

Impacts of Heightened Immigration Enforcement on Children's Education

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Schools are central settings for children's learning, development, relationships, and safety. After their homes, schools are where children spend most of their time and build many of their daily routines and social connections (Butler et al. 2022; Kraft and Novicoff 2024). They are not only places of learning but also central spaces for children's and families' relationships and access to information and services. However, the current administration's heightened immigration enforcement policies¹ have disrupted how many children and families experience and navigate school (Rodriguez 2026).

Immigration enforcement has been shown to impact students' academic progress, from drops in attendance to test scores and grade progression, both historically (Amuedo-Dorantes and Lopez 2017; Bellows 2021; Ee and Gándara 2019) and in the current era (Camp et al. 2026; Dee 2025; Figlio and Özek 2025; Rogers et al. 2025; Sattin-Bajaj 2026). Recent policy shifts have permitted enforcement activity in previously protected areas,² and there have been reports of enforcement occurring at or near schools (ACLU 2026).³ Other policy changes have resulted in the arrest of long-term residents with no criminal background, extended detention, and violations of due process. Some localities experienced intense surge enforcement operations involving large numbers of agents, some engaging in extreme uses of force including fatal shootings (ACLU 2026; Blair and Hausman 2026).⁴

In the wake of these policy decisions, communities have felt widespread fear and anxiety about the threat of immigration enforcement in daily life (Bernstein et al. 2026; Schumacher et al. 2025; Setty et al. 2026) and the risk of family separation (Cancian et al. 2026). Though high-visibility enforcement operations in targeted cities eased by spring 2026, quieter tactics continue across the US, and the risk of enforcement remains a constant concern for many families (Blair et al. 2026).⁵ Families and children are concerned about basic safety and are balancing the risk of exposure to enforcement agents with the imperative to attend school. How schools respond to this uncertain environment can influence families' experiences and students' well-being.

In this brief, we document the experiences of 34 parents in Latino mixed-status immigrant families⁶ navigating school environments in Chicago and Charlotte, which both experienced high-profile targeted enforcement operations in late 2025 (see box 1).⁷ Interviewed between April and June 2026, parents reflected on their experiences before the heightened enforcement policies of the current administration, during the most intense periods of local enforcement activity, and well after operations in those cities subsided but as enforcement threats persisted in mid-2026. (See appendix A for details on the research approach.) Thirty of the 34 parents had school-age children (ages 6 to 18). The parents represented the experiences of 92 children, 82 of whom were US citizens.⁸ Most parents and their partners had lived in the US for decades, and most families included an undocumented parent.

The threat of an encounter with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that could separate an undocumented parent from their family dominated the daily lives of all family members, including children. Parents and children expressed persistent fear of potential encounters with ICE—mostly for undocumented parents but also for US-citizen children.⁹ Although Charlotte and Chicago are distinct in their state policies related to immigrant protection (see box 1), we found families' experiences to be similar in many ways. One key difference, however, was how schools responded.

This brief describes how heightened immigration enforcement has affected families' access to school and school routines, children's academic performance and enrichment activities, as well as the variety of school responses that shaped family experiences.

Our interviews with parents yielded the following key findings:

- Nearly half of parents reported that their children had expressed concern about going to school because of the threat of enforcement, perceiving risks to both their parents and themselves, even as US citizens.
- Nearly half of parents reported that their children had stayed home from school for at least a few days because of concerns about immigration enforcement activity.
- Over half of parents reported concerns about sending their children to school or accompanying them to school because of the risk of either a child or parent encountering ICE on the way. Nearly half of parents changed school transportation routines to reduce their families' exposure to enforcement risk.
- Over half of parents described the psychological strain of the enforcement environment affecting their children's academic performance.
- Nearly all parents reported reducing their own time in public spaces. Many also reported not taking or allowing their children to go to parks or participate in after-school activities or sports.
- Parents in Chicago were more likely than those in Charlotte to describe their children's schools having some kind of supportive strategy, from information sharing to help with transportation and counseling.
- Parents recommended that schools strengthen communication to address their concerns and share available supports, help families navigate transportation challenges and offer remote learning when they cannot safely travel, provide emotional support and counseling services, and ensure a more consistent response across schools.

BOX 1

Immigration Enforcement in Study Cities: Chicago and Charlotte

Chicago and Charlotte were chosen for this study in part because of the contrast in policy environments on immigrant protection and inclusion. Both cities experienced high-visibility enforcement operations involving surges of federal enforcement agents in late 2025: Operation Midway Blitz in Chicago from September to November and Operation Charlotte's Web in Charlotte for a shorter period in mid-November. Localities and states responded to heightened federal immigration enforcement in different ways.^a

Illinois and Chicago have established frameworks of policies supporting immigrant integration and limiting cooperation with federal immigration enforcement, such as the Illinois Trust Act and the Welcoming City Ordinance. Responses to federal enforcement have included, among other initiatives, the Illinois Accountability Commission^b and legislation mandating protections at schools and universities, early childhood care providers, courthouses, and hospitals.^c

Charlotte, North Carolina's largest city, is also a certified Welcoming City. However, it is situated in a Dillon's Rule state, where local governments are limited by the authority of the State General Assembly. Mecklenburg

County, where Charlotte is located, has taken a protective stance and ended its 287(g) agreement in 2018.^d The General Assembly has moved in the opposite direction: legislation in 2024 mandated all sheriffs cooperate with ICE, and 2026 legislation required state agencies, including the Highway Patrol, to sign 287(g) agreements with ICE that delegate federal immigration enforcement authority to state and local jurisdictions.^e

^a Muzaffar Chishti and Kathleen Bush-Joseph, “Escalation of ICE Operations Emboldens State and Local Lawmakers to Constrain Its Operations,” *Policy Beat* (blog), Migration Policy Institute, February 26, 2026, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/journal/policy-beat/escalation-ice-operations-emboldens-state-and-local-lawmakers-constrain-its>.

