitative study during the summer of 2025 to capture the lived experiences behind the 2024 findings and how immigrants and their families were adapting to not only SB 1718 and the state's immigration policies but also to new federal enforcement practices, particularly the collaboration of both state and federal enforcement agencies in carrying out immigration enforcement operations.

Fifty-three in-depth, semi-structured interviews were completed with immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, as well as US-citizen adult children of immigrants (all participants were age 18 or older; see **Table 1** for the sample's demographic characteristics). Participants were recruited through grassroots organizations, churches, and trusted community networks. Most interviews were conducted in participants' native language. For this report, pseudonyms are used, personal identifying information is omitted to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, and all quotes in Spanish are translated into English. This research was approved by the University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board and the research team and participants adhered to all state and federal laws in conducting this research and drafting this report.

[8] Aranda, Elizabeth, and Liz Ventura Molina. 2024. "The Impacts of Florida's SB 1718 on Immigrants' Well-Being." Immigrant Well-Being Research Center. https://www.usf.edu/arts-sciences/centers/iwrc/documents/report-sb-1718-final-nov2024.pdf.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Characteristics	*Category*	*Number (n=53)*	*Percentage (%)*
Gender	Women	39	74%
	Men	14	26%
Age	18-29	14	26%
	30-44	20	38%
	45-59	17	32%
	60+	2	4%
Average time living in the US		Mean 10.5	Range 1.5 – 34 years
Region of Origin	Mexico	23	43%
	Central America (Honduras, El Salvador)	5	9%
	South America (Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela)	7	13%
	Caribbean (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad & Tobago)	13	25%
	Africa (Nigeria)	2	4%
	United States	3	6%
Legal Status	Undocumented	26	49%
	Temporary Status (DACA, TPS)	8	15%
	Lawful Permanent Resident	7	13%
	US Citizen	3	6%
	Asylum Seekers	9	17%
Employment Status	Agriculture/ Landscaping	4	8%
	Construction	3	6%
	Domestic work	4	8%
	Service/Hospitality	7	13%
	Professional/technical	11	21%
	Entrepreneurs	3	6%
	Transportation/Delivery	2	4%
	Not employed nor seeking employment	11	21%
	Unemployed	8	15%

Note: Percentages have been rounded and may not total 100%

FINDINGS

Findings from interviews reveal that the effects of state and federal enforcement actions and tactics were far reaching, affecting every facet of participants' lives. These enforcement activities influenced: a) immigrants' work and participation in the economy; b) their housing options and decisions of whether to remain in the state and country; c) levels of fear they had about family separation and resulting social isolation practices; d) their relationships with law enforcement; e) their experiences in detention and the lingering effects once released; f) their health and access to healthcare; g) their children's education and mental well-being; and h) their resilience, practices of resistance, and the community bonds they formed.

Work and Participation in the Economy

The combination of SB 1718 and escalating federal enforcement measures has intensified economic precarity.

Immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, are overrepresented in the most precarious sectors of the labor market including agriculture, hospitality, domestic work, and construction, where legal status becomes a tool for employers to suppress wages and evade regulation.[9] In these sectors, immigrant labor is marked by "normalized expendability," treated as both essential and disposable, especially in contexts where formal labor protections do not apply.[10] The combination of SB 1718 and escalating federal enforcement measures has intensified economic precarity, pushing some immigrants to fully depend on forms of labor that were once supplemental such as delivery driving or small-scale reselling.

For many individuals we interviewed, this precarity was not only about wages but about the loss of mobility that once made survival possible. Concerns regarding being detained and possibly deported restricted daily commutes, leading immigrants to abandon construction jobs or limit themselves to working very close to home. Selena, a

[9] Miller, Linda A. 2007. "The Exploitation of Acculturating Immigrant Populations." *International Review of Victimology* 14 (1): 11–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/026975800701400102; Donato, Katharine M. 2010. "U.S. Migration From Latin America: Gendered Patterns And Shifts." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 630 (1): 78–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716210368104.
[10] Aranda et al., "Normalized Expendability," 2024.

37-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the US for 25 years, explains how this is the situation with her husband.

> **My husband has stopped going to construction work and stays at the ranch all day so he doesn't have to be moving from one place to another… because there's that fear that they could detain him and put him in a deportation process.**

The pervasiveness of this concern extends beyond those without legal status. Abril, a 39-year-old mother from El Salvador who has lived in the US for 8 years, shares her hesitation to drive despite holding Lawful Permanent Resident status.

> **It's that worry that something [could happen], because sometimes my husband reassures me and says, "You don't have, you don't owe anything, you don't have to be afraid, you're here legally, you can show your residency, always drive carefully," and all that. So, that gives me some confidence, but still, that feeling doesn't go away. From what one hears and sees in other cases, it's frightening.**

Fear of being stopped by law enforcement did not only end travel to local job sites. Seasonal migration, a long-standing practice for agricultural workers, has also become too risky under the current enforcement climate. Mirna, a 45-year-old Mexican mother of US-citizen children, who is undocumented and has lived in the US for over 20 years, explains how her family has long relied on traveling out of state for seasonal work when Florida's strawberry harvest ends, but this year, the worry about being stopped while driving north forced them to abandon that plan:

> **We are not going to travel this year, because of fear. Because on the road we don't know what it's like either. And especially since we have two little girls, and if something were to happen to us and the girls, what would happen to them? That's the fear we have, that we just can't travel this year.**

As formal job opportunities narrow, some turn to informal or unstable forms of work. For example, Faustino, a 53-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the US for 25 years, described how his son runs a second-hand shop, however, like other small businesses catering to immigrant communities, the ramping up of enforcement means that customers are not going out to shop, leading to a decline in business that puts small enterprises in jeopardy. Faustino said,

> **My son managed to surpass everything that we earned from the strawberry [fields]. He started a small business. He sells secondhand goods. He has a store… But right now, it's declined. Right now, it's completely ruined. Right now, he is selling, but little by little. Everyone who has a small business, everything is going down. Down, down.**

Like some others, Jorge, a 59-year-old asylum seeker from Cuba who has been in the US for a year and six months, must rely mainly on his side job for income:

> **Right now, at this very moment, I'm doing deliveries, so… I don't have an occupation at all. Last year I worked at a factory, but even then, I was also doing delivery apps, and that went better for me.**

Jorge had been paroled into the country upon seeking asylum. Though he had lawful status to be in the country, he recently received a letter from the government revoking his parole and ordering him to leave the country within 30 days. Jorge's case illustrates how immigrants who are legally allowed to be in the country, are forced out of legal status by policies and EOs introduced by the Trump administration.

The shift to unreliable work also comes with increased risks of discrimination and mistreatment from employers. Beatriz, a 51-year-old LPR from Mexico who has lived in the US for 24 years, describes the patterns she observes at work in which Hispanic workers face unequal treatment compared to their US-born co-workers, highlighting a double standard that has become normalized.

U.S. Department of Agriculture / Preston Keres

> **At my job there are Americans, and usually, they never get reprimanded. But if you are Hispanic, anything—if you stop for a moment, if you converse—it becomes a reason for scrutiny. You always have to be moving. Meanwhile, an American can go to the restroom several times, chat, sit down if they're tired, and no one says anything. But a Hispanic cannot do that. They demand more than what one realistically does, and in the end, you have to comply because you have to support your family. If not, the threats of being fired come or similar things. If you don't do exactly what they expect, they pressure you. I don't know if this is discrimination against Hispanics, but usually, in the places I've worked, it's always been the same.**

Such discriminatory experiences are not limited to immigrants; their US-born children also face ethnic and racial discrimination. Mirna, introduced earlier, describes how her daughter left her job after repeatedly being treated differently from her co-workers. Referencing the discrimination, she said,

> **Maybe it was because she looks a little bit different, another color. I'm the one that thinks that's why because she says, "No, I don't know why they treated me like that. They treated me differently from the other coworkers."**

Exploitation also takes the form of fraudulent schemes that prey on immigrants' need for work. Amanda, a 39-year-old asylum seeker from Venezuela who has lived in the US for 11 years, describes how members of her extended family lost thousands of dollars to a sham recruitment operation:

> **I have some uncles that now, actually, were scammed. It was 200 employees … they each were asked for a $400 deposit … and after collecting those $400 from each of the 200 workers, they were told no, that they were not going to hire them and they took their money… among those 200 there are many who are illegal. So, of course, they took advantage.**

Despite bearing the economic weight of vital industries, immigrant workers in Florida are pushed into increasingly dire choices, from forsaking seasonal migration to piecing together survival through informal means. Their predicament is neither random nor individual; it is the predictable outcome of laws such as SB 1718 and enforcement policies that keep immigrants from being able to travel to work. These policies have not

only restructured job opportunities but also undermined Florida's broader economic stability. Industries reliant on immigrant labor face labor shortages and heightened turnover, putting the state's productivity at risk.[11] Immigrants also contribute substantially to Florida's tax base and workforce growth, meaning that restrictive policies ultimately jeopardize the very economic base that sustains the state.[12]

Families already struggling to maintain employment now face shrinking options for where and how to live.

