



July 2025

“It’s Horrible to Live Like This”: Immigration Policy’s Real-Time Impact on Young Children

Insights from Child Care Providers

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Children need love, community, and safety to thrive. These foundational elements are not luxuries—they are developmental necessities. The same is true for the families and caregivers who make up children’s support systems. Yet across the country, families are being robbed of that sense of safety by the climate of fear created by the Trump administration’s immigration policies. In its first few months, the administration launched a mass deportation campaign and unleashed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers in workplaces and communities across the country.¹ It has revoked protections from immigration enforcement in schools and hospitals and other sensitive locations.² It has deported parents of American citizens to prisons in foreign countries in direct violation of judicial orders and detained documented immigrants and U.S. citizens without due process.³

To better understand the impact of these actions on the day-to-day lives of families with young children, we interviewed child care providers in late-April and early-May 2025. Child care providers have special insight into the experiences and needs of families and communities. Because of the nature of their work with infants and toddlers, they often develop close relationships with parents, who may turn to them as trusted sources of information and counsel in the course of their daily interactions. Child care programs also frequently serve as resource hubs, connecting families to non-childcare related

community supports, such as food pantries, housing assistance, and legal services. As a result, providers are not only knowledgeable about children’s social and emotional health, developmental needs, and overall wellbeing, but they also have insight into parents’ concerns, families’ financial circumstances and living arrangements, as well as how community organizations and local agencies are responding to national political and policy developments.

We interviewed five child care providers who work with children in immigrant families in diverse geographic areas across the United States to learn how the Trump administration’s actions are affecting families with young children. Each of the people we interviewed work in a community with a large number of immigrants, and at least two of the five are immigrants or children of immigrants themselves. Given the nature of their relationships with parents, and the number of immigrant families they serve, they spoke with deep knowledge and authority about the effect of immigration policy on families with young children, and the strategies they are deploying to try to protect the wellbeing of children and families who are struggling to understand how such policies will affect them and connect them to resources.

The child care providers we spoke with detailed how the Trump’s administration’s actions have caused widespread fear among the immigrant families they serve—affecting families regardless of the immigration status of the children or parents. These qualitative findings are supported by quantitative

research conducted by the Urban Institute shortly after the presidential election, which found in a survey conducted in December 2024 that adults in immigrant families with children were anticipating changes in immigration policy, with more than one in three worried about deportation for themselves, a family member, or a close friend. Fear was most prevalent in mixed-status families, with more than half of respondents concerned about deportation, but even in all-citizen immigrant families with children one in six adults were still worried about deportation, showing that fear of deportation exists regardless of immigration or citizenship status.⁴

The child care providers we spoke to shared how these pervasive fears are leading families to change their daily routines and impacting their decisions on everything from where they live and work, to whether to go to the grocery store or send their children to school. They also shared how the political climate is affecting children, who are feeling their parents' fear, even if they do not understand its cause. They have noticed children becoming more fearful, restless, and anxious. The trauma and stress that children are being exposed to harms children's mental health and well-being. Further, prolonged, chronic exposure to these traumas can also impact children's development and cause long-term disruptions to how children learn and relate to others. As Anna, a child care provider in Virginia, explained:

“It’s scary to see the impact that that has in the lives of these young children and what that will do as children grow up. ... what kind of reaction they’re going to have to the adversities that they’re being forced to live in.”

This brief details what we learned from providers about how the administration's actions are impacting children and families in real time.

About The Research

In April and May 2025, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with five child care providers, who operated programs of varying sizes, from large, center-based programs serving over 100 children to home-based providers who are licensed to serve 5–12 children.

The child care providers we spoke to do not collect information about the citizenship or legal status of the families they serve. Some collect information about the languages that families speak at home. Parents also sometimes share information about their immigration status with their children's teachers or other staff due to the trusting relationships they develop with their child care programs. The providers we interviewed estimated that anywhere from a quarter to all the children that they care for are from immigrant families. For the purposes of this report, we consider a child to be in an immigrant family if they are immigrants themselves or have parents who are immigrants.

The Child Care Providers

Name*	State	Care Setting	Role
Betty	MA	Center-based	Director
Anna	VA	Center-based	Director
Emilia	NC	Center-based	Family Liaison
Christina	CA	Home-based	Owner
Diana	CA	Home-based	Owner & Care Provider



* Names and identifying information have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.