^b Illinois Accountability Commission, *Illinois Accountability Commission Final Report* (State of Illinois, 2006), <https://ilac.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/ilac/documents/final-report/IAC-Final-Report-April-2026.pdf>.

^c Office of the Governor of Illinois, JB Pritzker, “Governor Pritzker Signs Bill to Protect Immigrants from Unjust Federal Actions,” press release, December 9, 2025, <https://gov-pritzker-newsroom.prezly.com/gov-pritzker-signs-bill-to-protect-immigrants-from-unjust-federal-actions>.

^d Julian Berger, “Sheriff McFadden, ICE at Odds over Immigration Enforcement,” WFAE 90.7 NPR, March 27, 2025, <https://www.wfae.org/race-equity/2025-03-27/sheriff-mcfadden-ice-at-odds-over-immigration-enforcement>.

^e Nicolas Baintrub, “These Are the State Laws That Most Affect Immigrants in North Carolina,” *Enlace Latino NC*, July 7, 2026, <https://enlancelatinonc.org/en/These-are-the-state-laws-that-most-affect-immigrants-in-North-Carolina/>.

Immigration Enforcement Disrupted Children’s Access to School

Parents in both Chicago and Charlotte reported that concerns about local enforcement activity have disrupted children’s school routines. They commonly reported that children expressed fear and anxiety about going to school and missed school to reduce risk. Transporting children to and from school was a central concern for parents who feared potential encounters with ICE. Parents reported these impacts were still being felt months after the fall 2025 local enforcement operations had subsided.

Nearly Half of Parents Reported That Their Children Were Worried About Going to School

Nearly half of parents reported that their children had expressed concern about going to school because of the threat of enforcement during or in the months following the local operation, perceiving risks to both their parents and themselves, even as US citizens. Children’s reluctance had a variety of reasons, including information they had gotten from the news or social media that ICE was operating near their neighborhood, fears that a parent might be detained while they were away, knowledge that other students were not going, or other fears about enforcement risk. A mother in Charlotte described that her adolescent daughter, a US citizen, was afraid to walk to school and refused to go:

“When rumors start circulating, my ... daughter, even though she’s a citizen, says, ‘No, I don’t want to go to school.’ I mean, she won’t go; even though it’s only a two-block walk, she just refuses. She says, ‘I’m going to get kidnapped. I don’t want to go.’ That’s it, and yes, you can really see the fear in her. It’s the fact that she doesn’t want to leave the house.”

“Cuando se escuchan rumores, mi hija ... aunque ella es ciudadana, ella dice ‘No, yo no quiero ir a la escuela.’ O sea, no va porque aunque tiene que caminar dos cuadras nada más, tú dices no. Dice ‘a mí me van a secuestrar, yo no quiero ir.’ Pero solo eso, y sí, se le nota el temor, es el hecho de no querer salir de casa.”

—Mother of six, Charlotte

In some cases, children’s fears were reinforced at school through warnings, rumors, and conversations among peers. A few parents noted that their children’s concerns intensified after observing changes in their school environment, such as fewer children being at school, the closure of an outdoor playground, or the school requiring

students to remain indoors until a parent picked them up. Additionally, a few children heard worrisome information from peers, such as learning that a peer's parents had been detained and claims that ICE would come for undocumented children.

Nearly Half of Parents Reported That Their Children Had Missed School Because of Enforcement Concerns

It was common for children of interviewed parents to miss one or more days of school because of concerns about local immigration enforcement activity. Absences were common not only during the height of local operations but also in the months following when families heard or believed that ICE was nearby. These accounts aligned with local news coverage in both cities: tens of thousands of additional absences were reported in Charlotte on the Monday after the November 2025 operation began,¹⁰ as was declining attendance at Chicago schools among English language learners and in immigrant and Latino communities when the operation began in October 2025.¹¹ **Nearly half of parents reported that their children had stayed home from school for at least a few days** because of concerns about immigration enforcement activity, either during the operation or in the following months when families believed ICE was in the vicinity. A few described absences of one or two weeks or up to a month.

Nearly Half of Parents Changed School Transportation Routines to Reduce Enforcement Risk

Parents expressed feelings of anxiety about accompanying their children to school, particularly on days when they heard that immigration enforcement was active in the community. **Over half of parents reported concern about sending their children to school or accompanying their children to school** owing to the risk of either a child or a parent encountering ICE on the way.

Nearly half of parents changed school transportation routines to reduce their families' exposure to enforcement risk, often arranging transportation through informal support networks to ensure that their children could continue attending school. This included shifting responsibility to their older children, relatives, other parents, or community members, or using paid ride-sharing apps that incurred additional cost. A few parents said that their children now go to school by themselves, including one Chicago mother whose 14-year-old takes two buses and told her, "Don't worry, I'll get there. You're better off staying home."