As work becomes less stable and more dangerous, the ripple effects extend directly into the home. Families already struggling to maintain employment now face shrinking options for where and how to live. Rising rents, the sale of family homes, and the painful consideration of leaving Florida altogether reveal how employment precarity and housing insecurity are deeply intertwined.

Housing and US Settlement

Employment precarity was linked to housing insecurity. Legal status influences not only what kinds of homes immigrants can access, but how securely they can inhabit the space.[13] The current political climate has intensified housing insecurity by fostering a climate of unease and uncertainty, making immigrant tenants more hesitant to report discrimination, unsafe conditions, or seek assistance.[14]

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[11] Garsd, Jasmine. 2024. "A Year Later, Florida Businesses Say the State's Immigration Law Dealt a Huge Blow." NPR, April 26. https://www.npr.org/2024/04/26/1242236604/florida-economy-immigration-businesses-workers-undocumented; Tsoukalas, Alexis, and Esteban L. Santis. 2023. "Florida HB 1617/SB 1718: Potential Economic and Fiscal Impact." Florida Policy Institute. April 26. https://www.floridapolicy.org/posts/florida-hb-1617-sb-1718-potential-economic-and-fiscal-impact.

[12] McConnell, Micaela. 2024. "Immigrant Workers Help Florida Thrive. Anti-Immigrant Policies Threaten That. - American Immigration Council." American Immigration Council. June 26. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/immigrant-workers-help-florida-thrive-anti-immigrant-policies-threaten-that/; Krieger, Sarah. 2025. "The Price of Cruelty: How Trump's Mass Deportation Agenda Endangers Us All." National Immigration Law Center. October 3. https://www.nilc.org/articles/the-price-of-cruelty-how-trumps-mass-deportation-agenda-endangers-us-all/.

[13] Cornelissen, Sharon and Livesey Pack. 2023. "Immigrants' Access to Homeownership in the United States: A Review of Barriers, Discrimination, and Opportunities." Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University. https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/research/files/harvard_jchs_immigrant_homeownership_cornelissen_pack_2023.pdf.

[14] Kort, Alexa, Nina Russell, and Susan J. Popkin. 2025. "HUD's Data Request For Immigration Status Threatens Federal Housing Assistance Nationwide." Urban Institute. September 15. https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/huds-data-request-immigration-status-threatens-federal-housing-assistance-nationwide; Carbonaro, Giulia. 2025. "Study

To adapt to rising housing costs coupled with not working due to fear of traveling to job sites, some participants report having to sell their homes, while others downsized and moved in with family members to consolidate expenses. Families like Mirna's moved in with their adult son to save money since they were no longer traveling north for the harvest.

> **We were renting and the landlord raised the price, and we just couldn't afford it anymore, couldn't make it, so we moved here. Here my son, thank God, he earns a little bit more and can pay for it, and that's why we're here, although … we are helping him because it's not enough. He also is the only one who is supporting us.**

Immigrants being detained was another factor that infused insecurity into their housing situations. Emely, a 49-year-old undocumented immigrant who has lived in the US for almost 7 years, and whose adult son had recently been detained, describes offering her living room as a temporary refuge to his family, anticipating that they would soon be unable to afford rent due to his lost income:[15]

> **I was going to let them live here. I told them in the living room, to come with all the kids, because if they got evicted, where else are they going to go?... I told them, "No, you can stay in the living room at least." Yes. It's affected us a lot.**

The environment of insecurity in which immigrants live also triggers, for some, a desire to leave neighborhoods they consider home, as communities become increasingly surveilled, inhospitable, or unsafe. Mariana, a 51-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the US for 28 years, describes her perception that enforcement is getting closer to her home, instilling a sense of vulnerability and insecurity:

> **Not anymore, [feel safe in my community] because now, they've already arrived here, and a neighbor who is in [an apartment in] another parking area up ahead also said that there too, in that parking lot, they came knocking at dawn. My husband says, "If it gets too bad, it's better we leave and take whatever we have so we don't leave anything behind." It makes me sad, because I tell him our kids won't want to leave.**

Finds Immigration Crackdown Could Slow Housing Market." *Newsweek*, February 9. https://www.newsweek.com/study-finds-immigration-crackdown-could-slow-housing-market-2028405.

[15] We do not disclose Emely nor her son's country of origin to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Although several participants expressed thoughts of leaving Florida, and return to their countries of origin, the majority ultimately spoke about staying. For many, the idea of departure is overwhelming, resulting in an internal struggle in which they weigh concerns about feeling persecuted and ostracized against the desire to maintain the opportunities available for their children in the US. Patricia, a 47-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the US for 25 years, stated:

> **Here is where my family is, here is where we have been and are now. So, I think that's what makes us hesitate, and sometimes we don't even want to think about leaving for another place.**

Participants also express uncertainty about what returning would mean after years of building a life in the US. Some say they would feel like foreigners in their native countries, while others fear going back to the violence and instability from which they had escaped. Selena, the 37-year-old undocumented Mexican introduced earlier, stated:

> **He [husband] had expressed to me his desire to return, but honestly, I don't want to because I'm afraid of the crime in Mexico. I tell my husband, "I am scared because I have my children, and I'm afraid of waking up one day and finding that they've been kidnapped or something like that."**

These experiences and sentiments reveal how housing and settlement has become precarious under increased state and federal immigration enforcement. From having to consolidate households due to finances or someone's detention, to persistent unease in many communities, immigrants now worry about their safety in the places they call home, as well as the possibility of having to leave everything behind.

Fear of Family Separation and Social Isolation

The current political environment is redefining many aspects of daily life for the immigrant community, transforming once-routine activities into calculated risks. Participants describe feeling watched, targeted, hunted, and unsafe when going to work, attending church, or getting groceries. The uncertainty of not knowing if you or your family members will be next puts people in a state of constant alarm and distress. Even those under legal protections express their worries and empathy for the situations that thousands of families are going through. Pedro, a 65-year-old Venezuelan LPR who has lived in the US for 10 years, witnessed law enforcement stopping people to ask for their documents at the grocery store and explained,

> **It's not the same to have legal status as to not have it, I mean, you still see this from last week, I was there at a Publix. I went in and when I came out, I saw four police patrols with their lights on, asking people for their documents. And at first, I was surprised and it shocked me, and then I said, "But wait a minute, you are a permanent resident. How must it feel for someone who isn't, someone without status?" Listen, that must be so hard.**

Love and parenthood become entangled in the legal and emotional burdens that restrictive immigration policies impose.

For many immigrant families, the fear is not just about being detained or deported, but the process of being separated from their loved ones. In this way, love and parenthood become entangled in the legal and emotional burdens that restrictive immigration policies impose. In contexts where legal vulnerability defines everyday life, relationships are not just private affairs but sites where the state exerts power, as immigration status, and the threat of being taken away from one's loved ones, infuses familial bonds with chronic anxiety. This forces parents to navigate daily decisions within the looming possibility of separation from their children, who were often US citizens themselves.[16] Natasha, a 32-year-old Jamaican immigrant who overstayed her visa and has been living in the US for 10 years, captures this anxiety in stark terms:

[16] Kohrt, Brandon A., Francis G. Lu, Emily Y. Wu, Devon E. Hinton, Neil Krishan Aggarwal, Ranna Parekh, Cécile Rousseau, and Roberto Lewis-Fernández. 2018. "Caring for Families Separated by Changing Immigration Policies and Enforcement: A Cultural Psychiatry Perspective." *Psychiatric Services* 69 (12): 1200–1203. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201800076.

> **Are they going to take my kids and put them in the system? I'm not a bad mom. It's just that I don't have status.**

Fear of family separation is not limited to undocumented immigrants. Even those with more secure statuses, such as TPS or LPR, and even US citizens, worry that increased enforcement can jeopardize their family unity. Caroline, a 29-year-old US-born citizen and daughter of undocumented immigrants, describes how heightened enforcement has made her fearful not only for her parents but also for her own safety and that of her child.