Immigration Fears Started in November, Spiked in January

According to the child care providers we spoke to, immigrant families began expressing concerns about mass deportation immediately after the presidential election in November 2024. Christina, the owner of a home-based child care program in California, told us she began to have conversations with parents and staff about potential mass deportations “the moment Trump was elected, to be honest.” Providers reported that this unease increased noticeably in early 2025, after President Trump took office and immediately signed a series of executive orders laying the groundwork for mass detention and deportation.⁵ Betty, the director of a large child care program in Massachusetts, told us she first heard of immigrant families’ concerns from a staff member who works in the city’s shelter system, where many immigrant families moving through the asylum application process reside:

“I would say probably like January, February was when it was heightened. ... [One of our] directors works in a lot of the shelters with [immigrant] families, specifically mums... she was bringing us information initially because she was like right there, front and center, and meeting with those families and talked about the concerns.”

Immigrant Families and Providers Are Afraid, Regardless of Status

The immigration enforcement actions that followed President Trump’s executive orders further ratcheted up fear in immigrant communities.⁶ High-profile cases of masked ICE officers seizing people off the street or at immigration hearings, often in clear violation of due process, have left many families concerned about being deported even when they have work permits, are permanent residents, or have another lawful immigration status. Emilia, a family liaison for a large center in North Carolina, described a general atmosphere of fear, “I think it’s come to a point where, regardless of your legal status, being able to remain in the country has been a concern.”

The providers we spoke with also told us that teachers in their programs have been fearful. Nationally, approximately 20 percent of child care providers are immigrants, and all of the providers

we spoke with either employ immigrants or are immigrants or children of immigrants themselves.⁷ Directors or owners of programs who employ immigrant teachers observed that many staff members are experiencing immigration-related anxiety even though they have work authorization and are legally present in the United States. Christina noted that because early childhood educators tend not to be well-compensated, some child care providers are afraid to travel because they would struggle to afford legal representation if wrongfully detained by ICE:

“You know, we’re teachers. We don’t make that much money. We can’t afford the fancy lawyers. My teacher, who’s from Mexico, goes to Mexico every year to visit her family. And she said she’s not going back anytime soon.”

For immigrants at higher risk of deportation, the fear can be ever-present. Diana, a home-based care provider in California who is herself an immigrant, says she lives in constant fear that she or another member of her family may be detained by ICE:

“Sometimes I don’t want to go outside to do the grocery shopping. My husband tells me, ‘Calm down, my love. We are going to proceed with caution.’ But I feel—I feel really awful. Because yesterday, even, we went to do the grocery shopping. He saved me from a panic attack, because I clearly saw a patrol car [that looked like] immigration [enforcement]. He said, ‘No, it’s not immigration.’”



Diana eloquently summarized what each of the providers communicated during the course of our interviews: *“It’s horrible to live with these fears.”*

Immigration Enforcement Hits Close to Home for Many

Three of the five child care providers we interviewed shared how immigration enforcement has hit close to home over the last several months and directly affected some of the families in their programs.

Diana recalled incidents in the last several months when ICE agents were spotted near her program or a parent’s home during drop-off and pickup, alarming children and parents:

“Two months ago, immigration came here, to the building where I work with my children. ... It was chilling to see them pass by my apartment, in front of my apartment. And at that moment, two mothers were on their way over with their children, and I already had the others here with me. I felt such terrible fear that I had to close the blinds completely... I immediately contacted the mothers who were on their way. And one of them ... was about to get out of the car, with her daughter. And they immediately saw there were some agents at the back of the building. And she hid. She hid with her daughter in her car... and the [three-year-old] girl began to tremble, because she said to her mother, ‘What’s wrong, Mom?’ And her mother couldn’t find what to say. ‘No, my love. We’re going to hide for a while. Because teacher Diana isn’t home yet.’

...That was the first time. Later it happened again. A girl’s mother came to pick her up. And at that moment, she received a video that immigration was at the building where she lives. And she started crying inside the daycare. And I had to calm her down. Because her hands got really cold and she almost fainted. The other children were asleep. Her baby had just woken up, and the baby sensed that [distress]. The baby started fussing and crying to see her mother.”