A mother in Charlotte whose teenager and younger child attended two different schools described how her family had adjusted transportation arrangements in a variety of ways since the local operation took place. Although she retains primary responsibility for taking her children to school, the family has relied on different strategies depending on perceived risks. Before leaving home, the parent and her partner check news reports and social media. On days when they believe it is unsafe to travel, they sometimes arrange an Uber to take their eldest to school. During the local enforcement operation, they did not feel safe transporting their younger child to school for part of the week. Eventually, they found a woman with lawful immigration status to provide transportation. Despite feeling uncomfortable and anxious about entrusting their child to someone they did not know well, they felt it was important for their child to attend school. The mother also recalled an occasion when her older child heard that ICE agents were nearby and asked her parents not to pick her up; instead, she asked a teacher to drive her home. The mother was deeply moved by her child's willingness to protect her parents.

A few families reported having limited or no transportation alternatives, which meant they had to decide between keeping their children home or continuing to transport the children themselves. These reports suggest that transportation alternatives were not equally available to all families. Some parents still had to walk or drive children to school despite their fears. These families described rushing, changing routes, or minimizing time outside while experiencing intense fear when in public because they could not fully avoid exposure. A mother in Chicago described how she felt as she took her son to school:

“Because I have to take him there as fast as I can walk, since I don’t drive. I run there and run back, always with that fear and dread inside me, thinking, What if I run into a van or get stopped? Because the fear—well, I can only speak for myself—the fear that I might get caught out there is still with me.”

“Porque tengo que ir a llevarlo lo más rápido que puedo caminar, porque como no manejo. Yo lo llevo corriendo, me regreso corriendo, siempre con el temor y ese miedo que tengo dentro de mí, que digo, No me vaya a encontrar alguna camioneta o no vaya a ser detenida. Porque el miedo, yo pienso, bueno, yo hablo por mí, el miedo lo tengo todavía que pudiera ser atrapada por ahí.”

—Mother of three, Chicago

Children Experienced Declines in Academic Performance and Reduced Access to Enrichment Activities

Fear and anxiety about immigration enforcement and family separation have affected children’s well-being, with parents reporting that children were showing signs of declining academic performance and reduced access to extracurricular and outdoor activities. Such impacts were observed long after the end of fall 2025 local enforcement operations.

Over Half of Parents Reported That Enforcement-Related Stress Had Affected Their Children’s Academic Performance

Most parents reported seeing psychological impacts of the enforcement climate on their children, including worry, fear, anxiety, and depression.¹² This translated into negative academic impacts; **over half of parents described their children suffering some academic performance consequences** because of the psychological strain of the enforcement environment, including declining grades, lack of motivation, and difficulty focusing at school. Most of these observations were based on children’s experiences at the time of the interviews in mid-2026, long after the end of local enforcement operations. One mother shared that her son was experiencing challenges:

“Oh, sure, [the enforcement environment] definitely had an impact—it’s affected his schooling, obviously, because the boy has depression. There have been days when he can’t get up to go to school. It’s affected his attention span.... [Even] though he’s autistic, he speaks well and everything, he’s in high school now. But since all this happened, his teachers have said he’s had a lot of trouble focusing in class and doing his homework. He just seems really distracted.”

“Oh, claro, [el ambiente de aplicación de las leyes de inmigración] sí ha afectado, ha afectado su escuela, obviamente, porque el niño tiene depresión. Ha habido días que no se puede levantar, ir a la escuela. Ha afectado su atención.... [A] pesar que es un niño autista, pues este habla bien y todo y o sea, está en la high school. Pero desde que todo esto pasó, ha tenido, los maestros han dicho que ha tenido muchos problemas enfocándose en sus clases. Haciendo las tareas y como que está como muy distraído.”

—Mother of two, Chicago

Although a few parents explicitly mentioned that their children lacked motivation at school, it was more common to hear that children were getting distracted at school and experiencing declining grades. Some parents mentioned that their child was distracted at school more often, and **half of parents reported seeing declining grades**

for at least one of their children. A mother in Chicago described her child being upset by the thought of not finding his mom when getting home from school, which contributed to his lower grades:

“My son, the 10-year-old, was also affected because I saw the change in his grades and in him emotionally. Even though we were here at home, he would cry and hug me.... He’s a little calmer now, but yes, the change was that, as I mentioned, his grades dropped. He could barely sleep. He just wanted to be with me. He cried. He cried a lot and said he didn’t want to leave [school] and come home to find his mom wasn’t there, because he was afraid I might have been caught in a raid.”

“Mi niño, el de 10 años, él también fue afectado porque yo vi el cambio en sus calificaciones y también en él emocionalmente, porque aunque estábamos aquí en casa, lloraba y me abrazaba.... Ahorita ya está un poquito más tranquilo, pero sí, su cambio fue de que va, como le comento, bajaron sus calificaciones. Y casi no podía dormir, casi nomás quería estar conmigo, lloraba, lloraba mucho y decía que él no quería salir de clases y llegar a casa y saber que su mamá no estaba porque él tenía miedo de que pudiera haber sido atrapada en alguna redada.”

—Mother of three, Chicago

Fears Also Reduced Children’s Access to Extracurricular and Recreational Activities

In addition to losing access to school, parents described their children losing access to other learning and recreational activities because of concerns about enforcement. These concerns persisted at the time of interviews in mid-2026, long after the local operations had subsided. **Nearly all parents interviewed reported reducing their own time outdoors, and many reported not taking or allowing their children to go to parks or participate in after-school activities or sports.** One mother in Charlotte described that she no longer took her child to soccer because of fear of encountering ICE:

“I used to have my son on a soccer team, but not anymore.... There’s so much immigration [enforcement] on the streets, and we never know when we might run into them, so I decided to take him out.”