> **The other day I was coming home with my son after picking him up from daycare and when I realized there was a sheriff behind me, I felt fear because… from what I've been hearing, it's not only that they're going for undocumented people, it's like when the person that was a US citizen came from a neighboring state and they detained him and put him in a detention center. I start thinking, "Could they put me in a detention center? Am I ready to fight back?" Yes. But I also have my son. I also have my three-year-old. What are they gonna do with him? I do not trust them. Where are they gonna put him? Are they gonna take him back home to my husband? What's gonna happen? And that also is like another worry right now when my parents have them because if they do stop my parents and my son is with them … what are they gonna do with my children? My parents deserve to spend time with their grandchildren, and my children deserve that too. But I do not trust these officials.**

The emotional burden of caregiving under threat of separation is compounded by the moral weight of staying "for the children." Parents express guilt at placing their children in harm's way but also feel immense pressure to remain in Florida or the US to ensure educational and economic opportunities for them. As Angelita, a 43-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico, who has been living in the US for 14 years, stated, "I am here for my children." Similarly, Rosa, a 42-year-old undocumented mother from Mexico who has lived in the US for over 10 years, expressed:

> **Sometimes I would like to [leave]. But because of my children, no, since they're studying here, I think about it more for them. When I get stressed… yes, I would like to leave, but I try to keep going for them.**

These testimonies show that immigration policy is not just a matter of enforcement, it seeps into the intimate spaces of parenting, shaping the choices, silences, and sacrifices that define family life. For many immigrant parents, keeping the family together becomes an act of endurance—they remain in a hostile environment out of obligation to their children's future. The fear of separation, the guilt of not being able to offer protection, and the impossibility of safe alternatives reflect a system that turns care into risk, reshaping what it means to be a family.

To cope with this fear, many employ the strategy of simply staying home. Families describe a self-imposed confinement, avoiding restaurants, churches, parks, and even canceling family vacations and traveling traditions to reduce the risk of being detained. Alberto, a 57-year-old father of three, and an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the US for 27 years, explained:

> **Now, with the limitations we have that we can't drive, we don't go out anymore because you feel that fear that you could be stopped on the street and all that … We have stopped going to church, we have stopped eating at restaurants … stopped going to play in the park, all of that we have tried to avoid, so we don't have to confront the police or someone else on the street …. It's like you just don't feel like going … to church to participate, because you feel like you are being persecuted. They truly see that you are Hispanic or whatever, police stop you and that's where the problems can start. So, we try to avoid all that instead … and we stay home … Sometimes the kids call … "Would you like us to buy something at the store?" Before, we didn't do that, we would just go to the store ourselves and buy whatever we needed, but not now. We have to tell them, "Bring me this, bring me that," whatever it is. Yes, it's made us avoid a lot of things.**

The degree to which immigrants and their families are self-isolating has contributed to what one participant calls "COVID all over again," referencing a re-imposed quarantine logic: staying home not to avoid illness, but to avoid arrest. Guillermina, a 40-year-old undocumented mother from Mexico who has lived in the US for 28 years, explained:

> **[The Church will meet through Zoom or WhatsApp because many parish members have been arrested]. We don't know what conditions will be like; it's just going to be a test run. It's like when COVID happened. This is another COVID. This migration situation is another COVID … Because now, now it's a struggle for survival, to survive, of [thinking] "Oh, I made it home. I was not arrested today, I don't know tomorrow what, what it will be," right? ... [During COVID times you would come home from the supermarket and change outside the house] because you felt like you already had COVID. But now … you feel someone is chasing you. The anxiety increases, the fear. So, what's going to happen now?**

Such accounts reveal how fear has migrated into the private sphere, affecting people's routines, hobbies, and even how they worship. These policies are fracturing social connections and eroding the spaces that are supposed to foment familial and community bonds. Parents that were once involved and active in schools now remain home; individuals who found joy in helping around their communities, such as volunteering, now remain inside, hidden, and in fear. These consequences are being seen in communities throughout the country in the form of fewer people in the streets, less attending church, and less supporting small local businesses. The ripple effects resonate stronger in these same communities but will also affect American society, as the economic repercussions will reach every industry where immigrant labor and patronage are key for their success.[17]

Self-isolating is not limited to undocumented immigrants. Participants with lawful status and even US citizens also describe retreating from social life, avoiding public spaces, and limiting interactions beyond their families. They express unease about being misidentified or targeted because of their appearance or accent. Nereida, a 21-year-old US-born citizen, explains that despite her citizenship, she lives with persistent fear of law enforcement and racial profiling. As such, she stays "hidden." That has become the norm for her and her family:

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[17] Krieger, "The Price of Cruelty," 2025; American Immigration Council. 2025b. "New Data: Immigrants Keep Economy Strong, as Congress Considers Wasting Billions on Mass Deportation - American Immigration Council." February 25. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/press-release/immigrants-keep-economy-strong-as-congress-debates-mass-deportation/.

> **Even my parents are like, "Why are you scared of the police? You're a legal citizen here." And despite that I'm scared of them because they basically represent a threat … what they're doing with deporting these, supposed criminals, is simply being racist and saying that anyone who's born Latino or looks Latino is a criminal … We try to keep ourselves hidden, because we don't want to have problems. We do our jobs. We return home, and … some of us go to church, and what we want to do is spend time with our families.**

Immigrants and their US-citizen kin often develop shared knowledge about when and where it is safest to move or work, cultivating spatial awareness and community surveillance practices to avoid detection in high-risk zones.[18] Their concerns are not unfounded, as racial profiling—which the US Supreme Court has allowed[19]—surveillance, and traffic stops are core mechanisms through which immigration enforcement is operationalized, particularly in states like Florida, where local law enforcement is increasingly deputized to perform immigration functions.[20] Under these conditions, even legal residents and US citizens are not immune. Several interviewees describe knowing people who were detained despite having lawful status or ongoing court cases, creating an atmosphere in which no one feels fully protected.

Fear transforms familiar spaces into zones of unease.

The result has been a collective shrinking of public life. Community members describe avoiding church, school functions, and even health clinics for fear of being detained. For many, fear transforms familiar spaces into zones of unease. Erica, a 49-year-old undocumented Mexican who has lived in the US for 30 years, describes how the rising visibility of law enforcement and anti-immigrant sentiment makes even her daily neighborhood walks feel unsafe.

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[18] Galemba, Rebecca B. 2021. "'They Steal Our Work': Wage Theft and the Criminalization of Immigrant Day Laborers in Colorado, USA." *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 27 (1): 91–112. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-020-09474-z; Garsd, Jasmine. 2025a. "Immigrant Communities Develop New Rules of the Road Amid Deportation Fears." NPR, July 11. https://www.npr.org/2025/07/11/nx-s1-5409325/immigrant-communities-develop-new-rules-of-the-road-amid-deportation-fears.

[19] American Immigration Council. 2025. "How the Supreme Court's Latest Decision Clears the Way for Racial Profiling During Immigration Raids - American Immigration Council." September 9. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/supreme-courts-decision-racial-profiling-immigration-raids/.

[20] Associated Press. 2025. "Florida Universities to Deputize Campus Police for Immigration Enforcement." WUSF, April 12. https://www.wusf.org/politics-issues/2025-04-12/florida-universities-to-deputize-campus-police-immigration-enforcement

> **Now I even go out to walk, and if I come across a patrol car … I already feel afraid that that person might stop me as I walk …. I tell my husband, "Can you believe that I feel scared, that I think, that I believe they could stop me for the simple fact of walking and because of my Latino look." I tell him, "Now imagine … that is why … I don't feel comfortable going out," I tell him, "To places. One because there are more chances that I'll get stopped … because the more you go out, the more you risk it … You feel … that lack of … confidence to go out in the street, to speak your language, or that if someone talks to you in your own language, or to want to listen to my own music" … I no longer feel at ease listening to music in my own home, because I don't know if it bothers my neighbor, and she has that freedom.**

Erica's quote illustrates how immigrants, particularly those who speak Spanish, do not just fear going out, but also are concerned about being profiled in their own homes, by way of playing music in Spanish that might be too loud and result in a neighbor calling the police. As the next section illustrates, more than anything, immigrants and their US-citizen kin avoid law enforcement officials at all costs.