Anna described the experience of one family in her program in which the father was deported, leaving behind a wife and children who are U.S. citizens who are now experiencing economic hardship, alongside



the emotional pain of being separated from a loved one:

“I’ve also had a child whose father was deported. This is a father that would contribute economically to the household that now is not able to do so, [who] has left a mother with children on her own trying to... And this is—again—another U.S. mother, being left without her husband, and having to provide for their children without the supports and in conditions that create trauma and exacerbate, you know, adverse situations that I don’t know what the gain will be. But I ache for those families.”

Christina shared how one of her families was unable to re-enter the United States in January after a trip back to the Philippines to see family for Christmas. The mother, who had been in the U.S. on a student visa, was denied entry and she and her child—who is a citizen—were staying in the Philippines while waiting for a resolution to her visa issue, leaving her child far from the friends and teachers she had come to love:

“We had a family from the Philippines. Mom was here on a student visa. And they went back to the Philippines to visit family over Christmas time, and then they couldn’t come back to the United States. Their visa was denied, and she couldn’t come back. Even though she’s established, she’s been here now, I think for five years. I’m in constant communication with her. She still can’t come back. They keep denying her visa.”



These incidents reveal the wide-ranging impact of immigration enforcement on families with young children, as it interferes in their daily routines, causes paralyzing fear, separates them from their loved ones, exacerbates economic hardship, and impedes their ability to raise their children in the place they call home. In the face of this assault on families and communities, providers are witnessing parents and caregivers reconsider their everyday decisions and upend their lives to protect their children.

How Child Care Providers Are Seeing Families Respond

Parents Are Pulling Children Out of Programs, Limiting Activities

Child care providers emphasized that parents are responding to shifts in immigration policy in ways that prioritize their children's safety and keeping their families together. Some parents have pulled their children out of their child care programs and limited their participation in activities outside the home. Smaller, home-based programs reported losing one or two families, but Anna—who runs a large center in Virginia—has seen dozens of families withdraw their children since early 2025. Although she does not conduct exit interviews with each family who disenrolls, conversations with staff revealed that more immigrant families are now afraid to apply for child care subsidies and can no

longer afford to send their children to her program. One father also told Anna privately that he and his wife decided to withdraw their children from her program in order to go into hiding from ICE:

“I had a parent who said to me, ‘Sorry, Miss Anna, I have two children. And I know how much this [program] has been a blessing for them. But right now, safety is more important for me and my family. And my wife is going to stop working. We have rented a basement somewhere. She’s going to stay there with the children while I’m going to be the one risking to go out there.’”

Because of the declines in enrollment, Anna’s program had to shut down one of its classrooms and lay off a few teachers. As difficult as the financial loss has been to her program and the teachers that she had to let go, Anna is most upset by the loss of educational opportunity for the children that her program is no longer serving:

“What infuriates me about that is that these are U.S.-born children. These are U.S. citizens that should receive the same opportunities that anybody else in America [does]. That are now being confined into spending most of the day in isolation in a room.”

Child care providers also shared that they have seen unexplained absences increase since the start of the Trump administration. All but one provider we interviewed reported that daily attendance fell—sometimes sharply—in late January and early February. Some providers we interviewed attributed the uptick in unexplained absences to parents being afraid to drive their children to school. As Anna shared, “I know for some children, parents have asked others to drop off and pick up their children because they don’t want to drive.” Emilia not only saw a drop in daily attendance, but also a drop in attendance at other events and community programs held at her center:

“I would say at the beginning of the year more so, we were really feeling it. The numbers of attendance were impacted, not only for family programs and families not wanting to attend events, but in the classrooms at the beginning. Some families were not even coming out to bring their kids to school.”

Several providers noted that fear of immigration enforcement is also leading immigrant families to stay indoors as much as possible. Diana shared that all the children she cares for have immigrant parents, and they are now afraid to take their children to the park despite some having legal status and work permits:

“Before, they used to go out. They were used to going to the park, going here, going there. Now they don’t. Now the mother of the twin girls is telling me that they no longer feel free to go out. Even though they [she and her husband] have work permits, that doesn’t guarantee anything...”

