

US immigration

Parents pull kids from childcare as immigration fears hit US's youngest

Childcare workers also nervous to go to jobs due to deportation threats as Ice raids rampant in Trump era

'They're hurting our children, our babies': US schools on high alert amid Trump immigration raids



📷 An empty classroom. Photograph: Jackie Mader/The Hechinger Report

Jackie Mader, The Hechinger Report

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t a home-based childcare program in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Maggie, 47, a lawyer before she emigrated from Mexico 10 years ago, has seen the swift effects of immigration-related executive orders from Donald Trump.

A Five of the 12 children enrolled in her care quit showing up. Through an interpreter, Maggie said parents were leaving their young children with older siblings or grandparents instead of with her, leaving home only to work so they are out of sight from law enforcement as much as possible. (The Hechinger Report is not using the full names of some of those interviewed for this article because they fear for their safety.)

“The parents said, ‘We’re just going to wait for things to calm down,’” Maggie said.

One of Trump’s executive orders, signed shortly after he took office, undid restrictions that kept US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) from raiding schools and childcare programs, the latter of which typically serve children ages five and under. As a result, America’s strict new immigration policies are hitting some of its very youngest - as well as those who look after them.

One in four children under the age of six has at least one foreign-born parent, according to [the Center for Law and Social Policy](#). Childcare providers say many of these parents are fearful of deportation now. The vast majority of these children of immigrants - 96% - are American citizens.

It’s not just the children in childcare programs around the country who aren’t showing up. Damaris Alvarado-Rodriguez closed a classroom at one of her childcare centers in Philadelphia nine days after Trump’s executive orders were signed.

Despite having green cards, the teachers in that classroom, which serves one-year-olds, were too nervous to come to work. Since Trump took office, his officials have targeted Philadelphia and other so-called sanctuary cities that limit their cooperation on immigration enforcement. Immigration agents have been a constant presence in the neighborhoods that house Alvarado-Rodriguez’s three centers.

“I’m really afraid of how this is going to impact our children, families and our staff,” she said.

Ice did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

In America, [one in five](#) childcare workers is an immigrant. In big cities like New York, immigrants make up more than 40% of the childcare workforce

(and the majority of the city's 14,000 nannies). In Los Angeles, it's nearly 50%.



📷 'Red cards' provided by some childcare programs and schools, like these at a center in Texas, are intended to help families understand their rights if they are stopped by immigration officials.

Photograph: Jackie Made/The Hechinger Report

“In the care economy, immigrants are a backbone of this work,” said Erica Phillips, executive director of the National Association for Family Child Care. These early educators are “dedicating themselves to providing one of the most essential and impactful services to young children across the nation.”

Trump’s executive orders threaten that backbone, experts say. Among other changes, the orders expand the rules about which immigrants can be deported quickly, without a hearing; require some who are not citizens to register and submit fingerprints; and restrict work permits.

The situation feels more dire than in previous years, several childcare providers said. The current administration has set daily quotas for immigrant arrests, arresting more immigrants each day than the average under the Biden administration. That includes many without criminal records, who were not targets of enforcement under former president Joe Biden.

America can ill afford to lose childcare staff. Many programs already struggle with chronic turnover, which can create instability in the lives of the

children in their care. Low wages - the average childcare worker makes \$13.22 an hour - make it hard to recruit staff. Caregivers often lack benefits and can make more working in fast food or retail roles. The pandemic sapped the workforce, and it has been slow to recover.

“We’re already starting from a place where there’s not enough childcare, programs are struggling and the workforce is already experiencing incredible stress,” said Lea Austin, executive director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley. “We can only expect that this is going to further devastate the entire early care and education ecosystem.”

Some workers face particular risk. An estimated 142,000 undocumented immigrants work as nannies and personal care or home health aides nationwide, according to research by the Center for American Progress.

In northern California, Adriana, a 27-year-old who emigrated from Mexico two years ago said she wants to start working, and recently was offered a job with a large company. But first she needs to find childcare for her three-month-old, and she worries about being separated from her baby by immigration officials. “I am scared, especially because it sounds like they’ll be able to come into my place of work,” she said through an interpreter. “I worry about leaving my child alone.”

Immigration policy can have a chilling effect on communities, causing immigrants to shy away from jobs that could increase their visibility to law enforcement agencies, said Chris Herbst, an associate professor at Arizona State University who studied the policy’s impact on childcare between 2008 and 2014. Because America’s childcare system is so reliant on the work of immigrants, “the impacts are instantaneous”, he added.



📷 An Ice officer on duty in Silver Spring, Maryland. The Trump administration has set daily quotas for immigrant arrests. Photograph: Alex Brandon/AP

In Albuquerque, Ana directs a childcare program that serves 50 local families, most of whom are American citizens. Ana left Mexico in 2020 with her husband and young son when violence ramped up in their home state of Sinaloa, and now worries she could be deported. That kind of worry is shared by her staff: three of her 14 staff members have stopped coming to work, afraid of immigration raids.

Recently, Ana and her husband gathered some belongings in case they are detained. To prepare, they are also considering notarizing a document to grant custody of their three-year-old, who is an American citizen, and their eight-year-old, who is not, to a family member. “What’s motivating us is to improve the situation of our families, to live in better places and to increase the opportunities for our children,” she said. “We hope that [immigration officials] go out after criminals and not try to follow or go after people who are good, working people.”

Elida Cruz runs a childcare program in central California that serves children of migrant workers. For some of the parents, she said the fear is palpable; she and her husband now deliver groceries and transport children to and from their childcare program so the parents can limit time away from home. Her husband developed a code word with one family, which he says three times so the parents know it’s safe to open their door.



📷 A playground at one of the childcare centers Damaris Alvarado-Rodriguez runs in Philadelphia. Alvarado-Rodriguez closed one of the classrooms recently because several teachers were too nervous to come to work with immigration officials targeting the city. Photograph: Damaris Alvarado-Rodriguez

Cruz, like many other childcare providers, has been trying to educate immigrant families about their rights by sharing resources and handing out “red cards” that advise people on what to do if they are approached by immigration officers. In addition to worrying about the effects on families and children, she worries what will happen if those families leave.

“Financially, it would be devastation of my business,” she said. “I would literally close. It would leave me without any clients, no children at all,” she added. “Our businesses are just gonna collapse, because we all depend on the field workers.”

It may only be a matter of time: even the young children in her care seem aware things could change at any moment. “It’s heartbreaking to see the children’s little faces, full of scaredness,” she said. One child asked if immigration officials would come to her center.

Cruz told him the only thing she could think of, even though she knew it was a white lie.

“I was like, ‘You know why they’re not going to come in here? ... Because they don’t even have our address, so they don’t know we’re here, *mijo*.’”

Camilla Forte contributed reporting

This story about Trump deportations was produced by the Hechinger Report, a non-profit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the Hechinger newsletter.

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