

POLITICS

She Testified About Being Raped. Then ICE Showed Up.

Immigration officers are making arrests in sensitive locations, including family court.

By Marie-Rose Sheinerman

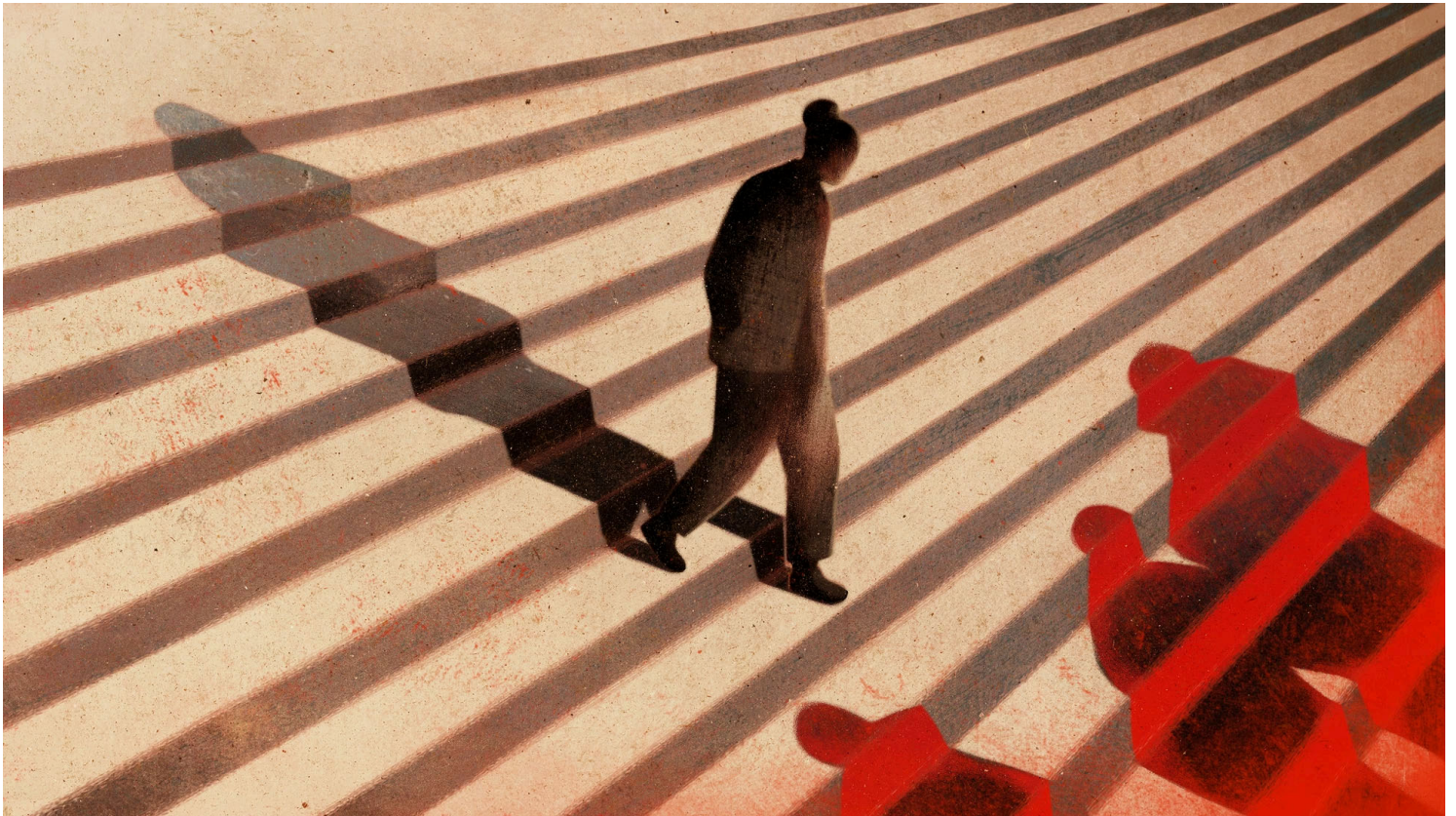


Illustration by Owen Gent

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SAVE 

TWICE A WEEK, a 67-year-old retiree in New Jersey volunteers as an advocate for victims of domestic and sexual violence, often visiting hospitals and police stations as women complete rape kits and answer questions. One afternoon last May, she sat for hours in family court with a 35-year-old mother of two who was trying to secure a permanent restraining order against her ex-boyfriend.