Early education and care have lasting benefits for children, as children learn through play and through their daily interactions with adults and other children.⁸ A growing body of research also highlights the benefits of outdoor play to children’s health and well-being, including improved motor development and positive behavior and mood.⁹ Parents deeply value both outdoor play and early learning opportunities for their children, but are making the decision that it is more important to prioritize keeping their family safely together in the face of increased immigration enforcement.

Parents Are Taking Precautions for Children Who Remain in Care

Child care providers also told us that parents are taking precautions for their children who remain in school. Because child care programs are no longer protected spaces from immigration enforcement, some parents are worried that their children might be detained by ICE while at school, even if they are U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents. In an effort to protect their children from being erroneously detained, some of the parents in Anna’s program began leaving passports and other documents verifying their children’s immigration status in their cubbies:

“When the executive orders came in, and the issue of deportations began, some of my U.S. [citizen] parents decided to bring the passports of their children and tuck them into their belongings. Just in case we would be impacted by a visit from ICE, that they would know that their children are actually U.S.-born children, that they shouldn’t be deported.”

Child care providers also shared other steps that parents are taking out of fear of immigration enforcement. Diana explained that after ICE appeared outside her program, they began calling more frequently both to check on their children and to report their own safety: “Sometimes they call me. And they tell me: ‘Everything is fine. Everything has been fine today.’” As she explains, fear of ICE is ever-present for the immigrant parents she works with: “I mean, they live with it.”

Some parents are also identifying guardians who can care for their children in the event one or both parents are detained or deported—and turning to their child care providers when they do not have close relatives or friends nearby. One mother urged Diana to become her child’s guardian if she is ever deported, saying that there is no one else she trusts with her daughter. As Diana shared:

“One mother even told me that if immigration were to catch her on her way to work, she wanted me to stay with her baby. Because she doesn’t have any family here. ... She told me that I’ve been taking care of her baby since she was 5 months old. And that she has great trust in me. ... I told her that I was very grateful, that I loved her daughter very much, because I love what I do with my work. But at this moment, it would be much better to leave her with a relative. It’s the most appropriate thing to do. Because I’m also a migrant. I can’t have her.”



The close relationships that providers often form with parents of young children give them deep insight into their most pressing concerns, and the decisions they make in response. But it can also place significant emotional burdens on the providers themselves, who need to be strong not just for themselves and the children in their care, but for the parents as well.

The Impact on Children

Children Are Sensing and Mirroring Their Parents' Fear

When parents experience immigration-related stress or stop engaging in daily activities for fear of being detained by ICE, their children suffer as well. A couple of the providers we spoke with mentioned how perceptive young children can be—capable of noticing their parents' distress and then exhibiting higher levels of stress themselves. This anxiety can manifest in children as disrupted sleep, fear of sirens and law enforcement, clinginess, and other behavioral changes. Diana, who cares for infants and toddlers ages 0-3, mentioned several times that the children she looks after are sensing their parents' worry and internalizing it. One of Diana's clients is a single mother who rents a bedroom that she shares with her daughter. Their small living quarters makes it difficult to shield her daughter from the stress she is under:

"She [the girl] used to sleep pretty good, but now she wakes up crying. She's more restless and her naps have been disrupted. She sleeps with mom, who rents a bedroom within an apartment with other people, so they sleep together. The mom said, 'It's probably me. I'm showing [my fear] and my girl is sensing all this stress.'"

Because young children often have difficulty expressing what is wrong, providers look for cues like comfort-seeking behaviors to assess when there is a higher level of stress in their classroom. Betty saw an uptick in the number of young children visiting a quiet space set aside for children to calm down: "There were more visits, I would say, to what we call the Zen Den. It's like a sanctuary space." Even if they do not understand the full context of the enforcement actions being carried out, children in immigrant families understand that all is not well. Betty noted that some older children in her



program were worried about their parents being out in public, and reluctant to have their parents pick them up from the child care program. Children's primary support system is their family. Whether they express it or not, children in immigrant families are sensing that their support system is in jeopardy.

