

CHILD KILLED

Father who found his 11-year-old murdered in Texas nearly deported by ICE before he could testify

By [Jessica Willey](#)

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A key witness in the shocking murder of 11-year-old Maria Gonzalez was moments away from deportation, raising concerns about immigration enforcement's impact on criminal investigations.

PASADENA, Texas -- A father, who is a key witness in the shocking murder of his 11-year-old daughter, Maria Gonzalez, was moments away from deportation, raising concerns about immigration enforcement's impact on criminal investigations.

Maria's father, Carmelo Gonzalez, discovered her body in a bag under a bed in their apartment in Pasadena Texas, near Houston, in August 2023. According to court records, Maria had been sexually assaulted and strangled. Just four days later, 18-year-old Juan Carlos Garcia Rodriguez, a neighbor, was arrested in Louisiana, and charged with capital murder. Gonzalez is considered an important witness in the case.

Harris County, Texas District Attorney Sean Teare expressed alarm over recent developments and emphasized the importance of Gonzalez's testimony.

"To be that close to losing such a crucial witness is really scary," Teare said. "There's no way you try a case like this without giving that little girl a voice, without having the man who raised her and loved her from birth be able to talk about her to a jury."

On Jan. 26, court records show that Gonzalez was arrested for his first DWI offense, a misdemeanor. As an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala, he was flagged by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Upon release on bond the next day, online records indicate he was taken into ICE custody for an immigration violation.

By the time the district attorney's office was notified and found him, Gonzalez was already on a plane, Teare said, despite having a pending U-Visa application, which is typically granted to crime victims who assist in criminal investigations and prosecutions.

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"I have never seen a witness with a U-Visa application already in the process of being removed from the country within a week of going into ICE custody," he said. "I have never seen that even with someone without a U-Visa application."

Currently, Gonzalez is being held at a facility in Conroe, Texas, while officials work with ICE to secure his release. Teare warned that recent changes in immigration enforcement policies are already impacting criminal prosecutions.

"We are having less witness cooperation because of these policies, which means we are not able to prosecute the predators preying on our communities as effectively," Teare said. "These victims, these family members, these witnesses are scared to show up at the courthouse, that, quite frankly, is full of law enforcement because they are worried about being deported."

ICE has not responded to requests for comment. The presence of ICE agents inside Harris County Jail has long been a reality, but this case, Teare said, highlights growing uncertainty about immigration enforcement at the courthouse.

While Teare said he wants to ensure that Gonzalez will be the "voice for this beautiful little girl," he also promises the father's DWI case will go through the same process that others do.

Additionally, Teare said his office is now tracking the number of cases that are affected due to immigration enforcement fallout.