The woman took the stand to tell her version of what had happened, which she had already told police: She and her then-boyfriend had argued. She had started pulling

her clothes out of the closet to leave when he grabbed her from behind. Then he placed her in a chokehold and raped her. Eventually she lost consciousness. (That is not the ex-boyfriend's account of events; his lawyer denied the allegations.) The hearing finally ended at about 5 o'clock. The woman said goodbye to her lawyer and headed downstairs with the advocate.

The two stepped outside into the rain—and the woman who had testified was tackled to the ground. “I thought she was being kidnapped,” the advocate told me. She ran to the law-enforcement officers in the lobby to ask for help. “The police were just standing there like they were having a coffee klatch,” she said. “And I was like, *Guys, are you kidding me? Why are you not doing something? This woman is being assaulted.* And they said, *We can't do a thing. They're ICE.*”

The advocate remembers wondering: *Should I jump in there? What should I do?* “I'm strong for a woman my age, but I'm not someone who can fight off two people,” she said. After about 15 minutes, the federal agents—neither of whom were wearing uniforms or identification, both women told me—put the struggling, screaming mother into an unmarked car and drove away.

When President Trump returned to office and launched what he has claimed will be the largest mass-deportation campaign in history, his administration revoked ICE guidance instructing officers to avoid detaining people at sensitive locations, such as courthouses. As the administration tries to deport 1 million people a year, ICE officers are now staking out immigration courts, and many immigrants are skipping routine court appointments out of fear. Although ICE still advises officers to “generally avoid” enforcement at family courts, it has become riskier for victims who are not citizens to report crimes or seek protections, including restraining orders. A Department of Homeland Security spokesperson defended the shift toward courthouse arrests as “common sense,” saying in an email that arresting immigrants there is safer for officers and “conserves valuable law enforcement resources because they already know where a target will be.”

Beyond arrests at courthouses, other noncitizen victims seeking help from the legal system have found themselves being targeted for deportation. News reports have described a mother and her child taken into ICE custody in Austin in January after police responded to a domestic-disturbance call; a woman in Houston last April who called 911 to report domestic abuse by her ex-husband only to have the police contact ICE; and a mother of eight in Sacramento detained in September after reporting her case specialist—an ICE contractor—for sexual harassment. Many victims who are not citizens fear that if they interact with law enforcement in any way, they are putting themselves at further risk of being detained or deported, more than a dozen attorneys and advocates told me. A year into Trump's first term, the ACLU and the National Immigrant Women's Advocacy Project surveyed 232 law-enforcement officers, and nearly 70 percent reported that investigating domestic-violence cases had become

more difficult since Trump took office. That has become true again over the past year, experts told me, and the challenges are growing.

The lawyers I spoke with described a climate of fear for victims lacking citizenship—fear that calling police will get ICE involved, fear of being detained at a courthouse, fear of an abuser’s threats to have her deported if she reports him. Law-enforcement veterans told me that fear undercuts efforts by local police to reduce crime. During ICE’s “Operation Midway Blitz” in Chicago last fall, calls to 911 fell by more than 21 percent in Little Village, home to the city’s largest Mexican American population, the *Chicago Tribune* reported. “This is making all of us less safe,” Morgan Weibel, the legal-services director at Tahirih Justice Center, a national nonprofit serving immigrant survivors of gender-based violence, told me. “If people can’t confidently pick up the phone and call 911 when they or someone else is in danger, it erodes safety for everyone.”

The volunteer advocate in New Jersey spoke with me on the condition of anonymity to comply with confidentiality rules designed to protect the victims she helps. She said she hasn’t witnessed any other ICE arrests in the past year—but she’s more cautious now, more vigilant. Part of her job is to encourage survivors, who may feel scared or helpless, to not give up seeking the help they need. Now she feels an additional obligation, especially when she is dispatched to courthouses. She needs to make sure that people are aware that “ICE could be waiting for them.”