Relations with Law Enforcement

Interactions with law enforcement have profound effects on the daily lives of immigrants in Florida. Since Trump's inauguration, the number of 287(g) partnerships between local law enforcement and ICE has dramatically increased, with agencies in Florida signing the most agreements in the country. This means that, as we see above, immigrants fear that immigration enforcement threatens the ordinary spaces they occupy, such as neighborhoods, roads, workplaces, schools, and places of worship. Many participants describe the added hustle of finding new routes to go to work or buy groceries simply to avoid any contact with law enforcement. This increased surveillance means that they often navigate driving or going to work with added precaution; it even calls into question whether they can report a crime—either as victims or witnesses. As Señora, a 56-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the US for 30 years, stated:

> **We thought the worst had already passed, but we never expected this situation that we are really being hunted in the way that they are attacking us. Because it's not just ICE, it's everyone, everyone. The**

> **highway patrol, the local police, the agricultural police, all the agencies are doing the same thing.**

As Señora indicates, driving has become problematic. SB 1718 invalidates out-of-state licenses for undocumented immigrants who have them, but recently, amid a broader escalation of immigration enforcement, including reports of ICE agents and undercover officers conducting stops on Florida roads, driving to work or picking up children from school has become a legally risky act.[21] Government surveillance, data sharing, and the criminalization of daily life, together reconfigure ordinary spaces into sites of potential enforcement.[22]

Participants are not just concerned about having encounters with law enforcement that could lead to their detainment and deportation, but they also express worries over the mechanisms that officers are using to pull over drivers and stop people. For instance, Guillermina, the 40-year-old undocumented immigrant mother discussed earlier, has two US-born daughters and stated:

> **Before, it was the persecution of people of color, and now it's the legal persecution of people who speak Spanish. And it's not just me, my daughters also feel like this. Because of the color of my skin. Now, if you're in the car, they see that you're Hispanic, and they stop you. So, you feel, you feel bad, you feel persecuted.**

This concern about racial profiling or singling out someone for speaking Spanish is shared by those with legal status, and even US citizens such as Guillermina's daughters. Beatriz, the 51-year-old LPR from Mexico introduced earlier, shares how she feels that law enforcement officials associate anyone who looks or sounds Hispanic with criminality:

> **By being Hispanic, it doesn't matter if you have residency; you cannot change your color. You could have been born here, but your color**

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[21] Salmon, Barrington. 2025. "Immigration Politics & Law Commentary Florida: Immigrants Are Not Welcome Here 'Cruelty Is Not an Immigration Policy.'" *Florida Phoenix*, April 16. https://floridaphoenix.com/2025/04/16/florida-immigrants-are-not-welcome-here/; Palm, Valentina. 2025. "'We Can Do Better,' Palm Beach County Commissioner Says of 'callous' Detainment of Teen." *The Palm Beach Post*, July 30. https://www.palmbeachpost.com/story/news/local/2025/07/30/county-commissioners-request-reports-on-us-citizen-arrest-by-florida-highway-patrol-border-patrol/85364427007/.

[22] Humphris, Rachel, Graham Hudson, and Raffaele Bazurli. 2025. "Digital Internal Bordering: Surveillance, Data-sharing, and the Fate of Sanctuary Cities." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, July, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2025.2513166.

> **doesn't change, not even in your blood. If you were white, like an American, maybe. But the color of a Hispanic is very recognizable. They will always see you as Hispanic, and they will always look at us that way, as criminals, like everything they have said.**

As demonstrated thus far, fear of persecution and racial profiling is not limited to undocumented immigrants, it extends to legal residents and US citizens. And as the next section documents, their fears are not unfounded—not even those of US citizens.

Detention and Its Lingering Effects

For some participants, the fear of detention is not abstract, it has already materialized, as they or their family members have been detained for weeks or months, with little information about their whereabouts and no guarantee of their release. Even a US citizen was detained by ICE, giving credence to fears shared by many legal residents and citizens in our sample.

Ricardo, a 27-year-old undocumented immigrant who has lived in the US for 4 years, is married to Silvia, a Puerto Rican woman with US citizenship. On their way to work, they were apprehended, and both were detained, despite Silvia's attempts to prove her citizenship. Silvia was physically assaulted by officers who did not believe that she was a citizen. Emely, Ricardo's 49-year-old mother who was introduced earlier, describes what happened:

> **They grabbed her, she is from Puerto Rico, and they threw her to the ground … they kicked her all over, and even her fingers were injured and they handcuffed her. And she told them she was a citizen, but they didn't believe her … They didn't believe her.**

The violence Silvia was subjected to caused injuries and emotional trauma that persisted long after her release. Ricardo explains how this affected him, and how he believes that this incident led to Silvia losing their unborn child since she was pregnant when detained.[23]

[23] ICE has arrested and detained pregnant women, in violation of agency policies. Reports also indicate that pregnant women endure shackling, solitary confinement, delayed and substandard prenatal care, care without consent, inadequate food, and medical neglect during detention. (American Civil Liberties Union, American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana, National Immigration Project, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Sanctuary of the South, and Sanctuary Now Abolition Project. 2025. "ACLU, Partners Demand ICE Release Pregnant and Postpartum People from

> **Honestly, I say that if it had only happened to me, not to my wife, it would have been sort of easier, because one knows that in this country, you're undocumented, and you know you're not going to stay here forever, but since they hit her, she was pregnant. Since that day on, about a month later, I lost my child, unfortunately … Because they hit her, threw her to the ground, handcuffed her, and yelled at her, saying she wasn't an American citizen …. [She] doesn't have the accent from her country, being Boricua. So, since she doesn't have it, they said no, that she was lying and that is why they kept us there from 4:55 until nine, with her in handcuffs.**

The White House / Daniel Torok

At the time of our interview with Ricardo, reports had just begun to circulate that immigration enforcement officials in Florida had detained the first US citizen.[24] Since then, reports have surfaced that hundreds of US citizens have been detained as part of federal and state enforcement efforts.[25] Silvia's experience is a harrowing example of the compounded vulnerabilities for women in detention and a testament to the indiscriminate use of force being applied against citizens and innocent individuals.[26]

ICE Detention." Letter to ICE, October 22. https://www.aclu.org/documents/aclu-partners-demand-ice-release-pregnant-and-postpartum-people-from-ice-detention).

[24] Llanos, Jackie. 2025. "U.S.-Born Man Held For ICE Under Florida's New Anti-Immigration Law."

[25] Foy, Nicole. 2025. "We Found That More Than 170 U.S. Citizens Have Been Held by Immigration Agents. They've Been Kicked, Dragged and Detained for Days." ProPublica. October 16. https://www.propublica.org/article/immigration-dhs-american-citizens-arrested-detained-against-will.

[26] Patler, Caitlin, Altaf Saadi, and Paola Langer. 2025. "The Health-related Experiences of Detained Immigrants With and Without Mental Illness." *Journal of Migration and Health* 11 (January): 100302. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmh.2025.100302; Human Rights Watch, Americans for Immigrant Justice, and Sanctuary of the South. 2025. "'You Feel Like Your Life Is Over': Abusive Practices at Three Florida Immigration Detention Centers Since January 2025." https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2025/07/us_florida0725%20web_3.pdf.

Ricardo remained in detention for months. His story reveals how detention functions not merely as a legal mechanism, but as a deeply dehumanizing experience. The angst and distress that accompanied the detention process took a toll on his mental and physical health. Ricardo recounts this when he mentions how being imprisoned affected him:

> **I knew it was daytime because I talked to my wife during the day, but when night came, I spent all night with my eyes open because I couldn't sleep because of the light. There were 78 of us in the [detention center], all on the floor, lying there, freezing, because they keep the air conditioning super cold, without eating, without showering, without using the restroom, without anything …. And psychologically, mentally, I was unwell, I was very bad. It's inhumane, because they treat you so badly there …. They hit you and all, because they hit you, they mistreat you, they insult you … they take away your phones, they take everything. There were phones, but they were super expensive to make a call. You only have the right once or twice a month to see your judge if you have court with the lawyers, if not you could be there your whole life. [There are] people who go to court, those who don't, [and] those who are denied, get deported. But they treat you very badly. It's something you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy.**

Not only were detained participants' personal experiences traumatic, but they also witnessed abuse toward other detained individuals and heard stories about the mistreatment and injustices that others suffered. Ricardo was particularly disturbed by stories about avoidable deaths. Ricardo explains,

> **There were people who had seizures, right there in the center where I was, I didn't see it personally … that anyone died, but I was told that had happened. Fellow detained people that had been there for a long time told me that several died inside the center …. There are cameras, but the cameras do not work, they are useless. And in the room [sic] there were two cameras, and there was a moment when that [Russian guy] grabbed me by the neck …. And there was an officer watching through the window, sort of like betting to see who would win. And I didn't say anything, I'm not going to do anything because in reality what I wanted was to get out of there already. The better you behave, the sooner you get released.**

In this quote Ricardo not only talks about deaths of detained individuals that could have been prevented, but also explains that he was assaulted while in detention and that he could not fight back because that would be considered misbehavior, which he wanted to avoid so he could be released sooner. Ricardo later explains how the trauma of detention still haunts him, describing insomnia, fear, and emotional withdrawal.

