NATIONAL

Police say ICE tactics are eroding public trust in local law enforcement

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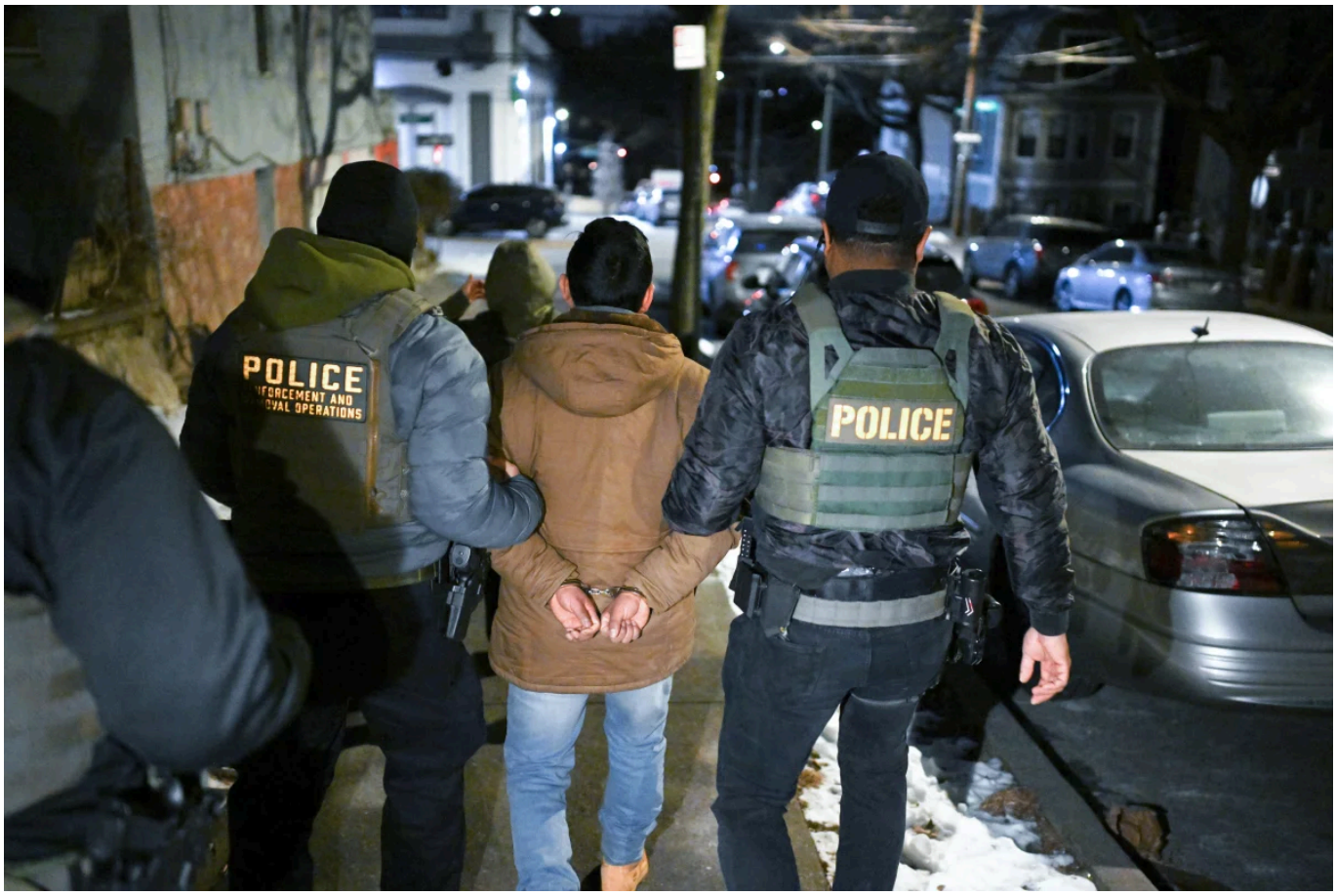
4-Minute Listen PLAYLIST TRANSCRIPT



Law enforcement walk with Leonardo Fabian Cando Juntamay as he was detained in the Bronx during ICE-led operations to apprehend illegal immigrants on Jan. 28, 2025 in New York, NY.

Matt McClain/The Washington Post via Getty Images

Read this story in Spanish.

In Santa Fe County, N.M., last month, local police leaders stood before a packed auditorium and showed photos of their uniforms so residents would know what they look like — and, more pointedly, what ICE does not.

"Whatever happens around the country, whoever is president, you are our community. We are your officers," Santa Fe Police Chief Paul Joye said with the help of a Spanish interpreter. "It is a fundamental human right that you feel safe in your home regardless of where you're from."