Children Are Becoming More Isolated

Providers shared concerns about both the immediate and long-term impact of children's increased isolation, as they miss out on critical early learning opportunities and have fewer interactions with children or other adults who can support their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Diana shared her worries about the psychological effect of the heightened stress combined with lack of outdoor exercise or play:

"I feel like all this is affecting the children in one way or another, psychologically. Because they see their parents' worries. ... They don't go out to have fun, to play. So many things."

Anna, who has a background in educational psychology, explained why this isolation is so harmful:

"The concept of who you are is built by the interactions you have with others. Your sense of self-value, your self-esteem gets to be built upon the foundation that is given through the interactions you have with the world around you. When your world shrinks, the opportunity that you have to build a more coherent sense of who you are is impacted."

Providers are seeing children experience isolation that is in some ways similar to what occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of which they continue to see in the children they care for five years on. But whereas a large portion of the population quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to protect their own health and that of vulnerable members of the community, the isolation that immigrant families are experiencing now is also social and political, driven by a fear of what the government might do to their families. In the face of these threats to families and communities, child care providers are supporting children and families to mitigate their isolation and protect their safety and well-being.

How Child Care Providers Are Supporting Families

Teaching Children to Reframe Fears, Connecting to Mental Health Support

The child care providers we spoke to shared how they were trying to support children by maintaining a positive and welcoming environment within the walls of their programs. For Christina, that has meant finding ways to address parents' concerns about immigration without letting it bleed into day-to-day program activities. Christina makes it a point to stay informed about the constantly changing policies and guidance related to immigration enforcement, but tries to keep it out of the classroom for her young students:

"Children sense everything. You're having a bad day; they feel it. You're depressed; they feel it. You're angry; they feel it. Even if you



don't say anything. And so there still needs to be—As much as we want to create a safe space for families to vent, we still want to keep the environment positive. We want to keep it about the children."

For young children who express fear of law enforcement, care providers have tried to explain the situation in less frightening ways and taught children how to self-soothe. Despite her own fear of law enforcement, Diana tries to defuse the fear and apprehension that the children she cares for feel every time they hear sirens:

"I always try to calm them down. I always try to tell them different things. One day we were doing an activity, and we heard a sound like the police, but it was an ambulance. And the girls said, 'Police, police, Teacher Diana!' [I replied,] 'No, my love, it's not the police. It's not the police. Calm down.' That was when I started. We stopped what we were doing, and I started doing exercises with them. We took deep breaths. We did some yoga-style exercises. I started to do that with them. And they already seem to be doing a little better."

In addition to helping children understand and reframe these scenarios in age-appropriate ways, child care providers at larger, center-based programs also shared how they connected children with additional mental health and wraparound supports. Betty made sure that children were given the space to talk informally about their fears of immigration enforcement with staff or more formally with in-house clinicians who could help them work through their anxiety. Additionally, she made sure her center's licensed social worker was ready to provide counseling and crisis support in case any families were affected by a deportation action. Emilia, the family liaison of a large center-based program in North Carolina, recognized that her center needed more mental health support for young children affected by immigration stress, and reached out to a community partner to provide these services to immigrant families:

"You know, in situations like this, you can't just think about the adult. The children are being impacted as well. And we are very blessed to have in-house therapists that provide services of OT [occupational therapy] and speech

[therapy], but we had to identify other types of services that we could offer to the children and the families, very specifically for mental health services. We partner[ed] with [a local organization] ... and they now provide mental health services for children who are three and younger.”

Although providers differ in their access to community support and ability to provide wraparound services, everyone we spoke with recognized that even the youngest children in immigrant families are experiencing a high level of stress and need an outlet to talk about the uncertainty they and their families are facing.

Fostering Connection and Community

Child care providers also shared how they work to keep families connected to each other and to community resources, which can help mitigate fears and foster a sense of community. In the early months of 2025, when attendance at school and events dropped, Emilia’s program began to offer more virtual events and plan in-person parent events around drop-off or pick-up times to minimize the need for repeated trips to and from the center:

“What we did at the beginning also was that some of those opportunities that were offered in person, we’re keeping them virtual. And just it’s working for us, more so than in-person opportunities. Also, what we are doing is, the in-person opportunities that we are offering, we’re trying to offer them around the time they either have to come drop off their children or they already come to pick them up. But they don’t have to make another special trip.”

