

Immigration raids and family separation have become common tools for the U.S. government to enforce immigration laws. These actions treat immigration like a crime, even though being undocumented is not a criminal offense. Immigration law is technically a civil system, which means it is meant to regulate who can enter or remain in the country rather than punish people for crimes. However, over time, immigration enforcement has become increasingly criminalized, especially after the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These institutions expanded the government's ability to detain, police, and deport immigrants in ways that resemble the criminal justice system. As a result, many immigrant families now experience enforcement practices that feel similar to criminal punishment, even though immigration violations are civil matters. Yet raids, detention, and family separation force many immigrant families to live in constant fear and uncertainty. Children are often the most harmed. When parents are taken away, children experience trauma, anxiety, and long-lasting emotional damage. The Society for Research in Child Development states that family separation policies have “serious and lasting consequences for children’s mental health and development” (SRCD, 2019). This shows that immigration enforcement is not only a legal issue but also a serious mental health and public health issue because the trauma caused by separation can harm children’s emotional well-being, development, and long-term stability. This paper explores how treating immigration as a crime harms children, divides families, and creates fear in immigrant communities of color. It introduces the concept of crimmigration, which explains how immigration enforcement has increasingly merged with criminal law. By examining raids, detention, family separation, and community impacts, this paper argues that humane, community-based alternatives are needed to protect families and improve public safety.

Immigration law in the United States is legally a civil system, not a criminal one. This means that being undocumented is not considered a crime. Civil immigration law focuses on regulating entry and status, not punishment. However, immigration enforcement has begun to look and feel like the criminal justice system. Legal scholar Juliet Stumpf introduced the concept of crimmigration in 2006, describing it as the merging of criminal and immigration law. This merging allows the government to use criminal-style punishments, like detention and policing, even though immigration cases are technically civil. Stumpf later notes that immigration enforcement has grown more severe and more accepted over time. She writes that the system “treats migration as a threat to be controlled rather than a social reality to be managed humanely” (Stumpf, 2023). Therefore, immigrants are treated like criminals even when they have not committed a crime. When immigration is treated like a crime, enforcement focuses on punishment rather than protection. This creates a system where families are targeted, children are traumatized, and communities live in fear.

Immigration raids are carried out by federal agencies like ICE and the U.S. Border Patrol. These raids can happen suddenly at workplaces, homes, or public places. They are often unannounced and can involve armed officers. Worksite raids target businesses suspected of hiring undocumented workers. Officers enter the workplace, check IDs, and arrest people who do not have legal immigration status. Many of those arrested are parents who have no time to arrange care for their children. Research shows that for every two people detained in worksite raids, roughly one child is affected by the arrest, meaning children are often left without immediate care or support (Urban Institute, 2020). Family separation also happens at the border. When families cross the U.S.–Mexico border without authorization, Border Patrol may separate adults from children. Family separation also occurs at the border when families cross the U.S.–Mexico border without authorization, where Border Patrol may separate adults from children without clear procedures to ensure families remain together or are reunified before deportation. Since raids and border enforcement can happen suddenly, families do not have time to prepare. Parents may not have time to tell children what is happening or to find a safe caregiver, creating chaos and trauma.

Children are among the most harmed by immigration raids and family separation. Separation from parents causes severe emotional and psychological distress. Children often experience anxiety, depression, nightmares, and symptoms of PTSD. The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) calls family separation a “toxic stressor” that disrupts healthy brain development (SRCD, 2019). So, separation is not only emotional, but it also affects physical brain development.

Children's education also suffers; when a parent is detained or deported, children may miss school, move frequently, or lose access to educational support. Studies show that fear of raids leads parents to keep children home from school, which hurts academic performance and social development (Gándara & Ee, 2021). Plus, health outcomes also worsen, as separated children are more likely to suffer from sleep disorders, headaches, and developmental delays. A systematic review of unaccompanied immigrant children found that trauma often continues even after reunification due to a lack of mental health services and stable support systems (Lovato et al, 2025). Overall, children experience long-term harm because separation causes trauma, instability, and loss of support systems.