> **I confuse day with night and night with day, I still haven't adjusted. I mean, the same anxiety makes me hungrier. I eat, eat, eat, and eat, but tell me, what's the point of eating and eating if there is no money for you to buy food later? I can't sleep, [you feel] like they can break down the door and they can detain me again. I can't see a patrol car now because—my wife tells me to calm down, [but] I can't see a patrol car, or anyone, not even walking because, I'm scared. If I'm somewhere, [I'm better off leaving] … It's something so unjust, because you come here to work, you don't come to harm anyone … Today more than ever [sic] not even driving, or going to the doctor, or going to public places where there are lots of people. I just stay locked up here.**

Ricardo's anxiety made him eat more, but he references not being able to purchase food given that he lost his job when he was detained and could not work for the foreseeable future. Overall, the experience of detention fractured trust in authorities and in the social world itself, leaving Ricardo to remain shuttered in his home.

Luis, a 24-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the US for 4 years and has two US-citizen children, was detained after a routine traffic stop. He describes the psychological toll of isolation and the lingering fear of leaving his house:

> **[In detention centers] I think it's the same as being in prison. You are … they treat you a bit worse. But why are you going to treat me like this if we [are] equals? … [Now], I mean, I don't go out. Because, well, everything is being tracked. So, I can't drive. I can't go out. I have to stay. Now I feel fear ... Now I see the police and I get scared. I mean, it's like I think, "Oh, I hope they don't stop me" … I am more afraid. I mean, fear that I didn't feel before, you understand? ... [Now] I'm much more cautious and I'm always alert, watching for things.**

Luis also describes the mental and physical consequences of detention, when weeks after release he still experiences trauma and anxiety. He could not sleep, and his appetite has decreased significantly, as he lost 20 pounds while in detention:

> **The insomnia I felt when I had just gotten out. I couldn't fall asleep. I would fall asleep around 3:00 am. Like your mind still hasn't processed that you are out. You are like with that fear. Like, "They're going to come now and wake me up." Yes, it affects you … I don't eat as much as I used to. It was like they forced me to eat just a little … I lost 20 pounds … It affects you. It wears you down. It messes with your mind.**

Following his release, Luis needed medical care, but he was afraid to go to the hospital. He also felt emotionally withdrawn and exhausted. Detention's effects were long-lasting:

> **I didn't go to the hospital … Because I was afraid they'd do something to me again … I felt shut down. Like tired of everything.**

Such symptoms are consistent with clinical findings on post-detention trauma. Research shows that formerly detained immigrants experience high rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, even years after release.[27] Moreover, the trauma of detention is never borne alone. Families endure the economic and emotional fallout. In both Ricardo's and Luis' cases, their spouses had to take over all household responsibilities, coordinate legal efforts, and manage childcare, all while trying to find ways to replace their husbands' lost income. Ricardo's wife, Silvia, for instance, considered moving their family into a single room in Emely's house to cut costs while he was detained. These experiences reflect how legal precarity of one family member reverberates across the household.[28]

For the men interviewed, the fact of being held without clarity or closure was one of the most destabilizing aspects of their experiences. Their testimonies about the detention centers' conditions resonate with recent investigations documenting overcrowded cells, denial of medical care, extreme temperatures, unsanitary conditions, and even preventable deaths at some of Florida's largest detention facilities such as Krome in Miami-Dade County, Glades in Moore Haven, Baker just west of Jacksonville, and the

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[27] Dadras, Omid, and Mohammad Sediq Hazratzai. 2025b. "The Silent Trauma: U.S. Immigration Policies and Mental Health." *The Lancet Regional Health - Americas* 44 (March): 101048. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2025.101048; Pillai, Akash, Drishti Pillai, and Samantha Artiga. "Potential Impacts of Mass Detention," 2025.

[28] Lovato, Kristina, and Laura S. Abrams. 2020. "Enforced Separations: A Qualitative Examination of How Latinx Families Cope With Family Disruption Following the Deportation of a Parent." *Families in Society the Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 102 (1): 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389420923470.

Everglades detention center.[29] These facilities have reported spikes in illness, hunger, suicides, and even maternal health neglect.

What emerges from these experiences is a portrait of detention as institutionalized trauma, not only inflicting physical and psychological harm but rupturing familial bonds, destabilizing finances, and producing long-term emotional scars. Moreover, even the threat of detention and deportation affects physical and mental health, as the next section demonstrates.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

[29] Jordan, Miriam, and Jazmine Ulloa. 2025. "Concerns Grow Over Dire Conditions in Immigrant Detention." *The New York Times*, June 28. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/28/us/immigrant-detention-conditions.html; Garsd, Jasmine. 2025b. "In Recorded Calls, Reports of Overcrowding and Lack of Food at ICE Detention Centers." NPR, June 6. https://www.npr.org/2025/06/05/nx-s1-5413364/concerns-over-conditions-in-u-s-immigration-detention-were-hearing-the-word-starving; Human Rights Watch, Americans for Immigrant Justice, and Sanctuary of the South, "'You Feel Like Your Life Is Over'," 2025; Ceballos, Ana, Alex Harris, and Claire Healy. 2025. "Giant bugs, heat and a hospital visit: Inside Alligator Alcatraz's first days." *Miami Herald*. July 29. https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article310130645.html; ACLU, American Oversight, and Physicians for Human Rights. 2024. "Deadly Failures: Preventable Deaths in U.S. Immigrant Detention." Research Report, June 21. https://www.aclu.org/publications/deadly-failures-preventable-deaths-in-us-immigrant-detention.

Health and Healthcare Access

Prolonged exposure to enforcement-related stress has been linked to anxiety, depression, and PTSD-like symptoms in both adults and children.

Immigrants' retreat from social life, the ensuing social isolation, combined with fear, take their toll on their and their families' well-being. Immigrants reported symptoms of insomnia, depressive episodes, and hypervigilance, which are consistent with chronic stress and trauma. Prolonged exposure to enforcement-related stress has been linked to anxiety, depression, and PTSD-like symptoms in both adults and children, extending also to those with legal status.[30]

Beyond fear, the physical and mental health consequences of an enforcement-first environment are visible in everyday life. Participants described the effects resulting from constant vigilance and uncertainty and what these effects have done to their bodies, highlighting sleep disturbances, anxiety, appetite loss, and persistent fatigue as common experiences they are facing. These struggles are not isolated to a few interviewees; they are present throughout all the interviews, regardless of the participants' legal status. Laura, a 43-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the US for 22 years, describes how rest has become nearly impossible, her mind unable to stop replaying fears of raids, detentions, and family separation:

> **You end up unable to sleep … always thinking, "What will happen tomorrow? What will tomorrow bring?" Or "If I can go to this place? Will I return?" … I think it affects you … Sometimes I'm falling asleep at one in the morning … I get up later, at like three in the morning, and then I sleep for a little while, and I get up at like five in the morning, and I sleep for an hour, and then get up at six to put my daughter on the bus.**

[30] Kohrt et al., "Caring for Families Separated by Changing Immigration Policies and Enforcement," 2018; American Immigration Council. 2021. "U.S. Citizen Children Impacted by Immigration Enforcement - American Immigration Council." June 24. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/us-citizen-children-impacted-immigration-enforcement/; Martínez, Airín D., Lillian Ruelas, and Douglas A. Granger. 2018. "Household Fear of Deportation in Relation to Chronic Stressors and Salivary Proinflammatory Cytokines in Mexican-origin Families post-SB 1070." *SSM - Population Health* 5 (June): 188–200. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2018.06.003; Dadras, Omid, and Mohammad Sediq Hazratzai. 2025a. "The Silent Trauma: U.S. Immigration Policies and Mental Health." *The Lancet Regional Health - Americas* 44 (March): 101048. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2025.101048.

For many, the constant reminder through the news and social media of the reality and closeness of the threat has permanently invited stress, anxiety, sadness, and insomnia into their lives. Selena, the undocumented mother discussed earlier, explained:

> **Sometimes I can't sleep. I tell my husband, "I feel anxious." Sometimes I feel very nervous, sometimes very sad—especially when I see the videos from here in the city where we live. People on Facebook post that there are immigration vehicles in certain places, "Do not to pass through there." But sometimes they post videos showing how people are being taken, people going to work, in their work clothes, and it makes me so sad because I put myself in their place and say, "What if that were my husband, what if that was my case?" There are people, there are wives at home waiting for them, children waiting for them, and that makes me cry a lot sometimes, because we're human beings. These are people who are only trying to help their families, to have a better life, which for many reasons they can't achieve in their own countries. And sometimes I read the comments, and I see people saying, "Well, if they don't want that to happen, they should just do things right, legalize themselves." The problem is that we all want to be legal in this country, but we're not given that opportunity. So, if it were that easy, there wouldn't be undocumented people in this country. And that just … it distresses me, it stresses me out, and sometimes it affects me to where I can't sleep, I can't rest. Sometimes I'm just left with that sadness.**

Some describe physical manifestations of stress such as hair loss, loss of appetite and weight, and fatigue that felt paralyzing. Emely, the undocumented mother discussed earlier, explains how the stress affects her appetite and makes her feel fatigued:

