

U.S. NEWS

AP Exclusive: Trump's immigration crackdown has detained more than 50 military spouses and parents



1 of 6 | The Trump administration's expanded immigration enforcement has led to the detention of dozens of spouses and parents of active-duty U.S. service members after ending protections previously available to military families. [Read More](#)

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President Donald Trump's administration has detained dozens of parents and spouses of active-duty U.S. troops as it rolls back [immigration](#) protections for military families to pursue its [mass deportation agenda](#), an Associated Press investigation found.

More than 50 parents and spouses of active-duty service members have been detained since Trump took office for a second term, and at least six [have been deported](#) and one self-deported, the AP found in [the first accounting of such detentions](#), which the government does not track. At least eight immediate family members of U.S. service members remain in federal immigration custody.

Parents and spouses of people in the military have generally been shielded from deportation under bipartisan consensus for decades. But the AP found they're now routinely being detained for months as they try to adjust their legal status through the policies available to service members' close relatives and even as the military continues to recruit by advertising immigration benefits for enlistees' families. Experts warn that the reversal could undermine military preparedness even as the U.S. is at [war in Iran](#). It's left military members without emotional support and caretakers for their children, delayed deployments and forced some to take leave.



Army Sgt. Hedar Leonel Turcios Juarez, whose wife Cristy has been detained by immigration authorities, poses for a photo at home in El Paso, Texas, July 21, 2026. (AP Photo/Ryan Romero)

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“How can I even focus on my military career because I have to worry about how my wife is doing?” said Army Sgt. Hedar Leonel Turcios Juarez, who was stationed in Fort Bliss, Texas, when his wife was detained outside a Walmart in front of their 6-year-old daughter in July.

A handful of detentions of service members’ spouses have [prompted public backlash](#) and led to [intervention](#) by Homeland Security Secretary [Markwayne Mullin](#) to secure their release.

The Department of Homeland Security has said it does not compile data on these cases. The AP obtained information by analyzing thousands of federal court records compiled by [Habeas Dockets](#), a project run by the Immigration Justice Transparency Initiative; by reviewing existing media coverage; and by verifying information with family members and attorneys. The actual number is likely much higher than the 52 cases AP found.

The AP asked for comment from DHS on each case, including the individuals’ immigration and criminal history. The agency did not provide specific information about the majority of cases but noted that at least seven people had been removed from the U.S. before, at least eight had removal orders and at least two had drunken-driving or drug-related convictions.

“DHS and ICE value the contributions of all those who have served in the U.S. military,” DHS said in a statement. “U.S. military service alone does not automatically grant lawful immigration status, or exempt aliens from the consequences of violating U.S. immigration laws.”

The Pentagon declined to comment on the AP’s findings.

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Service members are losing their safety net

Air Force Tech. Sgt. Wendy Gbeve, 30, said she hasn’t had a good night’s sleep since her father, Luis Alberto Ramirez Zavala, was detained by immigration officials last month. Gbeve was there

when he was [arrested at a routine interview](#) with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in Missouri about his pending application for legal status.

She spent hours refreshing the USCIS page to track where the government was taking her father: from a county jail in Missouri to an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility in Texas. Finally, roughly two weeks after he was detained, she found out he had been deported to his native Mexico.

“It’s the most frustrating, helpless feeling,” Gbeve said.

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Gbeve said ICE still hasn’t informed her family why her father was removed so quickly. Ramirez Zavala spent most of his life in the U.S. working as a ranch hand in rural Illinois.

Ramirez Zavala’s wife of 30 years, a legal permanent resident, is considering returning to Mexico to be with her husband. For Gbeve, whose husband is also in the Air Force, that would leave no one to watch their children, ages 2 and 4, if both were deployed.

“That would be our entire safety net,” she said.

Military members have had to take leave or delay a deployment

Some service members have been left caring for children alone.

Army Staff Sgt. Alexis Jaramillo, an aviation operations specialist who has served for more than a decade, said he would normally be involved in training soldiers at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Instead, he is on administrative leave, caring for his 5-year-old stepson, Noah, after his Brazilian wife, Maisa Lopes Eliaser, was detained in early July.