FOR DECADES, bipartisan efforts tried to make it easier and less intimidating for victims who are not citizens to report sexual violence and seek protection from their abusers. In 2000, Congress passed a law that built on the Violence Against Women Act by creating new types of visas for victims of certain serious crimes, including domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and false imprisonment, with the goal of removing immigration status as a barrier to cooperating with police and prosecutors. Although only 10,000 of these visas are available every year, applicants waiting for approval could be given “deferred action” immigration status, making them eligible to legally work in the U.S.

Proponents of these visas—of which the U visa is the most common—say that they have helped victims come forward and helped prosecutors convict more offenders. From 2017 to 2023, immigrants were 5 percentage points more likely than those born in the U.S. to report being a victim of a sex crime, according to an analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey by the Cato Institute. But research also shows that reporting falls at moments of increased immigration enforcement. During President Obama’s first term, when there was a historic spike in detentions and deportations, the likelihood that a Hispanic victim reported an incident to the police dropped 30 percent—and the likelihood that a Hispanic person was victimized increased by 16 percent, according to a recent study accepted for publication by the *American Economic Review*.

In 2021, the Biden administration built on existing protections by enacting policies directing ICE officers to check whether someone they were arresting was a crime victim, and to exercise leniency if they were. In January 2025, Trump officials reversed those guidelines. The DHS spokesperson said that the visa programs for victims had turned into “loopholes for illegal aliens seeking to stay in the United States.” The spokesperson added that the number of applications for the visas doubled from 2021 to 2024, which they attributed to “rampant fraud, abuse, and exploitation.” A Biden-era inspector-general report found that the U-visa program was susceptible to fraud, and last July, federal prosecutors indicted three police chiefs and two others in Louisiana for a nearly decade-long alleged conspiracy to commit fraud that the prosecutors say involved filing false police reports in exchange for thousands of dollars. Experts counter that although some fraud exists within any immigration program, these visas are among the only immigration benefits for which the consent of police, a prosecutor, or a judge is a prerequisite. And the rise in applications, they say, can be attributed to an increase in awareness about the program among both undocumented communities and the police.

An undocumented immigrant always faced some risk in coming forward, “but the risk was really pretty minor,” Gina Amato Lough, who leads Public Counsel’s Immigrants’ Rights Project and has worked with immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other crimes for nearly two decades, told me. That isn’t the case anymore. The risk level started to change under the first Trump administration, and drastically escalated in the second, she said. For the first time in her 18 years doing this work, she is seeing a growing number of victims get detained and deported even when they have a U visa or deferred-action status, or are in the process of applying for either.

Read: Hundreds of thousands of anonymous deportees

Victims have become more reluctant to pursue these visas, advocates told me, and lawyers are changing their guidance, adding layers of caution and caveats. From the spring to the summer of 2025, the number of U-visa petitions the government received dropped by more than 60 percent, according to data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The number of such applicants receiving a visa, meanwhile, dropped by more than 25 percent.

Several attorneys emphasized to me that some of their clients are still successfully navigating the system. A woman in Atlanta, who is in her 20s, told me she had been afraid to leave an abusive marriage to a citizen out of fear that she could be deported. But last year, she called a hotline, was connected with lawyers, and applied for lawful status through a provision that allows certain noncitizens to apply without their abusive family member’s knowledge. “I really want to stress that there is support out there,” she said. “A lot of people don’t even know.”

Although jurisdictions have different policies about working with federal immigration enforcement, the targeted operations in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis panicked immigrants across the country. All of this emboldens criminal offenders, Giovanni Veliz, a retired Minneapolis police commander, told me. “They say, *Hey, we can go target these Spanish-speaking victims, because they’re not going to call the police,*” said Veliz, who served as the Minneapolis Police Department’s U-visa coordinator. He worries that heavy ICE enforcement in the city earlier this year jeopardized the department’s efforts to build trust within the community. “That relationship investment that we’ve had for years and years has been fractured,” he said.