Emilia also shared that when parents asked for assistance that her program was unable to provide, like transportation assistance, she was able to connect parents in need with other community members who were willing and able to assist:

“Well, at the beginning, a lot of them wanted transportation because they were—They wanted their children to receive the education, but not necessarily leave home. So yes, a lot of families came asking for transportation and unfortunately that is not something that we could accommodate. So what we typically do in situations like this is we just try to find

another family who lives nearby that is willing to provide transportation and then connect them to one another and let them decide on their own if this is something they would want to do.”

In Massachusetts, where local police do not conduct immigration enforcement,¹⁰ Betty shared how her program’s close relationships with local police helped the children and their parents feel safer, and strengthened their sense of belonging. As she explained, officers came into her program:

“I think having the officers there during some of those times [of heightened fear] to say like, ‘Listen, that’s not what we’re here for. That’s not what we’re here to do. This is a safe space for you. And we will do everything we can to make sure it is a safe space.’”

By strengthening families’ connections to each other, and to community resources and institutions, child care providers are helping buffer families from some of the harmful consequences of immigration enforcement.¹¹

Sharing Immigration-Specific Resources and Information

Beyond connecting families to each other and community resources, the child care providers we spoke with also shared immigration-specific information and resources with families. Many of the providers we spoke with have deep relationships with immigrant-serving community-based organizations and agencies, and they receive information through these networks that they then pass on to families. Christina told us how she passes



information about immigration legal assistance or clinics to the families she knows would benefit from those resources:

“We are connected with [Nonprofit Organization], which is a huge resource, I think, for families. If you have a family that needs an immigration lawyer or needs to—They do workshops on immigration law and things like that. We will just send it to the families directly. So anytime any of our resources send us something, we’ll resend it out to our families.”

Betty adopted best practices to support families to develop emergency plans in the event a parent is detained:

“We told the parents, like, they [their children] should know somebody’s phone number who they can contact [in case their parent is detained]. We’ll have that number too, but make sure that if they’re outside of the [center], that those numbers are updated and that if they’re old enough to remember a number...[then they know it]. Just little things like that.”

Child care providers also partnered with immigrant-serving, community-based organizations to develop programming to support families. For example, in early 2025, Emilia met with local immigration attorneys and legal service organizations, and together they decided to offer a legal clinic to help immigrant parents draft and notarize power of attorney documents in case of deportation:

“We offered a clinic where we brought public notaries to our schools so people could do power of attorneys—in preparation, if a parent had to leave... It was the conversation that we were a part of with other entities, with other agencies, and other organizations who were serving the same communities... we decided, ‘Okay, this is something that we can support families with.’”

Child care providers also received immigration-specific resources from their networks in early care and education, which enabled them to better support families. For example, most providers we spoke to shared wallet-sized cards with their families that advised them of their legal rights. Many programs also established and trained staff



on formal protocols in case immigration agents try to carry out an enforcement action at the center. Providers told us that the changes they have made to their routines and procedures are designed to meaningfully protect immigrant families who attend the program, and to be responsive to the fears of immigrant parents so their programs can remain a safe space for all children.

Although families who withdrew their children from child care programs in early 2025 have not returned, the providers we spoke to have seen more consistent daily attendance of those who remain enrolled as the months go by. Emilia interprets these developments as parents trying to maintain normalcy for their children during uncertain times: “At the beginning, like I said, even in the classrooms, some children were not attending. But I think things are going back to ‘normal’ in a sense.” While it is not clear precisely what brought some children in immigrant families back to their programs, it is possible that the measures many care providers undertook—such as restating their commitment to immigrant families, sharing legal resources, and communicating openly about their programs’ protocol in case of an immigration enforcement action—helped immigrant families feel more comfortable sending their children to school.

Conclusion

Early childhood experts and immigration advocates have warned policymakers for years about the harmful impacts of immigration enforcement on child development and family well-being.¹² We are now seeing those consequences play out in real-time, as many parents are forced to disrupt their children’s everyday routines or even withdraw from public life to keep their families safe.