> **I feel stressed … Because I get hungry, but when I look at the food, I lose my appetite. I don't know what's happening, honestly—it's like something is draining my energy. Look, I really do feel very tired. People tell me, "Hey, the more you rest, the lazier you're becoming," but I feel weighed down, as they say—low, without energy—all I want is [my] bed. My body just asks for [my] bed.**

Like many other patterns, the physical manifestation of the stress associated with uncertainty and insecurity was found among immigrants across legal statuses. Sarah, a 28-year-old Haitian immigrant with TPS who has lived in the US for 5 years, stated,

> **Sometimes I even wake up out of my sleep screaming from nightmares of being deported and being detained. It's, it's really not a nice feeling, and I really wish everything would go back to how they used to be …. My mood has definitely changed. I'm more, I'm angrier and definitely have been eating less. I've lost like 50 pounds.**

Mental and physical health conditions also aggravated pre-existing conditions. Amanda, the Venezuelan introduced earlier who had an active asylum case pending, stated:

> **Yes, [I've noticed changes], and I can tell you it's because of this. I don't have any other problems, but I know that when there are changes in my normal life, it affects me again. I'm eating less—unbelievably—and I've lost about 30 pounds … It's the day-to-day stress, of what's going to happen, what could happen. And I suffer from insomnia, and when something like this happens, I relapse. Right now, I'm not sleeping well. I have less energy and I'm more tired."**

Many of those whose mental and physical health are affected by the current enforcement climate find that stories about other immigrants' experiences aggravate these conditions. Mariana, the 51-year-old undocumented immigrant introduced earlier, is suffering from severe stress not only because she worries about her family, but because she empathizes with the struggles that others in her community are going through. She recently heard that a set of parents in the community had been detained and their two children, ages 12 and 18, were left alone. She explains how this affected her:

> **[I've noticed more stress]. Yes, the sleep—sometimes you fall asleep and wake up in the middle of the night thinking, "Oh my God." I think about the children of that [detained] woman who are left alone. I think, "Oh my God, how many kids didn't have their dad come home tonight?" And my husband says, "Can you imagine how many kids—?" The day they did that [raid] in [city in Florida], [he said], "Can you imagine how many kids didn't have their dad come home?" Yes, it's stressful—it takes away your sleep, makes you depressed. Your hair starts falling out, everything."**

These testimonies reveal that the health repercussions of immigration enforcement are tangible and worrisome. Chronic stress, insomnia, and psychosomatic symptoms are

embodied legal precarity, leaving a physical record of the fear and uncertainty these individuals must add to the normal stress load of everyday life. For many, even rest and sleep are dependent on the political climate as they experience their bodies and minds being affected while having to fight these consequences as well as they can and with the limited resources they have.

U.S. Department of Agriculture / Lance Cheung

None of the participants in our study sought health or mental health services for these conditions. In fact, the climate of fear is so pervasive that it also affects the likelihood that participants seek any form of healthcare at all.

Policies that embed immigration surveillance within healthcare infrastructure can deter individuals from seeking care.

Although SB 1718 does not explicitly restrict care, its symbolic and practical implications have introduced new fears among immigrants. Policies that embed immigration surveillance within healthcare infrastructure can deter individuals from seeking care.[31] Rescinding protections that once shielded healthcare settings from

[31] Rohde, Katherine. 2022. "Immigration Surveillance in Health Care." *The Regulatory Review*. June 6. https://www.theregreview.org/2022/06/06/rohde-immigration-surveillance-in-health-care/; Martinez, Omar, Elwin Wu, Theo Sandfort, Brian Dodge, Alex Carballo-Dieguez, Rogeiro Pinto, Scott Rhodes, Eva Moya, and Silvia Chavez-Baray. 2015. "Evaluating the Impact of Immigration Policies on Health Status Among Undocumented Immigrants: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 17 (3): 947–70. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-013-9968-4; Wang, Rita Y., Maria Campos Rojo, Sondra S. Crosby, and Serena Rajabiun. 2021. "Examining the Impact of Restrictive Federal Immigration Policies on Healthcare Access: Perspectives From Immigrant Patients Across an Urban Safety-Net Hospital." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 24 (1): 178–87. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-021-01177-9.

immigration enforcement has heightened fear and mistrust across immigrant communities, and by mandating hospitals to collect immigration data from prospective patients, while also navigating national enforcement policies, Florida's SB 1718 and Trump's EOs have introduced precisely the kind of policy mechanisms that have been shown to deter health access and undermine public health efforts.[32]

Florida is among the first states to directly link immigration status to healthcare.

While Florida is not alone in its enforcement tactics, it is among the first states to so directly link immigration status to healthcare access, an approach that has produced what researchers refer to as "chilling effects," patterns where immigrants and their families forgo necessary care out of fear that contact with public institutions may expose them to immigration enforcement.[33] Our 2024 data revealed that SB 1718 created conditions in which immigrants reported high levels of healthcare avoidance, particularly among undocumented immigrants, those with temporary legal statuses, and those experiencing financial hardships.[34] This research reveals the spillover effects of policies meant for undocumented immigrants onto lawfully present immigrants and US-citizen family members, leading to reductions in participation in essential programs, increased reluctance to seek healthcare, and toxic stress among children in mixed-status families.[35]

Nowhere is the convergence of legal precarity and structural violence more evident than in the realm of healthcare. Some interviewees report skipping essential

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[32] Pillai, Akash, Drishti Pillai, and Samantha Artiga. 2025. "Potential Impacts of Mass Detention and Deportation Efforts on the Health and Well-Being of Immigrant Families | KFF." KFF. May 14. https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/potential-impacts-of-mass-detention-and-deportation-efforts-on-the-health-and-well-being-of-immigrant-families/.

[33] Friedman, Abigail S., and Atheendar S. Venkataramani. 2021. "Chilling Effects: US Immigration Enforcement and Health Care Seeking Among Hispanic Adults." *Health Affairs* 40 (7): 1056–65. https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.02356; Aranda, Elizabeth, Liz Ventura Molina, Elizabeth Vaquera, Emely Matos Pichardo, and Osaro Iyamu. 2025. "Hesitation to Seek Healthcare Among Immigrants in a Restrictive State Context." *Social Sciences* 14 (7): 433. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14070433.

[34] Aranda et al., "Hesitation to Seek Healthcare Among Immigrants in a Restrictive State Context," 2025.

[35] Hacker, Karen, Maria Elise Anies, Barbara Folb, and Leah Zallman. 2015. "Barriers to Health Care for Undocumented Immigrants: A Literature Review." *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, October, 175. https://doi.org/10.2147/rmhp.s70173; Martinez, Omar, Elwin Wu, Theo Sandfort, Brian Dodge, Alex Carballo-Dieguez, Rogeiro Pinto, Scott Rhodes, Eva Moya, and Silvia Chavez-Baray. 2015. "Evaluating the Impact of Immigration Policies on Health Status Among Undocumented Immigrants: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 17 (3): 947–70. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-013-9968-4; Pillai, Akash, Drishti Pillai, and Samantha Artiga. 2025. "Potential Impacts of Mass Detention and Deportation Efforts on the Health and Well-Being of Immigrant Families | KFF." KFF. May 14. https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/potential-impacts-of-mass-detention-and-deportation-efforts-on-the-health-and-well-being-of-immigrant-families/.

appointments, rationing medication, or relying on herbal remedies rather than risk contact with law enforcement in healthcare settings. Mariana, the 51-year-old undocumented mother introduced earlier, stated:

> **Today I missed my dentist appointment. Because I didn't have anyone to take me. My daughter no longer wants me to drive, because she's afraid. She says, "If they take you, what are we going to do now?"**

It was not just the undocumented who are affected by fear of traveling to medical appointments or accessing healthcare. As Mariana discusses, she does not take her US-citizen son to the doctor because he does not have health insurance, but also because of the same factors that keep her from going to the dentist. As such, they have turned to home remedies to cure ailments:

> **I haven't taken my son [to the hospital] anymore for that same reason, because he doesn't have health insurance, and with everything they're saying, we just hold off. We look for home remedies sometimes to treat ourselves, because I'm afraid.**

Gloria, a 52-year-old LPR from Honduras who has lived in the country for 2 years, poignantly states that questions about patients' status sometimes were asked before even assessing their health concerns:

> **Your status—that's the first thing. They don't ask, "What's wrong with you? Why are you here?" [They ask], "What's your immigration status?" I think, and I'll say it again, international human rights should look into this, because if a person, a human being, is sick and needs medical attention, their immigration status shouldn't matter. They have to be treated.**

Gloria proceeded to talk about a former colleague who would not seek medical attention when sick for fear of going out into public spaces, as if she was on house arrest:

> **I know someone, a former coworker, who doesn't leave her house, she's rooted, she's basically under house arrest. She got sick with the flu, and we had to help her by bringing things from Walmart so she could recover. And I feel that's not fair, because she couldn't [go to the doctor].**

Institutions meant to provide care can transform into sources of fear for immigrants and their US-citizen children.