Illustration by Owen Gent

Leslye Orloff, an adjunct law professor at American University and one of the architects of the legislation behind U visas, told me that she has been urging lawyers she knows “not to collapse, not to freeze because their client is an immigrant.” She cited her experience as an attorney for undocumented domestic-violence victims in the 1980s—before the Violence Against Women Act or U visa existed. Sometimes, she said, she would get a family-court judge to order an abuser not to call immigration authorities on a victim, then jail the abuser for criminal contempt for violating that order. “There are things that you can do to be creative to address the concerns of today,” she said, “but you can’t do any of them if victim advocates and attorneys are paralyzed.”

AS ICE OFFICERS ARRESTED the woman in New Jersey last May, her hand was injured, becoming so swollen that she later told me it looked broken. The officers took her to the hospital—the same one where she’d completed a rape kit six months earlier, she said. Five days later, she was moved to the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center—where, during her detention, an officer pleaded guilty to sexually abusing a detainee. She shared a sleeping space with more than 70 women, she said, and learned that many of them had stories similar to her own.

The woman agreed to speak with me on the condition that I withhold her name and country of origin, fearing retribution. To verify what she and others told me, I reviewed court, police, medical, and immigration records.

[Read: How the Cruz family decided to self-deport](#)

She begged an immigration judge last summer to allow her to stay in the United States, explaining that she had been brought to this country against her will as a 13-year-old and has lived a life filled with trauma, including domestic and sexual violence. “I owe all my life lessons to this amazing country of America,” she wrote in a letter to the court. She was once a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipient, which gave her protection against deportation, but at the time of her arrest, she did not have lawful status. Her arrest record includes prostitution, aggravated assault, and drug possession with intent to distribute—all charges that were dismissed. Two charges on her record—a disorderly-conduct charge and a local-ordinance violation for endangering the welfare of a child—resulted in fines and no jail time. (She’s had many cases of “wrong place, wrong time, wrong relationships,” she told me.) She has two children, a 15-year-old son and a 10-year-old daughter, who she said live with their respective fathers, and she told the judge that she does not want to be separated from them. “My immigration status has always been a weapon to people that care to take advantage of me, so do me the favor of either releasing me back to New Jersey with my children, or sending me back to my birth country,” she wrote to the judge. “I do not wish to be taken advantage of anymore.”

Her immigration attorney, Carolyn Hines, argued that she should be released because her detention minutes after her testimony violated her constitutional due-process rights and failed to comply with federal statutory law. Officers “likely acted on information obtained from the very individual who had abused” her, Hines said in a court filing—a type of source that ICE prohibits officers from solely relying on when targeting someone for arrest. The DHS spokesperson denied that claim. (The attorney for her ex-boyfriend declined to comment.)

All of the woman’s pleas were denied. Seeing no likely path to legal immigration status, she agreed to what the government calls a “voluntary departure” to her home country in South America. Asked about the woman’s case, the DHS spokesperson called her a “criminal illegal alien” and listed crimes she has been accused of.

The lawyer for her ex-boyfriend, who is a U.S. citizen, accused the woman of fabricating allegations against his client “to protect herself from immigration enforcement,” presumably by getting a U visa. But in the six months between reporting the alleged assault to police and the date of her detention, she never applied for such a visa. The lawyer also pointed me to a pending assault charge on the woman’s record: Her ex-boyfriend had filed a police report against her, accusing her of biting his arm—an act she told police was in self-defense as he put her in the

chokehold. And in securing a temporary restraining order against her, the ex-boyfriend made other accusations, saying that she had repeatedly made him feel unsafe, including by cursing and throwing things. (The criminal charges, against both the ex-boyfriend and the woman, have not been resolved.) In designing U visas, lawmakers sought to ensure that charges an alleged perpetrator may file against their victim do not disqualify the victim from protections from deportation.

The woman and I first spoke in January, when she was still in detention. I asked what her hopes had been for the future—before the arrest, before Louisiana, before everything else. She said she had wanted to go back to school and get the training she needed to become a victim advocate, like the advocates helping her. “And I *still* want to do that,” she said.

We spoke again last month, after she had returned to her home country, and she told me she was trying to take it one day at a time. “I can breathe; it’s fresh air, and I’m able to take things slow,” she said. “I don’t feel like I’m on a hamster wheel. I feel like instead of existing, I can live.” She’s getting ready to apply for a U visa to return to the U.S. and, she hopes, reunite with her children. For now, she is rebuilding her life in a country she had not seen in nearly two dozen years.

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