“Yo tenía a mi hijo en un equipo de fútbol y ya pues ya no.... Pues es que andan mucho- anda mucha migración en la calle y no sabemos en qué momento no podemos encontrar con ellos, entonces pues tome la decisión de sacarlo.”

—Mother of three, Charlotte

According to parents, children were also losing access to informal recreational activities. For example, one parent reported that their child’s school closed its outdoor playground because of enforcement concerns, leaving young children confused about why they could no longer play after school while waiting for their parents. As families increasingly stayed home, children lost access to recreational spaces and activities, such as playing with friends, going out with family, and taking vacations.¹³ One mother in Charlotte shared,

“We used to be able to go to the beach, but not anymore—we don’t even do that; we’re afraid to. We don’t even go out or plan outings anymore, because we tell ourselves that what matters is staying in this country a little longer, but we no longer have any peace.”

“Antes nosotros hasta podíamos ir a la playa, hoy ya no, ya ni eso, ya tenemos temor a eso. Ya ni salimos, pues no planeamos salidas de nada, porque decimos que para nosotros lo importante es seguir un poco más en este país, pero ya no tenemos paz.”

—Mother of two, Charlotte

Children’s boredom and increased isolation can have developmental and mental health implications. Reduced access to play, peer interaction, and recreational activities limits opportunities for social-emotional development and may worsen children’s stress, anxiety, or other mental health challenges (Butler et al. 2022; Loades et al. 2020). For example, social isolation and loneliness are associated with higher risks of depression and anxiety among children and adolescents, which may compound stress at home (Loades et al. 2020). A mother in Charlotte described her son as having behavioral problems that she linked to the frustration of staying inside and avoiding public spaces:

“My son, the 10-year-old, has become very rebellious. He doesn’t want to be cooped up anymore. He wants to have a normal life, but I have to tell him that you can’t have a normal life here.”

“Mi hijo, el de 10 años, se me puso muy rebelde, él ya no quiere estar encerrado. Él quisiera tener una vida normal, pero pues le digo que aquí no se puede tener una vida normal.”

—Mother of three, Charlotte

Given the stressful environment of heightened enforcement, after-school activities and recreation may be particularly important in supporting children’s social-emotional development and stress management (Yogman et al. 2018). A few parents who had stopped their children’s participation in these activities seemed to understand their importance. As summer approached, these parents reflected on the opportunities their children had missed, noting that after-school and recreational activities might benefit their children and that it would be ideal to identify safe spaces where children could engage in such activities.

Young Adults Lost Access to Higher Education

Young adults also experienced disruptions to their postsecondary education, according to the parents interviewed. A mother mentioned that her daughter missed a few days of classes because she thought ICE was present on her college campus. One father in Chicago shared that his daughter, a US citizen, was afraid because a university classmate had been stopped by ICE:

“She’s heard rumors that ... they want to do raids at schools. And, well, she was born here, and she’s afraid that she and her friends might get detained. In fact, one of her friends was stopped and detained by immigration, even though he was born here. I think he was held for two days while they investigated him, and then they let him go because he was born here. So that’s why she’s afraid that the same thing might happen to her.”

“Le han mencionado rumores de que ... quieren hacer redadas en las escuelas. Y pues ella es nacida aquí y tiene miedo de que la vayan a detener y a sus amigos. Y a uno de sus amigos lo paró migración, lo detuvo, él es nacido aquí. Duró creo que dos días encerrado hasta en lo que lo investigaban y pues después lo dejaron salir, porque era nacido aquí. Y por eso anda con miedo también de que te vayan a hacer lo mismo.”

—Father of three, Chicago

Two parents reported that their children dropped out of college or university to work more and help support the household after parents stopped working because of heightened enforcement. Another mother said that her child was thinking about dropping out, against her wishes. A mother in Chicago, whose husband had been deported and who had stopped working at the request of her children, explained that her daughter had left college to work more to help cover household expenses.

Schools Varied in Their Response to Enforcement Activities

Parents' accounts suggest that, on the whole, the responses from schools in Chicago and Charlotte differed. However, parents from both cities described school-initiated strategies to support families navigating the threat of enforcement. In Chicago, parents more often described coordinated school-based supports, including Know Your Rights workshops, monitoring of ICE activity near schools, and connections to food or mental health services. In Charlotte, parents described fewer formal school-based supports and more uneven responses across schools. Some families received meaningful help, especially with transportation coordination, but others reported limited flexibility around student absences and a sense that schools did not fully recognize the risks immigrant families were navigating.

Parents in Chicago Were More Likely than Parents in Charlotte to Describe Help from Their Children's School

Nearly all Chicago parents (15 of 19), compared with fewer than half of Charlotte parents (7 of 15), described their school as providing supports to help families navigate the enforcement environment.

Parents described several specific school and community strategies that helped families keep children connected to school while reducing exposure to enforcement-related risks. The most commonly mentioned supportive practice reported among parents (mostly from Chicago) was schools providing **Know Your Rights information, emergency planning, or help with other preparedness processes** for parents. Some parents mentioned receiving information about what to do if they had to interact with immigration enforcement and Know Your Rights cards (often called red cards).¹⁴ Other parents mentioned receiving information about emergency planning to prepare for a parent being detained. One parent mentioned that the school organized a visit to a state office for students to obtain state identification cards. A mother in Chicago mentioned participating in workshops and a question-and-answer session with a lawyer:

"Yes, I've attended workshops at the school because they were also offering ... workshops that included that kind of guidance.... I carry cards in my purse that list my rights: the right to remain silent, the right not to provide personal information.... An immigration lawyer also came to my children's school. She provided a great deal of information and, honestly, many parents asked so many different questions because people were confused."