Healthcare avoidance is not just a matter of individual choice, but a direct consequence of restrictive policies. These "chilling effects" lead to broad declines in health outcomes and healthcare access among immigrant families, including delayed diagnosis, untreated chronic conditions, and increased preventable suffering, as well as overreliance on emergency care, which leads to higher medical costs.[36] In this way, institutions meant to provide care can transform into sources of fear for immigrants and their US-citizen children, especially in policy contexts where legal status shapes access, visibility, and vulnerability.[37] When laws like SB 1718 make this transformation explicit, they turn public goods into sites of threat and surveillance, which not only undermines immigrant health but corrodes the nation's trust in the public health system. From the perspective of many immigrants, the risks associated with detention or deportation, including potential family separation and medical neglect, outweigh the risks of untreated health conditions.

Children's Education and Mental Well-Being

Immigration enforcement policies have led to the unavoidable consequence of affecting even young children, most often US citizens, in immigrant households, shaping how they learn, grow, and imagine their futures. For many of the families interviewed, the fear of family separation is not only the concern of adults but has become a constant backdrop in the lives of their children. Angelita, introduced earlier as a 43-year-old undocumented mother, describes how her daughter, upon seeing her mother after school every day, expresses her relief that her mother has not been taken away by ICE:

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[36] Alarcon, Fabricio J. 2022. "The Migrant Crisis and Access to Health Care." *PubMed* 8 (4): 20–25. https://doi.org/10.32481/djph.2022.10.006; Nunn, Emily Baumgaertner, Nina Agrawal, and Jessica Silver-Greenberg. 2025. "Migrants Are Skipping Medical Care, Fearing ICE, Doctors Say." *The New York Times*, May 9. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/08/health/migrants-health-care-trump.html; Friedman, Abigail S., and Atheendar S. Venkataramani. 2021. "Chilling Effects: US Immigration Enforcement and Health Care Seeking Among Hispanic Adults." *Health Affairs* 40 (7): 1056–65. https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.02356; Pillai, Akash, Drishti Pillai, and Samantha Artiga. 2025. "Potential Impacts of Mass Detention and Deportation Efforts on the Health and Well-Being of Immigrant Families | KFF." KFF. May 14. https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/potential-impacts-of-mass-detention-and-deportation-efforts-on-the-health-and-well-being-of-immigrant-families/; Rohde, Katherine. 2022. "Immigration Surveillance in Health Care." *The Regulatory Review*. June 6. https://www.theregreview.org/2022/06/06/rohde-immigration-surveillance-in-health-care/.

[37] 8. *Ibid*

> **[My daughter] would go to school and always came back saying, "Mom, I was scared," she said, "That when I came back, you wouldn't be here anymore." And every day, when she'd get to the bus stop … she'd always come and say, "Mom, you're here!" "Yes, my daughter," I tell her.**

Children raised under such distress internalize this fear, sometimes moderating their own ambitions or independence to protect their parents by assuming responsibilities and pressures far beyond their years. Guillermina, the mother with two US-citizen daughters, explains:

> **We get home around five, five thirty, six at the latest, and by six thirty or six forty they start calling, "Mom, are you okay? Did something happen?" "No, we're stuck in traffic." And now they say, "Oh, don't worry, I'll go to the supermarket, it's fine, I'll go." Like the older one says, "I'll take my sister to the clinic, don't worry." So, they've taken on the role of giving us that security, doing it for us.**

Instead of focusing on schooling and friends, adolescents and young adults, of which many are US citizens, are having to drive, translate, get groceries, and do other tasks for

their immigrant parents to shield them from ICE. These tasks take away from their free time and make them transition into adult roles. Although this quick transition to adulthood illustrates their resilience and resourcefulness, it can also have negative consequences for their educational trajectories and their emotional and mental well-being.[38] Children act as brokers for their families; when it occurs, youth are likely to face elevated stress levels and have increased risk for anxiety and depression.[39] For older adolescents and young adults, these pressures often translate into academic challenges, with some postponing college enrollment to help their families manage transportation and income needs. Mariana, the mother of four US-born children, explains how her US-citizen teenage son did not apply for college because he needed to drive his father to work and help him throughout the day.

> **Yes, both of them [children] say they want to continue their education. Also, my 18-year-old son, he already had plans to apply and start studying, maybe a short program, but still to study. But now, with how things are, I don't think [he'll continue his education] ... I think we're going to hold off, because he's the one who drives so my husband can work. He tells me, "Mom, don't worry." He says, "I'll study, but we have to wait and see if things get better, because Dad can't drive."**

Young adults, like Jay—a 20-year-old US citizen born of undocumented Mexican parents—are having to become the heads of their households faster than they normally would. Jay had plans to continue his academic aspirations but decided to go into the military after college to see if that would open avenues to legalize his parents. For the moment, however, he has had to put those plans on pause because he has the responsibility of putting his parents' well-being and protection first:

> **I'm 20, finishing up my bachelor's right now. And I was gonna go for my master's too, but I have to go to the military to speed up that**

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[38] Todd, Hannah, and Eliza Martin. 2020. "Children of Immigrants and Their Mental Health Needs | Think Global Health." Think Global Health. August 20. https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/children-immigrants-and-their-mental-health-needs.

[39] East, Patricia L. 2010. "Children's Provision of Family Caregiving: Benefit or Burden?" *Child Development Perspectives* 4 (1): 55–61. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2009.00118.x; Oznobishin, Olga, and Jenny Kurman. 2016. "Family Obligations and Individuation Among Immigrant Youth: Do Generational Status and Age at Immigration Matter?" *Journal of Adolescence* 51 (1): 103–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.05.005; Subramoney, Sivenesi, Eric A. Walle, Alexandra Main, and Dalia Magaña. 2025. "Cultural Brokering in Immigrant Families." *Child Development Perspectives*, January. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12539; Martinez, Charles R., Heather H. McClure, and Mark Eddy. 2008. "Language Brokering Contexts and Behavioral and Emotional Adjustment Among Latino Parents and Adolescents." *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 29 (1): 71–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431608324477.

> **[immigration] process. As for sleep, yeah. I mean, I haven't been able to sleep as much just 'cause I've been driving my parents, my dad to work. So, I have to wake up at 6:00 in the morning to drive him to work, come back, and then. I want to protect my family as much as I can.**

Children who live with the possibility of a parent's detention or deportation often struggle to concentrate or engage fully in school.

Children who live with the possibility of a parent's detention or deportation often struggle to concentrate or engage fully in school, as chronic fear and instability can interfere with learning, attendance, and emotional regulation.[40] Some parents describe how their children's school performance has declined as their worries have deepened, fearing being separated from their own parents. Helena, a 52-year-old undocumented mother from Mexico who has lived in the country for 24 years, describes her daughter's reaction when she realized that she might need to take care of her parents, particularly if they leave the country or are deported:

> **I tell my daughter, "When you make it, what I would love most is for you to finish your degree." Once we can't work anymore, I tell her, "I'll go back." But I'll go back because she tells me … "Oh, so, Mom, the only bad thing is that I'm going to have to pay for everything, and I'll have to study hard, because my sister will already be older too, and I'll have to take care of you… I'll have to pay for everything."**

Even if it is a hardship, US-citizen children often insist on helping parents to preserve family well-being, as this quote illustrates.

Immigrant parents also share that their children are worried about classmates being detained or deported. Mariana, for example, explained what her 15-year-old US-citizen son told her:

> **He told me that some kids at school said [ICE] was going to the high school. And he says, "I'm worried, because I have friends." He says, "They don't have the papers that I have to stay in this country." He says, "They came from Mexico, and they came when they were older.**

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[40] Suárez-Orozco, Carola, Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Robert Teranishi, and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco. 2011. "Growing up in the Shadows: The Developmental Implications of Unauthorized Status." *Harvard Educational Review* 81 (3): 438–73. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.81.3.g23x203763783m75.

