

Families separated due to ICE detentions in Massachusetts

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The birthday cake was adorned with vanilla frosting, rainbow sprinkles, and four candles on top. Such a sight would normally have sent Jhon and his brother, Damian, bouncing around the kitchen in delight. They loved sweet treats, especially ones baked by their grandmother.

But tonight, the twins' fourth birthday, Jhon refused to blow out the candles. Instead, he hid behind doorways, under the table, behind the couch. "No!" he shouted, as his mother and grandmother coaxed him.

His mother picked him up. His father would want him to celebrate his birthday, she told him gently, blinking back tears. Jhon turned away.

"I don't want birthday," Jhon said. "I want Daddy."

Across Massachusetts, thousands of immigrants — many with no criminal record — have been detained by immigration officials. In May alone, [ICE arrested more than 1,400 people](#) in Massachusetts, more than any other month on record. A considerable number are parents.

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Left behind are their children, some too young to understand what has happened.

There is no publicly available data on how many parents have been arrested in recent months, or how many children have had a parent detained by ICE.

Almost 30,000 US citizen children in Massachusetts live with at least one undocumented parent, according to a report from the [American Immigration Council](#) based on data from 2023. Many other children who aren't citizens are living with a parent who does not have a legal status.

For the families of [parents in detention](#), traumas compound: Lost income leads to financial stress. Fear turns houses into de facto jail cells. In many cases, advocates say, extended family step up, taking in children without warning.

For a child, the disappearance of a parent can be psychologically crushing.

Toledo holds hands with Damian (right) and Jhon as they leave Mass at St. Stephen Parish in Framingham. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Children in these situations can be prone to anxiety and depression, says Charles A. Nelson III, a professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital.

Having an attachment figure suddenly vanish can be "really devastating to kids," Nelson says, in part because they thrive on predictability and constancy. "When we say 'taken away,' there's this mysterious black box that exists on the other side."

In interviews over the last several months, families across Massachusetts recounted how the lives of their children have been [upended by these arrests](#).

In New Bedford, a 1-year-old girl spent weeks this spring and summer looking out the window, waiting for her father, who is from Honduras and was detained for almost a month, to come home. In Framingham, a 4-year-old girl was left in the care of a family friend for days after her mother was suddenly detained, until her father could rush to the United States from Brazil. In Lynn, a 17-year-old girl watched four immigration officials in plainclothes arrest her father, who is from Guatemala, right outside their front door. Now she's afraid to leave the house.

In these situations, federal officials ask parents if they want their children to be deported with them. If not, ICE will place the children "with a safe person the parent designates," Tricia McLaughlin, the assistant secretary for public affairs at the Department of Homeland Security, said in a statement to the *Globe*.

Twins Damian (right) and Jhon ride bikes around their kitchen. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

A family portrait shows Toledo and her husband, Nexan Asencio Corado, holding their twins. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

“DHS takes its responsibility to protect children seriously and will continue to work with federal law enforcement to ensure that children are safe and protected,” McLaughlin said.

Parents who are living here unlawfully can use a mobile application called CBP Home to [voluntarily depart the country](#), McLaughlin said, adding that the United States is offering \$1,000 and a free flight for those who choose this option.

“We encourage every person here illegally to take advantage of this offer and reserve the chance to come back to the U.S. the right legal way to live [the] American dream,” McLaughlin said. “If not, you will be arrested and deported without a chance to return.”

Jhon and Damian, the twin brothers in Milford, have spent almost two months without their dad. To make ends meet, Christina Toledo, their mother, has picked up extra shifts at her two jobs as a school bus driver and office manager.

Toledo, like her boys, is a US citizen. She and her husband, Nexan Asencio Corado, had hoped they could normalize his status. He came in unauthorized about a decade ago from Guatemala, was arrested near the border and deported, and then returned.

He eventually received an approved petition, through his marriage to Toledo, to begin the process toward lawful permanent residency, and had a pending application to stay here legally while the process moved forward. The couple have been together for almost a decade, and have been married for four years.

Just after dawn on May 30, Asencio Corado was driving to his job in carpentry and framing. Immigration officers stopped his van.