"Sí, he ido a talleres en la escuela porque también estuvieron dando ... talleres con esas asesorías.... Yo traigo en mi bolso estas tarjetas que dicen conozco mis derechos de guardar silencio, de no proporcionar información personal.... También vino una abogada de inmigración aquí a la escuela de mis hijos. También proporcionó muchísima información donde pues la gente se la verdad, muchos padres hacían demasiadas preguntas, diferentes preguntas, porque pues la gente estaba confundida."

—Mother of three, Chicago

Parents also mentioned that **flexibility in counting absences** was helpful. A few parents in both cities reported that their school responded by excusing the absences caused by fear of enforcement activity, reducing their concern that keeping children home for safety reasons would create additional problems with their schools. Furthermore, one parent in Chicago mentioned that teachers helped by emailing homework and activities to students who stayed home temporarily.

Another school-based support that parents mentioned as important was **on-site counseling and mental health supports**. Some parents in both cities reported that their children's schools had counselors, therapists, or referral processes available for students. A mother in Chicago shared that her child's teacher had reached out proactively to offer help:

"The school also called me because the teacher said she had noticed my daughter seemed very distracted and sad.... When the teacher [asked me] if something was going on at home or if something had happened to her, I told her I thought [enforcement activities] was the reason—because we were having a lot of conversations about immigration issues ... and it had started to affect her deeply, to the point where the teacher spoke to me about it, and we had to fill out forms so she could start receiving counseling at school."

"De la escuela también me llamaron porque la maestra dice que estaba observando de que mi hija se veía como muy distraída. Y que se veía triste.... Y la maestra [me dijo] que estaba, que si estaba pasado en la casa o que si algo había pasado con ella. Le dije que pensaba que era por [las actividades de control de migración], porque si teníamos muchas conversaciones sobre cuestiones de inmigración ... y empezó a afectarle mucho al punto donde la maestra me dijo y tuvimos que llenar unas hojas para que empezara a recibir consejería dentro de la escuela."

—Mother of one, Chicago

Some parents (mostly from Chicago) described interacting with school-based **case workers** who helped connect families to assistance. One parent mentioned that the school's caseworker referred them to a food bank and clothing donation site, another parent mentioned that teachers took food donations to students' homes, and another parent mentioned that twice a month a food bank comes to the school.

A few parents (mostly from Chicago) also mentioned seeing **monitors around the school**. Monitors were people, generally with vests and whistles, who walked around the school monitoring for ICE activity and alerting families. They were either community volunteers or school staff. One Chicago mother described the reassurance that monitors provided:

"[Monitors] are there every morning, rain, snow, or shine. You can recognize them because they all carry an orange whistle. That gives me a bit more peace of mind, too, because when you arrive, you know someone is monitoring the area, and if they see anything unusual, they'll start blowing their whistle."

"[Los monitores] están ahí todas las mañanas, llueva, este cayendo nieve, o haya sol, están ellos. Los puedes conocer porque todos llevan un silbato naranja. Entonces eso también me da un poco más de tranquilidad porque cuando llegas, sabes que hay alguien monitoreando el área y si ve algo raro, va a comenzar a silbar."

—Mother of four, Chicago

Similarly, some parents (mostly from Chicago) mentioned that the school helped community members **stay informed on whether ICE was around the school**. This helped parents decide whether to drop off or delay picking up their children. A few parents also mentioned that schools closed their doors when ICE was nearby. Another similar strategy a parent mentioned was to keep the parking lot closed except to parents.

A few parents across both cities shared that the school **helped coordinate transportation** between parents so other parents could pick up their children. A mother in Charlotte provided a notable example of how this timely transportation coordination proved helpful. She described how her children were able to keep attending school only because the school quickly coordinated transportation support during a period of heightened immigration enforcement activity. The family lived far from school, and she and her partner were struggling with whether it was safe to drive their children to school after hearing that ICE was present in the community. They called the school to explain that they did not plan to send their children because of these safety concerns, and the school staff told them they had organized a group of volunteers who could help transport students. Staff sent the family a form to provide pickup information and authorize a volunteer to transport the children. The mother reported that she was surprised by the offer and deeply grateful. That same day, the school connected the family with a volunteer who arrived at 6:30 a.m. each school day for a month to take the children to school. Because of this support, the children did not miss a single day. Reflecting on the volunteer's help, the mother said, "*Gracias a Dios. Mi Dios me puso ese ángel.*" [Thank God. My God sent me that angel.]

The mother also emphasized that such coordination was not available to all families or in all schools. She had friends in other areas of Charlotte whose schools did not offer similar support, and their children missed school as a result. Those absences were now affecting students through missed exams and other academic consequences. Her friends were forced to make difficult decisions, and one had shared that she would rather have her child repeat the school year than risk family separation.

Some Parents in Charlotte Described Limited Flexibility from Schools

A few parents in Charlotte reported that some schools offered **little flexibility in how they counted student absences** during periods of heightened ICE activity. Their descriptions align with local news reports on the school system's decision to count absences during the local enforcement operation.¹⁵ One Charlotte mother explained,

"I called and asked if, well, if they could do me the favor of not marking him absent for the days he hadn't attended. The principal told me she was very sorry but that rules were rules and there was nothing they could do without an order from the district. The children were going to be marked absent regardless."