Meetings like this have been playing out nationwide in recent weeks. Police departments are holding town halls, releasing videos and statements, and adding FAQ sections to their websites. They're trying to communicate the same message: They are not immigration officers and residents should not be afraid to call them.

It's not uncommon for many people living in the U.S. without legal status to be wary of police. But as the Trump administration's immigration enforcement efforts have intensified, local police leaders say the fear many immigrants experience has also ramped up, and it's making their jobs harder.

"The one issue, honestly, that's keeping police chiefs up at night is dealing with immigration," says Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum. "Dealing with their communities, dealing with federal law

enforcement, they really find themselves caught in the middle and trying to navigate that ground as best they can."

A patchwork of police policies

At the Santa Fe meeting, Chief Joye, who dressed in plainclothes for fear his uniform might make people nervous, acknowledged his department's policy does allow them to work with federal immigration authorities in some instances.

"There are certain crimes for which we could work with ICE: concealing identity, identity theft, violent crime against another person, human trafficking, narcotics trafficking, gang-organized activity," he told the group, stressing that residents should still call the police when they are victims of crimes.

In a later call with NPR, Joye said he felt the meeting was productive.

"What I really wanted to let them know is, from our perspective, this is when we would or could get ICE involved. We don't participate in the sweeps. We aren't in a position to be adversarial to ICE or cause trouble for them either. We aren't working to aid them, but we aren't going to actively work against them either," Joye says.

It's a delicate message – and one that differs widely nationwide. There are around 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country, and they vary in how they work with ICE, if they do at all.

Many police want federal immigration authorities to detain people without legal status who have committed violent crimes or other felonies, but they don't want to scare away immigrants who are following the law — which they are more likely to do than citizens — from calling the police.

But the Trump administration is not targeting only people accused of committing crimes. It is also arresting students who protested Israel's assault on Gaza and people, lawyers say, who simply have tattoos of their favorite soccer team. That, along with the patchwork of local police policies, has helped sow fear.

Worries that immigrants are reporting fewer crimes

In Tennessee, the Greeneville Police Department postponed a Hispanic community meeting this month after commenters on Facebook discouraged people from attending, claiming it was an ICE roundup in disguise.

Many police chiefs have opted to risk the ire of the federal government in an attempt to preserve trust with immigrant communities – a bond that can be tenuous even in the best of times.

In Boston, when police commissioner Michael Cox pointed out last month that his agency doesn't have the authority to enforce immigration law, Trump's border czar, Tom Homan, said he'd "bring hell" to the city. On March 24, ICE arrested more than 300 people in Massachusetts.

Police leaders NPR spoke with say they're worried immigrants are already reporting fewer crimes. Studies show immigration status can be a barrier to calling the police.

Minneapolis Police Chief Brian O'Hara says that jeopardizes public safety.

"If people are not willing to call us and tell us what's going on, tell us they've been victimized, cooperate as witnesses, all of that leads to a situation that makes the potential for everyone in this city to be victimized that much worse," he says. "The effect of the climate over the last month has been that a lot of folks in different communities don't know the difference between my badge and an ICE badge."

Republican Sheriff Chad Bianco in Riverside County, Calif. says he is in favor of deporting "criminals who are also here illegally," though he says he is largely prevented by California law from participating in those federal efforts.

But he regularly speaks with county farm owners. He says many of them employ people who are living in the country without legal status. Those workers, he says, are telling their bosses about crimes that they're victims of, including robberies and assaults.

"The owners are telling me, but they're telling me that they can't convince their workers to be a victim and to notify law enforcement because they're afraid they're going to be deported," he says.

Kieran Donahue, the sheriff in Canyon County, Idaho, says when someone is arrested and then found to be undocumented, he will hold them for immigration authorities.

"I have an obligation under the rule of law to notify federal authorities because they have broken federal law. And they wouldn't be in my jail if they haven't violated state law," Donahue says. "We cannot, unless deputized, enforce federal law, but we enforce the rule of law. So it does put us in this position between these two factions, between the rock and the hard spot."

Donahue, also president of the National Sheriffs' Association, acknowledged that holding ICE detainees could damage public trust in law enforcement, though he says he hasn't seen that in his own county. Elsewhere, though, "There's been this spike of apprehension, nervousness, fear," he says. "That is a steep hurdle that law enforcement is facing."

Harold Medina, police chief in Albuquerque, N.M. and president of the Major Cities Chiefs Association, says trust between a community and law enforcement is what makes the difference in convincing people that local police are there to help them.

"It comes down to, you should never try to create a relationship with a segment of the community the day after something has occurred," he says. "Every day we deposit in the bank of trust."

He says if law enforcement is only trying to build trust now, it's too little, too late.