After he was pulled over, not far from their home, Asencio Corado ran back to the house — he was trying, his wife says, to tell her what was happening. They had been watching the news of recent arrests, and were worried that he could be apprehended without any notification to their family, which had happened in some cases. So they made a pact: If Asencio Corado thought he was in danger of being arrested, he would get as close to home as he could, to alert Toledo that he was being taken.

Toledo, 38, with Jhon (left) and Damian at home in Milford. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

And that's what happened on that Friday in late May, when Toledo heard a scuffle outside.

Video footage of the arrest, which Toledo took on her cellphone, shows two masked immigration agents handcuffing her husband in the backyard.

From an upstairs window, Toledo and the twins saw federal agents lead Asencio Corado to an unmarked car.

"Daddy," Damian can be heard saying in the background of the video. "Arrest, arrest."

Asencio Corado may face a losing battle to stay in the country under the Trump administration. DHS said in immigration court documents this year that he is not eligible for legal status since he reentered the country unlawfully, though they acknowledged he had no

known criminal record.

Officials at the detention center where her husband is being held told him that he would be deported, Toledo says. Still, she hopes that one day, her husband will be allowed to return home — and to his routine with their twins.

“I’m going to be sad for my whole life until you come back home, my love,” Toledo told him in a recent call, in a mixture of Spanish and English. “I just miss you, *mucho*.”

“Truly, I’m sorry,” Asencio Corado told her. “I feel guilty because you got married to someone who is illegal.”

“And it was the best decision of my life, don’t you understand that?” Toledo replied.

Damian (left) and Jhon at the kitchen window in June. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Before his arrest, the twins would take his coffee mug and lunchbox off his hands in the evenings — Toledo always had a meal prepared for him — after he came back from his job in construction; the family had just started their own residential framing business. They’d greet him with kisses and hugs.

Both boys are crushed, but Jhon is especially attached to his father, Toledo says. Asencio Corado held him every night at bedtime, until he fell asleep in his arms.

Since his father disappeared, Jhon has been acting out — stomping his feet, throwing his toys. Sometimes, he’ll cry randomly while playing games with his brother. Out of nowhere, he’ll say it over and over: *Daddy*.

Toledo was born in the United States. Her father is from Ecuador and her mother is Puerto Rican. She has never been to Guatemala, and neither have the twins.

If Asencio Corado is deported, she said, she might consider moving there, though the immigration process could take years. She doesn't want the boys to grow up without their father.

Some children, like Jhon and Damian, have spent weeks and weeks without one of their parents. Others have been separated from their sole caretakers.

Last month at the Goodnow Brothers Elementary School in Marlborough, families gathered with balloons and flowers on the sidewalk outside the school, eager to celebrate their fifth-graders' graduation from elementary school.

As the ceremony began, Luna Faltz was trying to hold back tears. She wore a necklace with charms of butterflies on it, which her grandmother had gotten her the day before. Her mother would usually paint her nails, but now they were bare.

Daiane Faltz, Luna's mother, was locked inside an immigration detention center in Karnes City, Texas, 2,000 miles away.

Luna, 11, excelled at school; after arriving from Brazil about four years ago, she was already fluent in English, and she loved playing volleyball. In the last weeks of school, her mind kept wandering in class as she worried about her mother, who had been arrested by ICE on May 15 in Plymouth, and swiftly transferred to the detention facility in Texas.

Luna, left, with a relative at her grandmother's home in Marlborough on June 6. Erin Clark/Globe Staff

“I had a hard day yesterday,” Luna said on a Friday just after school. “I remembered my mom. I started crying.”

Her teachers helped, encouraging her to take breaks, or play with a fidget toy when she got anxious. They offered extra hugs.

Faltz is a single mother, and had Luna young. The two of them are extremely close; they had come to the United States from Brazil, fleeing domestic violence at home, the family said. They love girls’ nights together, painting each other’s nails, ordering food in their pajamas and watching *Harry Potter*. After her mother’s arrest, Luna moved into her grandmother’s apartment in Marlborough.

Luna and her mother crossed the border without permission in 2021, according to records from DHS, but were first apprehended by immigration officials in Texas and expelled under Title 42, a pandemic-era immigration restriction.

A few days later, they crossed into California and were again apprehended by immigration officials, but released on their own recognizance while they [waited for a court hearing](#), records show. They made their way to Massachusetts, where Faltz’s mother lives.