"Yo llamé y le dije que si eran, pues sí, que no me lo pusieran, que sí me hacían el favor de no ponerle ausente por los días que no había ido, y me dijo la directora que lo sentía mucho, pero que las reglas eran reglas y que ellas no podían hacer nada si no recibían una orden del distrito, los niños íbamos a- iban a ser marcados como ausentes siempre."

—Mother of three, Charlotte

Parents viewed this as unfair because it did not recognize the difficult choices families were making when they feared that taking their children to school could expose them to encounters with ICE. As parents explained, children were absent not because families were disengaged from school but because they felt that keeping their children home was necessary to reduce the risk of family separation.

A few parents in Charlotte expressed **fear about being reported because of student absences**, noting that after a certain number of missed days, parents could be sent to court.¹⁶ A mother expressed this fear,

“They haven’t missed school because I’ve pushed them to go and not skip, because I feel and have seen cases where schools sometimes don’t understand the situation an immigrant is going through. For instance, if the kids don’t go to school, they get marked absent, and that’s wrong because after too many absences, you can end up in court.”

“No han faltado porque yo también los he empujado a que vayan y no falten, porque también a veces siento y he visto casos de que en las escuelas no entienden a veces por la situación que uno como migrante está pasando. Y, por ejemplo, si los niños no van a la escuela, les ponen falta y eso está mal, porque pues después de tantas faltas a uno lo pueden mandar a corte.”

—Mother of three, Charlotte

A few parents in Charlotte felt that there was a **lack of coordinated support from school leadership** for the community members and teachers who were helping monitor ICE activity and transport children to schools. One mother in Charlotte shared that individual teachers were helping accompany children to school but felt that the teachers were not being supported by the school district:

“Teachers that would be outside of the schools ... to walk [kids] to school ... so their parents wouldn’t have to or to wait for them outside.... So, these were initiatives that teachers took and the school never, like, gave them ... any kind of support.... These were people that organized themselves in order to protect their kids and their class, like, their children in their class, and the school district never supported it, never said a comment about it, never said anything.”

She also mentioned that most of the help she had received was from community organizations and not the schools. She had heard that the school would not provide Know Your Rights information, which would leave some parents lacking an important resource:

“We know, at least our school district ... we feel that way, like they don’t have our back, and they don’t have the community’s back. And although a big portion of the kids are ... from immigrant parents or immigrant themselves or they’re Latinos.... They have ... publicly ... said that they’re not going to, you know, either pass out ... Know Your Rights or any other information. I know this is something that I personally can ... find on my own, but I also know that a lot of parents rely on the information in their children’s backpack.”

—Mother of one, Charlotte

Parents Voiced Recommendations for How Schools Could Help Families

Parents described several practices schools could adopt to help immigrant families keep children connected to school during periods of heightened enforcement. Across parents’ comments, a consistent theme was that schools should not treat enforcement-related absences, transportation disruptions, or children’s distress as ordinary attendance or behavior problems. Instead, they emphasized that schools could play a protective role by sharing trusted information, offering emotional support, coordinating safe transportation, and creating flexible options when families are afraid to leave home.

A few parents recommended that **schools communicate more directly with families** to address their concerns and help families prepare for ICE activity. They suggested schools could share information to help all families decide whether it is safe to travel to school and to inform families of their rights. Furthermore, they said that

schools could offer options if children cannot attend in person. One parent said schools should provide more information and reassurance so parents would not be afraid to bring children to school or wait with them at the bus stop.

Some parents identified **transportation** as an important area where schools could help. Their recommendations included organizing volunteers or staff to accompany families walking to school, stationing trusted adults near bus stops, helping arrange rides for children who live far from school, and offering **remote learning** when families cannot safely travel.

A few parents mentioned that schools could **provide emotional support and counseling** for students affected by enforcement-related stress. Parents recommended that schools be proactive in identifying and supporting children who experience fear, anxiety, distraction, sadness, or academic difficulties related to the enforcement environment. One parent in Chicago emphasized that students who had been affected by enforcement **needed more support from teachers, psychologists, and counselors**. In her view, school-based emotional support could also help parents who were already carrying significant burdens at home.

Parents from Charlotte also offered recommendations that underscored the importance of **consistency in services and communication across schools**. Some Charlotte parents described schools that acted quickly and creatively, while others said similar supports were not available in their schools. This lack of consistency meant that children's ability to attend school safely and the effects on their learning could depend on which school they attended, whether individual teachers or volunteers stepped in, or whether families had access to informal networks. A Charlotte mother suggested that best practice would be to adopt strategies consistently across schools rather than leave individual staff members to organize on their own:

"At another school, since it was very close to where the students lived, staff members were present at the various bus stops to wait for the children to board, so the parents didn't have to go with them. In other words, the school actually came to the [students]. That wasn't something every school did. There were places where children had to get to the bus stop all on their own. So, I'd say ... that was something the schools could have done."

"En otra escuela, como está muy cerca de la de los niños que van a esa escuela, en las diferentes paradas de autobuses, estaba personal de la escuela esperando a que el niño se subieran al autobús sin que tuvieran que ir los padres. O sea, como que llegaron a ella. Y fue algo que no todas las escuelas lo hicieron. O sea, hubieron lugares donde sí, o sea, los niños tuvieron que llegar solitos a la parada del bus. Entonces, pues yo digo ... que fue algo que las escuelas pudieron haber hecho."