Immigration raids and detention deeply destabilize families. When a parent is detained, families often lose their primary source of income. This leads to housing instability, food insecurity, and debt. The Urban Institute (2020) reports that families affected by immigration enforcement experience sudden economic hardship that can last years, even if the detained family member returns. Parents report intense fear, guilt, and helplessness while children struggle with abandonment and insecurity. Families also face legal barriers, including high bond costs and limited access to legal representation. Immigration bond payments can range from about \$1,500 to over \$10,000, which is far beyond what many low-income immigrant families can afford. For example, reports describe families who must borrow money from relatives, take on debt, or sell personal belongings in order to pay for a parent's release from detention (Freedom for Immigrants, 2023). In households where families already earn low wages, these costs can be impossible to manage, leaving parents detained for months while their children struggle at home. The Migration Policy Institute (2020) explains that these pressures strain family relationships and increase long-term emotional damage, especially in mixed-status households where children are U.S. citizens but parents are not. The result is a cycle of instability: children struggle in school, families lose income, and communities become isolated. This makes it harder for families to recover even after reunification.

Criminalized immigration enforcement affects entire communities, not just individual families. Immigrant communities of color experience increased surveillance, racial profiling, and fear of public spaces. Studies show that increased immigration enforcement reduces trust in law enforcement, making communities less likely to report crimes or cooperate with police (TRAC, 2021), undermining public safety. When people avoid contacting police due to immigration concerns, crimes go unreported, and victims go unprotected. A study in the *Journal of Urban Economics* (Martinez et al., 2022) found that aggressive immigration enforcement correlates with decreased crime reporting in Latino communities, even for serious offenses. Consequently, criminalization weakens community safety rather than improving it.

Sanctuary cities offer a different approach by limiting cooperation between local police and federal immigration enforcement. Research consistently finds that sanctuary cities do not experience higher crime rates. In fact, a major study found that sanctuary jurisdictions have lower crime rates and stronger economic outcomes than non-sanctuary cities (Martinez et al., 2022). By separating local policing from immigration enforcement, sanctuary policies increase trust between immigrant communities and public institutions. This encourages crime reporting, community cooperation, and access to services. Sanctuary cities show that public safety improves when communities are not treated like criminals.

Despite their severity, raids, detention, and family separation do not reduce migration. Research shows that people migrate primarily due to violence, poverty, political instability, and climate conditions, but not enforcement policies alone (Migration Policy Institute, 2020). Criminalization does not address the real reasons people leave their homes. Instead, criminalization creates long-term harm by traumatizing children, destabilizing families, and increasing inequality. These policies are also costly and inefficient. Immigration detention is expensive, especially when facilities are privately operated. Studies show that private detention centers profit from higher detention rates and often lobby for stricter enforcement policies, creating incentives that prioritize profit over human well-being (Ackerman & Furman, 2013). Overall, these policies fail because they punish vulnerable people without solving the root causes of migration.

Research shows that humane alternatives work better. Programs that provide community-based support help families stay together while their immigration cases move through the legal system, guiding them through paperwork, court requirements, and other resources, all while maintaining high participation in hearings. The American Immigration Council notes that these programs are cheaper than detention and

result in better outcomes for families (American Immigration Council, 2020). Family unity policies, legal representation, and access to social services reduce trauma and improve long-term stability. Humane border processing that prioritizes child welfare and due process aligns with international human rights standards and supports safer, more organized migration management.

Treating immigration as a crime through raids, detention, and family separation causes lasting harm to children, families, and immigrant communities of color. Grounded in a long history of racialized enforcement, these policies fail to reduce migration and instead create trauma, fear, and instability. Through the lens of crimmigration, this paper shows how civil immigration law has been transformed into a system of punishment. The evidence is clear: humane, community-based approaches are not only more ethical, but more effective. Ending family separation and shifting away from criminalization is essential for justice, public safety, and human dignity.

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