

Immigration Enforcement and Its Unintended Consequences

The Impact on America's Children Study of Three Raid Sites Finds One Child Affected for Every Two Adults

As the number of worksite immigration raids has increased in recent years, the number of families affected by the raids continues to grow. The number of undocumented immigrants arrested at workplaces increased more than sevenfold from 500 to 3,600 between 2002 and 2006. The Urban Institute and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) closely examined the sites of three workplace raids – in Greeley, Colorado; Grand Island, Nebraska; and New Bedford, Massachusetts. Their recent report, [*Paying the Price: The Impact of Immigration Raids on America's Children*](#) [1], highlights one of the most harmful unintended consequences of the raids – the devastation to families and children, many of whom are U.S. citizens. The report does not address whether enforcement activities should take place. Rather, it questions how enforcement is done and the impact that enforcement policies have on Americans. The focus is on children “because they have strong claims to the protection of society, especially when they are citizens and integrated into their schools and communities, and the United States is the only country they have known and consider home.” **The number of very young children affected by worksite raids is alarmingly high.**

- **On average, the number of children affected by worksite raids is about half the number of adults arrested.** Over 900 adults were arrested in the three study sites, and the parents among them collectively had just over 500 children.
- **A large majority of the children affected are U.S. citizens.** Nationwide, there are approximately five million U.S.-citizen children with at least one undocumented parent, and policies that target their parents have grave effects on the children.
- **The children included in the report were very young.** In two of the sites, approximately 80 percent were ages ten and younger. In one site, more than half were ages five and younger.

The raids resulted in immediate needs for childcare and basic services.

- Many arrested parents were unable to arrange for alternative childcare because they had limited ability to communicate with family members. Some were not able to make phone calls, some were held in detention centers far from their homes, and others signed voluntary departure papers and left the country before they could contact lawyers or caregivers.
- Informal family and community networks took on significant caregiving responsibilities and economic support of children. Many families faced severe economic instability as their incomes plunged following the arrest of working adults.
- In all three sites, school districts played an important role in ensuring that children were not dropped off to empty homes or left at school overnight. However, some children were left without adult supervision, and others were taken into foster care.

The raids had a long-term economic and psychological impact on families.

- Many families continued to experience significant economic hardship and psychological stress because of the arrests and separations, as well as from the uncertainty of knowing if or when an arrested parent would be released
- Following the arrest of a parent, children often experience feelings of abandonment and show symptoms of emotional trauma, psychological duress, and mental health problems. However,

due to cultural reasons and fear of the negative consequences of asking for assistance, very few affected families seek mental health care.

Churches, local government agencies, community-based organizations, and nongovernmental service providers supplied important relief and resources, but better capacity and coordination are necessary.

- Churches emerged as central distribution points for relief efforts because they were considered “safe” by families. But in the long run, church-based assistance is not sustainable due to lack of resources and staff.
- The effectiveness of relief efforts varied in the different sites depending on the level of coordination, service delivery capacity, and the level of trust the immigrant community had with the various service-providing agencies.

ICE has been somewhat responsive to these concerns and issued new guidelines for addressing humanitarian issues during certain raids. Under the new guidelines, in operations targeting more than 150 persons, ICE should attempt to identify single parents, primary caregivers of young children, and other special cases to be released on humanitarian grounds. The guidelines also suggest that ICE coordinate with local social service agencies, provide adequate food and water, provide arrestees with information about their legal rights, and institute a toll-free hotline so that relatives can access information about their loved ones. Unfortunately, these guidelines are insufficient. Current U.S. immigration policy mandates the arrest of undocumented parents, and by extension causes separation of parents from children, as well as economic and psychological hardship. Only significant changes in immigration law and policy can reduce the threat of worksite raids and the disruptions they cause. **The Urban Institute/NCLR report’s short-term recommendations include:**

- Congress should provide oversight of immigration enforcement activities to ensure that children are protected during worksite enforcement and other operations.
- ICE should assume there will always be young children affected whenever adults are arrested in worksite enforcement operations, and should develop a consistent policy for parents’ release.
- Schools should develop systems to help ensure that children have a safe place to go in the event of a raid, and to reduce the risk that children will be left without adult supervision when the school day ends.
- Social service and other public agencies should prepare plans to respond to immigration raids and develop outreach strategies to assure parents and other caregivers that it is safe to seek emergency assistance and benefits for children under such circumstances.
- Relatives, friends, community leaders, and service providers should develop plans for immigrant families in the event of a single parent’s or primary caregiver’s arrest and be ready to provide ICE with necessary documentation for a parent’s release.

Published On: **Mon, Mar 31, 2008** | [Download File](#) [2]

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