

THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION RAIDS

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On March 6, 2007, several hundred federal immigration agents raided Michael Bianco Inc., a military contractor in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Michael Bianco, which made U.S. military backpacks, had been under investigation for employing unauthorized immigrants and operating a sweatshop. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers questioned every employee about citizenship and immigration status, and arrested 361 workers for being in the country illegally and lacking work authorization. Within weeks, the plant's owner had reopened in Puerto Rico. Most of the arrested workers, however, remained in federal detention for months.

Later that spring, researchers from the Urban Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, visited New Bedford and two other large raid sites—Greeley, Colorado, and Grand Island, Nebraska—to talk to arrested immigrants, family members, and others in the community.¹ The research focused on the raids' short-term impacts on families with children.

Altogether, more than 900 adults were arrested, including parents of over 500 children, two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens. In New Bedford, most of those arrested were Central Americans. Comprising the largest group were Guatemala's Maya Kiche people, many of whom had fled poverty and civil unrest. In some cases, those arrested were single parents, and almost three-quarters of the children were age five or under.



ON CHILDREN

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Impacts on Children

The children experienced a variety of challenges, including separation from parents, economic hardship, isolation, and social stigma.

Family Separation

Most of those arrested came from two-parent homes, which are a particular strength of the Latino immigrant community. Many were detained a long time, so their children went from living with two parents to living with one. With many immigrants in detention six months after the raids, the remaining parents often had difficulty coping. For example, some spouses lacked access to or familiarity with bank accounts or other financial resources.

About 60 of the New Bedford immigrants were released the same day because they were single parents or had very young or sick children. Others were held for days or weeks. The Massachusetts Department of Social Services sent three dozen social workers to Texas—where many detainees were moved after their arrest. They obtained the release of 21 parents, many of whom had

not divulged that they had children for fear that the children could be taken away or deported. Many children felt abandoned and could not understand why a parent had simply “disappeared.”

Economic Hardship

Many families lost the adult with the better job, and household incomes plunged. In New Bedford, the Michael Bianco jobs only paid between \$7 and \$9 per hour, and some were part-time. But the other two sites’ meat-packing jobs paid more than \$10 per hour, were full- or overtime unionized jobs, and offered full benefits.

For a while, extended families and informal networks helped provide child care and economic support, keeping the majority of children from living alone without supervision or becoming homeless. Other than three adolescents who were themselves arrested at the New Bedford work site, no children wound up in foster care.

Most families also received some form of community assistance lasting three or four months. Some families lost their homes or crowded in with other families. Utilities

were temporarily cut off for some, and often there wasn’t enough money for food.

Fear and Isolation

The raids created a climate of fear, especially in Grand Island, where follow-up raids continued for over a week. Researchers spoke to families who hid in their homes for days or weeks. Many were fearful of seeking help—even at trusted locations such as churches. Some would not open the doors for people who brought food baskets and other assistance.

Social Stigma

The remaining parents and caregivers struggled to explain to children what had happened. It was especially difficult for younger children to understand. One child said that his parent was “arrested for working.” Some older children, mostly high school students, went to the work sites and saw their parents taken away in handcuffs. Children also had to deal with signs of increased community hostility, especially in Greeley.

The separation, economic hardship, fear, isolation, and stigma led to children

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showing more aggressive behavior, changes in sleep patterns and appetites, mood swings, and prolonged bouts of crying. Mental health professionals that the researchers interviewed spoke of elevated stress in children, signs of depression, and even suicidal thoughts. (The researchers were unable to interview a random sample of parents and could not document the prevalence of mental health effects.)

Community Responses

All three communities initiated intensive and broad response efforts to assist immigrant families after the raids. The relief was especially well organized in New Bedford, where the Massachusetts Immigration and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) coalition led an effort to bring together state and local government officials, representatives from the Honduran and Maya Kiche communities, faith leaders, foundations, and others to plan the effort. Local foundations and individual philanthropists raised significant funds, and aid was distributed to families for rent, housing, food assistance, clothing, and other necessities.

Public health and social service agencies also helped, but their roles varied substantially across the three sites. The New Bedford city government was particularly supportive of families in need, and social workers from the Massachusetts Department of Social Services worked to link parents with children and distribute relief. Public assistance through welfare programs and food stamps, however, was limited to U.S. citizens and legal residents. Most adults did not qualify, and many families were afraid to apply even if they did qualify.

Churches emerged as central distribution points for relief because immigrant families trusted them. In all three sites,

public agencies and nonprofit service providers stationed their staff at churches. Religious and community leaders also went door-to-door to provide assistance, although some families were afraid to open their doors even to them.

How Can We Improve?

The study offers a preliminary view of the immigration raids' impacts on children. It covers three of the largest raids ever conducted by ICE, but there have been more than 10,000 work-site arrests—and other arrests in homes and on streets—over the past several years.² With about 12 million unauthorized immigrants in the country and more than 5 million children with at least one unauthorized parent, more families with children are at risk of raids and their consequences.³

The research report offered recommendations for the way in which raids are conducted, and ICE issued guidelines in November 2007 addressing many of the recommendations. One recommendation was to grant arrestees access to lawyers, consular officials, social workers, and other intermediaries to inquire about children. Another was to allow easier communication between arrested parents and children by improving telephone access and not moving parents out of the states in which they were arrested. Single parents and parents with very young children (nursing mothers, for instance) should be released on the same day of the arrest, as early in the day as possible.

There were also recommendations for state and local governments and the private sector. In all three cases, schools did an excellent job of ensuring that children did not return to empty homes, and the Grand Island School District developed a particularly successful model. State and local governments would be wise to develop

similar plans, and a centralized planning and coordinating body—such as the group set up by MIRA in New Bedford—could help ensure efficient service delivery. Further, the report suggested that trusted religious institutions should be used as assistance and outreach centers and that a national clearinghouse should be established to share information.

Many immigrant parents may eventually face the choice of leaving their children in the United States or taking them to an uncertain future in another country. Families themselves need to prepare. Both parents should have access to bank accounts and other financial assets. They need to gather their documents and their children's, and make sure that children who are U.S. citizens have passports in case they have to leave the country after a parent's arrest.

Even if all the recommendations are followed, however, children could still face harm from the arrest, detention, and deportation of their parents. So far there is no hard evidence on the longer-term impacts. Researchers from the Urban Institute plan to return to New Bedford and other communities to investigate the longer-term impacts of work-site raids and other types of enforcement actions on immigrants' children.

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Endnotes

¹See *Paying the Price: The Impact of Immigration Raids on America's Children*, published in October 2007 with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and posted on the Internet sites of the National Council of La Raza (www.nclr.org) and the Urban Institute (www.urban.org). NCLR supported the research with funding from the Atlantic Foundation.

²U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Work Site Enforcement Overview" (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, August 2007), [http://www.ice.gov/pi/news/factsheets/work site.htm](http://www.ice.gov/pi/news/factsheets/work%20site.htm).

³Jeffrey S. Passel, *The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.: Estimates Based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey* (Washington DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2006).