> **Not as babies, they came here when they were already grown up, but they've learned the language." He says. But yes … he already knows.**

Marina's son's concern is not misplaced. There have been increasing reports that immigrant minors are not just being detained but are being held in adult detention facilities.[41]

Participants discuss how they are beginning to see their own fears of immigration enforcement in their children. For instance, Selena explains how her children make sure they are behaving so they won't draw law enforcement officials' attention to them when they are in the car:

> **That worry, those nerves of sometimes just looking, especially when we go out, they're just looking around everywhere … Sometimes we run into patrol cars that just pass by, but they … I've heard her [daughter] tell her younger siblings, "Sit up straight because the police are coming. Don't move, don't turn around because the police are coming." So, I feel the stress they live with too, because of all this.**

Like many other trends noted thus far, the effects on children are not just in families where parents are undocumented. For example, Abril, the 39-year-old LPR from El Salvador, talks about how fear is paralyzing her and her children:

> **It scares me and it paralyzes me, and I even feel afraid to take them [children] to the store, afraid they might see or witness something like that. Or sometimes we're in the car, and even though we try not to let them know too much about what's going on, they say, "Mom, there's the police." [sic] …. that fear paralyzes us many times.**

The psychological effects of chronic stress and fear are profound, as children have become more quiet, sad, depressed, anxious, and scared. Several participants mention sleep and appetite disturbances among their children, which can affect their physical health and development. Mariana states:

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[41] Egozi, Gabriella. 2025. "Boy, 15, briefly detained at 'Alligator Alcatraz,' attorney says." July 21. NBC South Florida, https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/boy-15-briefly-detained-at-alligator-alcatraz-attorney-says/3662637/.

> **I've noticed nervousness in him … I tell him I'm going to take you to the doctor. Because he even does this thing with his foot, and before he didn't. It's like he gets anxious and starts shaking his foot like that, and I tell him, "Why are you doing that?" And he says, "I don't know," he says, "I do it without realizing it," but it's because he's stressed.**

Angelita explains how her daughter did not want to eat as she was thinking about her godfather who had been deported:

> **Now she doesn't want to eat. Some days she eats well, some days she doesn't, some days she's sad, some days she's happy, but she's a child. The other day she didn't want to eat and said, "Oh, Mom, I don't want to eat, because is my godfather eating?" And I tell her, "Yes, yes, sweetie, he's eating." "Do they give him soda?" she asked, and I told her, "Yes." But she kept thinking about him. And it really did affect her a lot.**

Although these struggles often go unseen, they represent a major form of collateral damage in the implementation of immigration enforcement policies and tactics, with parents and children maintaining constant vigilance while checking routes, rehearsing what to do in case of detention, and worrying about their livelihoods. In these ways, the reach of state laws and federal enforcement extends directly into homes and classrooms, shaping not just family life but children's education, health, and development. As these accounts reveal, the stress of living under constant surveillance undermines the very futures parents are trying to protect, resulting in a generation of US citizens that lives under conditions of uncertainty while carrying the emotional weight of a system designed to scrutinize and repress their families.

Resilience, Resistance, and Community Bonds

Churches and faith communities have become primary sources of emotional support.

Despite the mental health toll of dealing with constant uncertainty and distress, many immigrants avoid formal psychological services due to stigma, cost, or fear of institutional exposure.[42] Instead, churches and

[42] Derr, Amelia Seraphia. 2015. "Mental Health Service Use Among Immigrants in the United States: A Systematic Review." *Psychiatric Services* 67 (3): 265–74. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201500004; Dumke, Lars, Sarah Wilker,

faith communities have become primary sources of emotional support, though even these spaces are not immune to threat. In this context, silence, invisibility, and withdrawal become survival strategies. However, we also see the unbreakable resilience that this community shows in the face of unmeasurable hardship.

For many, prayer has become a form of therapy and a way to manage the fear and distress they are experiencing daily. Faith allows them to reclaim a sense of peace and gives them strength to continue moving forward. Beyond providing a place to find solace, participants indicate that churches and faith-based organizations are also useful for finding food assistance, sharing information about their rights, and receiving guidance and resources to help them manage not only stress but the complicated legal procedures they may have to navigate if they are detained. Whether through volunteering at their local churches or simply by connecting with others going through similar struggles, individuals can cope and regain some semblance of a routine. As Faustino, introduced earlier, put it,

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Tobias Hecker, and Frank Neuner. 2024. "Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Care for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in High-income Countries: A Scoping Review of Reviews Mapping Demand and Supply-side Factors Onto a Conceptual Framework." *Clinical Psychology Review* 113 (August): 102491. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2024.102491.

> **I belong to the Church … What helps us here right now, since I have a big family, is that we always talk to each other and go to church. That's what has helped us a lot. The church. When we've run out of food, we've gone to a church.**

Church is also a site in which immigrants and US citizens can connect with other members of their community who are facing similar challenges. Candy, a 54-year-old LPR from Ecuador who has lived in the US for 2 years, stated:

> **[The Church has helped me maintain a sense of community] because we have our brothers and sisters there who are our friends.**

Religion and the church are not the only ways for immigrants to build solidarity networks and feel supported. Advocacy groups, schools, and legal clinics are supporting immigrants by guiding them on how to create family preparedness plans, knowing what rights they have, and creating emergency communication plans in the event that they are detained.[43] They also provide resources on how immigrants can ensure that their children do not go into foster care should a parent be detained or deported, to lessen the trauma of family separation.

Lastly, many of our participants display their resilience by contradicting the political discourse in the media about immigrant criminality and setting the record straight. They assert their dignity and humanity by confidently delineating their contributions to US society. Patricia, the 47-year-old undocumented immigrant and mother of three introduced earlier, asserts:

> **I don't feel like a criminal. I don't feel—I'm not a criminal! I'm a person who is simply trying to have a better life, I've proved that, I've proved it. I've raised independent, hardworking children, and I'm still here too. I can show that I haven't had any problems with the law. So, I'm not a criminal.**

[43] Visaverge. 2025. "Immigration Enforcement Family Preparedness Workshops Are Underway Nationwide." July 31. https://www.visaverge.com/immigration/immigration-enforcement-family-preparedness-workshops-are-underway-nationwide; Najarro, Ileana. 2025. "Schools Brace as Fears of Immigration Enforcement Rise Among Families." Education Week, September 9. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/districts-get-creative-to-protect-families-from-immigration-raids/2025.

Alberto, the 57-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico introduced earlier, also refutes claims that immigrants are criminals, confidently illustrating his contributions to the US economy and society generally:

> **It's not right, it's truly unjust. I think they shouldn't criminalize people like us. We're good people; we're people who, during the time we've been here, have contributed to this country. We pay our property taxes, our work taxes, our car taxes, everything, we pay taxes on everything …. So, we're not doing any harm; on the contrary, we're contributing to this country … They make us look like criminals, but in reality, we're not.**

Despite the challenging climate they are living in, Patricia, Alberto, and many others, maintain their dignity and do not internalize the political and media discourse about immigrants. They assert their human right to maintain their and their families' livelihoods. Moreover, as Faustino and Candy state above, their religious values allow them to foster connections with other community members and build solidarity. Thus, in moments like these, maintaining one's dignity and caring for others become acts of resistance in their own right.

Through faith and solidarity, individuals and families carve out spaces of belonging where the state and country are offering none.

Love and mutual support among community members can serve as a buffer against structural and legal violence. Through faith and solidarity, individuals and families carve out spaces of belonging where the state and country are offering none, which fuels their endurance and contributes to an active reimagining of what it means to survive and be hopeful about the future.

CONCLUSION

The accounts in this report exemplify the widespread retreat of mixed-status families from public, civic, and even spiritual life, that reflects more than personal fear, it marks a form of collective trauma and persecution. As scholars have argued,[44] surveillance and enforcement policies generate a state of threat that reshapes behavior long before formal detention occurs. Participants share how the extended reach of local and federal

[44] 8. *Ibid.*

enforcement-first policies have affected their work, health, families, and faith, turning ordinary routines into sites of risk.

These cumulative effects comprise a system of legal precarity that blurs distinctions between the undocumented and the documented, creating an environment where immigrants, regardless of status, feel unsafe. This sustained insecurity fosters chronic stress, economic instability, and social withdrawal, while immigrants' resistance and resilience strategies help them endure this climate of persecution. Through prayer, mutual aid, and community support, immigrants reconstruct meaning and belonging amidst adversity, treating these issues as another wave of repression that they hope will pass. Solidarity and empathy within immigrant communities challenge narratives that depict immigrants as threats, criminals, or undeserving members of society, elevating the important role they play in sustaining Florida's social, economic, and spiritual fabric.

Our schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and healthcare systems have become sites of immigrant enforcement that are inflicting harm on those with and without legal status.

Ultimately, this report shows that the consequences of state and federal enforcement-first policies reach beyond undocumented immigrants; they affect immigrants who are lawfully present and even US citizens. These consequences have infiltrated the institutions that anchor public life for all. As a result, our schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and healthcare systems have become sites of immigrant enforcement that are inflicting harm on those with and without legal status and will likely leave scars for generations of immigrants and US citizens to come. Recognizing these lived realities is essential to understanding how structural and legal violence operate and how, despite this violence, communities continue to assert dignity, humanity, and hope in the face of uncertainty.

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