In 2024, Faltz was charged with operating a vehicle without a license. The charge was disposed of earlier this year after she paid her court fees, Marlborough District Court records show. According to her family, Faltz’s license was suspended without her knowledge during that process; they later learned she missed a court date she didn’t know she had. The notification had been sent to a former address.

In May, Faltz was arrested by Plymouth police for driving with a suspended license, DHS said in an immigration court hearing last month. ICE took her into custody.

Luna after her fifth-grade graduation ceremony in Marlborough. Erin
Clark/Globe Staff

Luna blows a kiss to her mother during a video call as her grandmother, Bianca, holds the phone. Erin
Clark/Globe Staff

So Faltz missed watching Luna parade around the school with her classmates at graduation, waving at their families; her daughter hugging her classmates and taking pictures with her teachers.

Luna's grandmother, who stood near Luna and her classmates as each name was called, managed to get Faltz on a video call from detention, just in time to see her daughter walk up and get her certificate on the school's lawn. Luna's grandmother held up the phone so her daughter could see. Luna flashed a grin as she realized who was on the screen.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Luna rushed over to talk to her mother.

"*Te amo*," Faltz told her daughter on the phone in Portuguese. "*Também te amo*," Luna responded.

Luna dove into her grandmother's arms and buried her head in her neck. All around them, other parents hugged their children. Faltz could only watch her daughter cry.

Time on video calls is always limited. Luna lifted her head and blew her mother a kiss before the screen went dark.

In the next week, Luna fell into a familiar pattern. She had constant reminders of her mom; the background of her phone screen was a picture of the letter "D" traced in the sand on a beach, a heart around it. "D" for Daiane.

On a Thursday, 10 days after Luna's graduation, she noticed her grandmother was behaving secretively, taking all of her phone calls in private. When bedtime wasn't enforced, Luna knew something was afoot. So her grandmother relented and told her the surprise: Her mom was coming home in the early hours of Friday morning.

Faltz had been released on bail, for the hefty sum of \$8,000.

It was nearly 2 a.m., and Luna was wide awake, jittery with anticipation. "One minute!" her grandmother told her in Portuguese as they glanced at her phone, tracking the progress of the Lyft making its way west from South Station. When the car arrived at their apartment complex, Luna took off running.

Daiane Faltz collapses onto the couch with Luna. Erin
Clark/Globe Staff

Luna massages her mother's hand. Erin
Clark/Globe Staff

They flew to each other and hugged. Faltz kissed Luna's head, over and over, sobbing with relief.

"I can't believe it," Faltz said.

Faltz had taken five separate buses over more than 48 hours to make it home. Luna could not stop smiling.

She held her mother's hand as Faltz described detention: the small cells, the lack of privacy, the inedible food. Luna took out a kit with beads to make her mother a bracelet. Her grandmother served carne ensopada, a Brazilian dish similar to beef stew. Luna braided Faltz's hair, and inspected her mother's new, bulky ankle monitor.

Daiane still had a long road ahead of her; she had to fight the deportation case that the US government was taking up against her. But on that night, all that seemed to matter was that mother and daughter were finally together again.

On a mattress on the living room floor, they curled up side by side and fell asleep.

Back in Milford, Jhon and Damian's dad has not come home.

Asencio Corado is in a federal prison holding ICE detainees in Berlin, New Hampshire. An immigration judge denied his bond. Toledo was devastated. Toledo, who is Catholic, has been going to church more often since her husband's detainment, searching for comfort in God. On a recent Sunday in June, Toledo and the twins walked up to St. Stephen Parish in Framingham for the 12:30 p.m. Mass in Spanish. Jhon balked at going inside.

"We're going to go see the angels," Toledo told Jhon. "Come on, for Daddy."

Toledo and Jhon during Mass at St. Stephen Parish. Jessica
Rinaldi/Globe Staff

He relented, and trotted ahead to catch up.

During the service, Toledo closed her eyes in prayer as Damian sat on her lap, and Jhon nestled in next to her. She listened intently as the priest shared his sermon; in times of loneliness, and profound hardship, he said, parishioners should look to God for solace. The chattering of children were the only sounds breaking through the sermon.

Jhon scanned the sanctuary walls, looking at paintings of scenes from the Bible, featuring men with beards and dark hair like his father's. He pointed. "Daddy," Jhon called out to them, breaking the hush of the Mass. "Daddy. Daddy."

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