It happened during what the family thought was a routine appointment at a USCIS office in Alabama. Eliaser arrived in the U.S. on a tourist visa in 2019, and the couple was trying to change her status.



Army Staff Sgt. Alexis Jaramillo visits his wife, Maisa Lopes Eliaser, a Brazilian national who is being detained by ICE, at the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center in Basile, La., Sunday, Aug. 2, 2026. (AP Photo/Joseph Vidrine) [Read More](#)

Immigration officials asked Jaramillo and his stepson to leave the room. Minutes later, they were told that Eliaser had been detained. The next time they saw her was inside a detention facility.

"It is really overwhelming because I need to take care of my kid by myself. No one is here to help me out," Jaramillo said.

At least one active-duty soldier halted her imminent deployment after her husband was detained by immigration officers, leaving no one to care for their then-5-year-old son, court records show. A judge eventually ordered the husband released.

Trump's policy is a reversal even from his first administration

A [new policy](#), implemented in April 2025, states that “military service alone does not exempt aliens from the consequences of violating U.S. immigration laws.”

Experts in military immigration law said this marks a stark shift from previous administrations across the political spectrum, including Trump’s first administration.

Dan Gividen, who served as ICE’s deputy chief counsel from 2016 to 2019 [under Trump](#), represents a soldier’s father who has been in ICE custody for more than eight months. He said that during his time as an ICE prosecutor, immigration authorities rarely detained service members’ immediate family members unless they had committed violent crimes.

“We would not place them into removal proceedings, period. That’s insane,” Gividen said. “The fact that they’re doing it now is just outrageous.”

ICE previously generally canceled past removal orders and allowed parents or spouses of troops to adjust their legal status, said Margaret Stock, an immigration attorney and retired lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve. She said that’s because the government wanted to ensure troops focused on their duties.

“It’s the same thing that happens if you don’t provide healthcare to the troops, or you don’t provide housing to the troops,” she said. If soldiers are preoccupied with detained or deported family, “they’re not concentrating on their job anymore.”

Even some congressional Republicans who are otherwise largely supportive of Trump’s aggressive immigration crackdown have [pushed for the release](#) of service members’ relatives.

“The immigration system is failing the honorable and good Americans,” Florida Republican Rep. Maria Elvira Salazar said at a news conference in July advocating for the release of the wife of retired Staff Sgt. Wilmer Trujillo, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. DHS said she illegally reentered the U.S. after being deported in 2005. Her attorney says they are seeking to rescind the removal order because she was not provided proper notice of the hearing that led to it.

Although DHS said it does not have data on active-duty troops, it has released figures for former service members, who also qualify for immigration benefits along with their immediate families. From Jan. 20, 2025, through Jan. 26, 2026, immigration authorities detained 125 military veterans — placing 34 into removal proceedings — and arrested more than 150 immediate family members, DHS said [in a letter](#) to several Democratic senators.

Anh Dung Cong Tran, known as “Tony,” had both a father and son who served in the military. Tran came to the U.S. in 1990 through a program for children of American military personnel

born in Vietnam. Tran, 56, was deported in July, having lived in the U.S. for decades with regular check-ins with immigration authorities after an assault conviction soon after his arrival.

His son Antonio Tran said his father persuaded him to enlist in the military in 2022. “He has a totally different view on America now,” said Tran, who was discharged as an Army specialist in March after a serious injury.

“Whatever your family have done for this country, to keep this country safe, to give the people, Americans, the freedom to walk around and to sleep safe at night, well, we don’t care about that,” Tony Tran told the AP in a video call from Vietnam.

Benefits for service members include what’s known as parole-in-place

Military recruiters tout immigration benefits for troops’ families as a selling point to enlist.