—Mother of six, Charlotte

Conclusion

Findings from interviews with parents made clear that heightened immigration enforcement has changed everyday life for many families and children. In Chicago and Charlotte, the threat of parents or US-citizen children encountering ICE has shaped children's educational experiences, mental health, and sense of safety, with effects present long after the end of targeted enforcement operations. Enforcement-related fear has disrupted school attendance, transportation routines, after-school and recreational activities, and students' ability to feel safe at school. These issues created barriers to learning that have translated into poorer emotional well-being and lower academic performance. This may have consequences for children's academic success, healthy development, and sense of security and belonging, as well as the well-being of their families.

Parents interviewed made clear that families highly value education and school attendance. Yet, the threat of immigration enforcement has compelled many parents to make difficult choices about getting their children to school safely, given the risk of potential encounters with enforcement agents on the way, or even on-site. They are forced to weigh the benefits of their children going to school or to after-school activities against the risk of an encounter with enforcement agents that could have extreme consequences, from emotional distress to family separation and detention or deportation of a family member.

Parents suggested that schools can make a difference for families navigating an uncertain enforcement environment by providing information on local enforcement activity and preparedness, flexibility on absences, and assistance with transportation, food, and mental health needs. Supportive school practices helped families keep children connected to school while reducing exposure to enforcement risk. When schools intervene, student engagement, learning, behavior, and mental health show better outcomes. Providing more support could also be a way for schools to build trust with communities and the families they serve (Suarez-Orozco 2025). When schools failed to support families' needs, families experienced additional stress and children disconnected from school. Rather than leaving solutions to individual staff, school districts could consider establishing consistent policies across schools and supporting educators with resources and training (NEA 2025). Consistent, trauma-informed, and family-centered school policies are important for supporting children's access to education and well-being, as well as the safety and stability of their families and their communities.

Illinois' Safe Schools for All Act and the broader HB1312 require schools and other community spaces to establish procedures for responding to federal immigration and law enforcement agents on-site and to safeguard individuals' privacy and access to services. Additional states are passing similar legislation (Broder et al. 2026). Such efforts are promising, as studies have shown protective school practices help mitigate educational harms associated with immigration enforcement (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2023). Further research is needed on how state and local policy contexts shape school responses and family experiences, as well as on the role that school districts and trusted community-based organizations can play in reducing the negative impacts on children's educational experiences as ongoing enforcement activity and threat of family separation continue to shape daily life for families across the country.

Appendix A. Research Approach

A bilingual research team conducted 34 semi-structured telephone interviews in Spanish (32) and English (2) between April and June 2026. Interviewees were recruited by four local community organizations, whose staff we trained to respect voluntary participation and safeguard research participants' personal information. Potential participants were screened for eligibility by the project team: participants had to be 18 years or older, live in the Chicago or Charlotte area, be a parent or guardian to one or more children (minor or adult) living in their household, and be part of a mixed-status family (defined as having both undocumented and US-citizen family members living in their household, including themselves). While family members with direct experience of ICE apprehension was not part of the screening, the final sample included five participants whose partners had been detained: two had been deported, one had been released, and two remained in custody at the time of the interview. Most interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, and participants were given a \$100 digital gift card. The interview protocol included questions about adults' and children's experiences living in the enforcement environment, including impacts on economic stability, children's education, families' physical and mental health; changes in daily routines; experiences with legal assistance and family emergency preparedness; and practices and supports that have been helpful and are still needed to manage ongoing challenges.

Qualitative data were analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis. Deductive codes were developed from the study's conceptual framework and interview guide, while inductive codes captured themes that emerged during the analysis process. Transcripts were systematically coded and reviewed to identify recurring patterns, with attention paid to both the prevalence of themes across interviews and the depth and richness with which participants discussed them. Bilingual researchers reviewed and coded the transcripts in their original language, using NVivo to organize, manage, and retrieve coded text. The following definitions were used in describing the frequency across participants: none = 0, a few = 2–5, some = 6–10, many = 11–13, nearly half = 14–16, half = 17, over half = 18–20, most = 21–29, nearly all = 30–33, and all = 34.

Table A.1 describes interview participants' demographic characteristics. The sample included 15 parents in Charlotte and 19 in Chicago. Almost all were women, except for 3 male respondents. Nineteen were married and 6 had a domestic partner, while 9 were single or separated from their spouses. There was a total of 92 children across the 34 parents, and the vast majority (82) were US citizens (not shown). Ages of children ranged from 4 months to 28 years, and three-quarters (69) were minors under the age of 18 (not shown). Nearly all parents (32) had minor children living with them. Over half (16) had children ages birth to 5, 23 had young school-age children ages 6 to 12, 17 had adolescents ages 13 to 18, 30 had school-age children ages 6 to 18, and 13 had young-adult children ages 19 or older. All parents were members of mixed-status families, with most parents (26) being undocumented themselves. Most participants' households (22) included undocumented spouses or partners, 7 included undocumented children (nearly all minors), and 3 included undocumented family members, such as parents or siblings. Among interview participants who were not undocumented, 6 were US citizens, 1 had Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, 1 had a green card, and 2 were awaiting asylum decisions (not shown). Most parents were born in Mexico (22), while others came from Venezuela, Colombia, or Central American countries. Two parents were born in the US. Most parents and their partners had lived in the US for decades, with 15 having lived in the US for 20 years or more.