The child care providers we spoke to emphasized that the impact of these shifts in immigration policy are widespread, as children, parents, teachers, and staff are experiencing heightened stress and anxiety and changing their routines regardless of their immigration status. Many immigrants, or those with family who are immigrants, see ICE as a threat to their safety, even if they have work authorization, are lawful permanent residents, or even naturalized citizens. The ripple effects are wide ranging, including financial costs to families—who may lose earnings or access to benefits as employers cut hours for immigrant employees and landlords to refuse to sign proof of residency—and child care providers, who have had to let go of teachers and reduce programming for other students when immigrant families leave their programs.

The fear and hardships described in this brief are not entirely new for immigrants living in the United States, nor are they limited to families with young children. Prior to the Trump administration's current mass deportation campaign, immigrants reported experiencing high rates of discrimination, labor exploitation, and difficulty affording basic needs like food, housing, and health care. Many feared immigration enforcement.¹³ But there were also protections in place to limit the harm to children and families, including policies protecting sensitive locations such as schools and child care centers from immigration enforcement and prioritizing immigrants with criminal convictions for removal. Enforcement officers could be expected to follow the rule of law and respect due process rights. This is no longer the case.¹⁴

The child care providers we spoke to emphasized that the families they serve are just trying their best to give their children a good life. As Diana

expressed, all the children and families she works with deserve a chance:

“...the government [should] ... give a chance to all these people who do nothing but good, who do good work. Who go out every morning to earn their daily bread. Because that's what I see in the parents of my children, the ones I care for. They're hardworking people, fighters. They deserve a chance, don't they? And I don't know how society can raise its voice, asking the government for that chance. To give us that chance. Because I, personally, am a provider; I work with children in one way or another. I feel like I'm part of these children's lives, I'm doing my small bit to make a difference in their lives. I'm doing something good, and I'm doing a good job. And I feel that we're not doing anything wrong.”¹⁵

At the end of the day, the experiences of immigrant families recounted in this brief raise more fundamental questions about who we are as a country. Do we want to be a country where immigrants with legal status are worried they might be arrested on the streets and entire families are going into hiding? Where mothers fear they may be detained on their way to work and children are trembling in fear of law enforcement? Where child care providers are trying their best to mitigate this harm by contracting with mental health services for three-year-olds?

We owe families a future where their children can grow, learn, and thrive without looking over their shoulders. Our communities need a new approach to immigration policy that enables families to build their lives in the United States and protect their children—for whom this country is the only home they have ever known. One in four children in the U.S. are living with at least one immigrant parent.¹⁶ To protect and promote the well-being of immigrant families, and all families, we need to end harmful practices that separate families through immigration enforcement, protect families from future harm by granting legal status and creating a real pathway to citizenship, and promote family well-being through inclusive and accessible public services regardless of citizenship status.¹⁷ Only by acknowledging and defending our common humanity can we create a society in which children have the support and freedom to thrive.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the child care providers who spoke to us about the experiences of the immigrant families they serve, and made this brief possible. The research also benefited tremendously from the input of parents serving on CSSP's research advisory board, including Huong Vu, who initially suggested we conduct these interviews, and Lupe Mendoza and Eboni Brown, who offered their insights and feedback at multiple stages. Thanks also to Megan Martin at CSSP for her thoughts and reflections on an earlier draft of this brief.

Suggested Citation

Zhou, Juliana and Elisa Minoff. "It's Horrible to Live Like This': Immigration Policy's Real-Time Impact on Young Children." Center for the Study of Social Policy, July 2025. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/immigration-policy-real-time-impact-on-young-children/>.

Endnotes

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- 15 The original Spanish reads: "Siento que lo más tratar que el gobierno le diera una oportunidad. Que nos diera una oportunidad a todas aquellas

personas que no hacen más que hacer el bien que trabajar bien. Que salen cada mañana a ganarse el pan de cada día. Porque eso es lo que yo veo en los padres de mis niños, de los que yo quedo. Son gente trabajadora, gente luchadora. Que merecen una oportunidad, ¿verdad? Y no sé cómo sociedad alzar la voz. Pidiendo esa oportunidad al gobierno. Que nos brinden esa oportunidad. Porque yo, en lo personal, soy una proveedora. Trabajo con niños de una u otra forma. Me siento que soy parte de la vida de los niños, sembrando un granito de arena en ellos. Estoy haciendo algo bueno, pues estoy haciendo un trabajo bueno. Y siento yo que no estamos haciendo nada malo.”

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