Army Sgt. Hedar Leonel Turcios Juarez, whose wife Cristy has been detained by immigration authorities, holds a necklace he gave to her at home in El Paso, Texas, July 21, 2026. (AP Photo/Ryan Romero)

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One of the military's most highly advertised immigration benefits is "military parole-in-place," which allows the spouses, children and parents of active-duty service members and veterans to obtain legal immigration status from within the country. Not everyone qualifies: Those who overstayed visas or who already applied for legal status at the border, for example.

The policy was implemented under Republican President George W. Bush during the U.S. war with Iraq in 2007 and [codified under Democratic President Barack Obama](#). DHS agencies can grant it on a case-by-case basis.

Under Trump, the average time it takes to receive military parole-in-place has more than doubled to 12 months, according to [USCIS data](#). That leaves military families more vulnerable to being placed in ICE custody.

Congressional Democrats and organizations that help military families facing deportation, including [Repatriate Our Patriots](#), said that the AP's findings were alarming.

"It's the job of the military to ensure that families are being taken care of — and this is not the way you take care of families," said California Rep. Gil Cisneros, a former undersecretary of defense for personnel who introduced legislation this year aimed at making it harder to deny parole to troops' relatives. "This administration just doesn't care, and they are not thinking about people who are putting their lives on the line for the country and to defend our nation."

Recruiters are still promoting immigration benefits

The AP found that troops' immediate family members have repeatedly been detained by ICE while applying for parole-in-place or seeking to adjust their status, including during immigration appointments.

Marine Cpl. Jose Manuel Vilchis-Valle's mother, Ursula Borja Valle, was detained at an appointment in August 2025 and deported to Mexico within a week. She had lived in the U.S. since the 1990s without a known criminal record. Her son was attempting to help her clear up a decades-old removal order through the immigration benefits that military recruiters had used to help persuade him to enlist.

"They basically told me that if you serve, and if you served honorably, you can help your parents," said Vilchis-Valle, 23, who was honorably discharged shortly after his mother was deported. "In a perfect world, I wished, because of my service, they could have pardoned her."



Army Staff Sgt. Alexis Jaramillo shows photos of his wife, Maisa Lopes Eliaser, a Brazilian national who is detained by ICE, near the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center where she is currently held, in Basile, La., Sunday, Aug. 2, 2026. (AP Photo/Joseph V Read More

In other cases, ICE has detained people who had already been granted protection, with the agency later arguing in court filings that their parole status had been revoked.

In June 2025, the Marine Corps officially stopped advertising enlistment as a way to protect immigrant family members, [in response to inquiries from the AP](#). But recruiters for the Army and the National Guard still promote it.

"For some service members, enlisting isn't just about serving their country," read an Instagram post published in late July by an official Army recruiter based in California. "It's also about doing everything they can to help protect their parents who sacrificed everything for them."

Recruiters are expected to highlight the benefits of service to attract applicants and military parole-in-place remains in effect, Army spokesperson Christopher Surridge said.

The National Guard said it does not track detentions of its troops' relatives or which recruiters advertise immigration benefits and referred additional comment to DHS.

A soldier who helped patrol the border grapples with his father's detention

For U.S. Army Specialist Romero Ralios, his father's detention has left him remorseful about his deployment last year to the [Joint Task Force Southern Border](#), where he spent nine months [supporting U.S. Customs and Border Patrol](#).

His father, Sebastian Ralios Tino, a Guatemalan landscaper with no known criminal record, was detained this summer. He lived in the U.S. for nearly two decades without legal status.

Ralios' commanding officer, Capt. Mohamed Elmaola, told the AP he wanted to speak up because Ralios is a "phenomenal soldier" whose father should receive due process.

"It's very hard to communicate and to have credibility as a leader when your own subordinates are unable to get support," Elmaola said. "Considering he enlisted his time and his life into supporting and defending the United States Constitution, it is the right thing to do to support soldiers and their families."

Romero Ralios struggles to sleep at night due to the stress and wishes he had not been involved in immigration enforcement, even though he was just following orders.

"It was karma. I should've known," Ralios told the AP. "All those families I broke. I have regrets."

Brook is a corps member for The Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. [Report for America](#) is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

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