Limitations of the survey included the following. First, all interview participants were people who felt comfortable participating in a research study and likely accessed assistance from the community organizations that aided in survey recruitment efforts; participants' experiences may look different from those of mixed-status families that are more disconnected from community services. Second, interview participants were all Latino, spoke either Spanish or English, and lived in communities with significant immigrant populations. The findings may not capture the full range of experiences of immigrant families with different ethnic backgrounds, family status

compositions, or locations. However, many of the fears and experiences associated with immigration enforcement are likely shared. Future research is needed to capture the experiences of other ethnic and linguistically diverse immigrant groups, immigrants not in mixed-status families, and families in additional localities to understand shared challenges and unique vulnerabilities. Last, information on child and partner mental health is reported by the parent participant, which may underestimate negative impacts.

TABLE A.1

Interview Participant Demographics

	Number of interview participants
City	
Charlotte	15
Chicago	19
Gender	
Female	31
Male	3
Partner status	
Married	19
Domestic partner	6
Separated	4
Single	5
Ages of participants' children in household	
Have any children ages 0 to 5	16
Have any children ages 6 to 12	23
Have any children ages 13 to 18	17
Have any minor children (under age 18)	32
Have any school-age children (ages 6 to 18)	30
Have any children age 19 or older	13
Family immigration status	
Participant undocumented	26
Spouse or partner undocumented	22
Child undocumented	7
Other resident family undocumented	3
Time living in US	
Fewer than 5 years	4
5 to 14 years	4
15 to 19 years	9
20 years or more	15
Country of birth	
US	2
Colombia	1
El Salvador	1
Guatemala	3
Honduras	1
Mexico	22
Nicaragua	1
Venezuela	3

Source: Urban Institute interviews with parents in mixed-status families, April–June 2026.

Notes

- ¹ The terms *immigration enforcement* and *enforcement* are used interchangeably in this brief.
- ² Memorandum from Benjamine C. Huffman, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, for Caleb Vitello, Acting Director of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and Pete R. Flores, Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Commissioner of US Customs and Border Protection, January 20, 2025, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/25_0120_S1_enforcement-actions-in-near-protected-areas.pdf.
- ³ Naax Modan, "ICE Activity on K-12 School Grounds," K-12 Dive, updated June 12, 2026, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/ice-activity-on-k-12-school-grounds/810648/>.
- ⁴ Muzaffar Chishti, Kathleen Bush-Joseph, and Colleen Putzel-Kavanaugh, "Unleashing Power in New Ways: Immigration in the First Year of Trump 2.0," *Policy Beat* (blog), Migration Policy Institute, January 13, 2026, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/journal/policy-beat/unleashing-power-new-ways-immigration-first-year-trump-20>.
- ⁵ Adriana Cardona-Maguigad, "Rapid Responders in Chicago Shift Tacts as Low-Profile ICE Enforcement Continues," *Chicago Sun Times*, May 7, 2026, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/immigration/2026/05/07/rapid-responders-immigration-enforcement-ice-puno-mimi-guiracoch-pilsen-unidos-nuestro-orgullo-casa-dupage-workers-center>; Albert Sun and Allison McCann, "ICE Arrests Soar as People with No Criminal Record Are Increasingly Targeted," *New York Times*, August 27, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/08/27/us/ice-immigrant-arrests-trump-deportation-dhs.html>; and Jazmine Ulloa, Miriam Jordan, Luis Ferré-Sadurní and David Ovalle, "A Quiet ICE Surge That Unfolded 'Everywhere All at Once' This Summer," *New York Times*, September 27, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/25/us/ice-surge-immigration-arrests.html>.
- ⁶ *Mixed-status families* are commonly defined as families that include some members who are US citizens and/or lawfully present immigrants and at least one member who is undocumented. All interview participants were living in households that included family members who were US citizens and one or more family members who were undocumented.
- ⁷ In describing the frequency across participants, we used the following definitions: none = 0, a few = 2–5, some = 6–10, many = 11–13, nearly half = 14–16, half = 17, over half = 18–20, most = 21–29, nearly all = 30–33, and all = 34.
- ⁸ Parents interviewed spoke about their minor and young-adult children: 32 families included children under age 18, while 13 included young adults ages 19 to 28.
- ⁹ Only a few risks faced by undocumented children were mentioned: 7 of the 34 families included an undocumented child.
- ¹⁰ Whitney Clegg, "'Where Are My Friends?' Teachers Say Operation Charlotte's Web Rattled Students," *The Assembly*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.theassemblync.com/news/education/k12/charlotte-immigration-teachers-students/>.
- ¹¹ Reema Amin and Cherry Salazar, "Attendance Drops at Chicago Schools in Communities with Increased Immigration Enforcement," *Chalkbeat Chicago*, October 31, 2025, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/chicago/2025/10/31/school-attendance-down-in-latino-immigrant-neighborhoods-amid-ice-operation/>.
- ¹² See accompanying brief Guelespe et al. (2026) for more information on the psychological impacts of the enforcement environment on children and other family members. Considerable evidence documents such psychological harms, including Cervantes et al. (2018), Chaudry et al. (2010), Fortuna et al. (2025), Patel et al. (2026), and Roche et al. (2024).
- ¹³ See accompanying brief Guelespe et al. (2026) for more information on interviewed families' social isolation.
- ¹⁴ A Know Your Rights card is a wallet-sized reference tool that summarizes basic rights and provides a script for individuals to recite or hand to immigration or law enforcement agents if they are questioned or approached.
- ¹⁵ Mark Price, "CMS Says Classes as Usual Monday. No Border Patrol Activity Expected at Schools," *Charlotte Observer*, updated November 17, 2025, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article312946158.html>.
- ¹⁶ North Carolina state law limits unexcused absences; see Clegg, "'Where Are My Friends?'"

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