Improving Protections for Children after Immigration Raids

by Claire S. Chiamulera

In communities throughout the country, undocumented immigrants are being seized during workplace raids by federal law enforcement. The raids happen suddenly and often ignore that many of those detained are parents. Children are left without a safety net as their parents are shipped elsewhere to decide their fates—deportation, criminal charges, or release.

A recent Urban Institute study examined the impact of workplace raids on children of undocumented parents, and the experiences of immigrant families and communities after the raids. The study focused on three communities where large workplace raids have occurred during the last year: Greeley, Colorado, Grand Island, Nebraska, and New Bedford, Massachusetts.

In each site, federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrived in great force, descended upon workplaces known to employ undocumented immigrants, and arrested and seized the immigrants. The children of the arrestees were typically in school, in day care, or in the care of relatives at the time of their parents’ arrests. These caregivers and community members were left scrambling to provide services and supports to meet the needs of the children left behind.

To learn about the raids and their impact on children, the researchers met with employers, lawyers, religious leaders, public social service agencies, nonprofit agencies, community leaders and other representatives in each of the three study sites. Some parents who had been released from federal detention, and some caretakers of children during the raids, were also interviewed. The researchers have documented their findings in the recent Urban Institute report, Paying the Price: The Impact of Immigration Raids on America’s Children. Read on for select highlights from the report and recommendations for improving responses to these families.

Affected Families

Across the three study sites, 912 undocumented adults were arrested in the raids. The home countries of those arrested included Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador. Collectively, these adults had 506 children, most of whom were U.S. citizens. In Grand Island, most of the children were age 10 and under—44% were under age six and 35% were age six to ten. In New Bedford, most children were age five and under—71% were under age six, 17% were age six to ten, and 12% were age 11 to 17. Age-related data for children in Greeley were not available.

The researchers noted that the young ages of the children, especially those age five and under, suggest that greater attention should be paid to child care arrangements for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers following workplace raids. Additionally, the researchers cautioned against expecting schools to bear the burden of supporting and responding to the needs of school-aged children after raids.

Impact on Children and Families

Suddenly losing a parent or both parents during the raids had a clear impact on children’s safety and well-being. The researchers found children and their families were affected in the following ways:

- **Family separation and abandonment.** Children were separated from their parents anywhere from a few days, a few weeks, to several months. Families received little information on the whereabouts and status of the arrested parent(s), and arrested parents were prevented from communicating with their family members or attorneys.

- **Ad hoc caregiving arrangements.** Caregiving arrangements after the raids varied depending on whether both parents, one parent, or a single parent was arrested. If only one parent was arrested, the remaining parent usually cared for the child(ren). However, that parent was often under considerable economic and psychological stress resulting from the spouse’s arrest. If both parents were arrested, extended family often took in the children; however, this often led to crowded housing and increased financial stress for the extended family, sometimes resulting in several moves for the children. Children in single parent families were most vulnerable, as the removal of the primary breadwinner in an already fragile family caused added hardship for the children and led to ad hoc and often chaotic temporary living arrangements.

- **Unmet physical needs.** Caregivers struggled to meet the basic physical needs of children, particularly young children. Food, baby formula, diapers, and clothing were in short supply for many children. In one case, a breastfed infant had no way of receiving her mother’s milk for several days.
Fear and isolation. Arrested parents often did not divulge that they had children out of fear that they too would be taken into custody. Likewise, caregivers and extended families often hid the children and refused assistance from community agencies because they feared other family members would be arrested.

School disruption. After the parents’ arrests, children in all three study sites were reported to miss school, especially in the days immediately following the raids. Absence from school interrupted the children’s school lessons. The emotional and psychological impact of being separated from their parent(s) and the uncertainty of their home situations also took a toll on the children’s academic performance.

Economic hardship and instability. Since the arrested parent(s) were often the primary breadwinners for the family, their absence created economic hardships for their children and extended families. Immediate and extended families’ savings were quickly absorbed. Public assistance was often not sought due to fears that children would end up in foster care or other family members would be removed. Some children bounced from home to home once caregivers’ resources were exhausted.

Emotional and psychological trauma. Many children experienced emotional trauma, psychological duress, and mental health problems after their parents’ removal. Depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, separation anxiety disorder, and suicidal thoughts were documented among children and family members. Again, fears surrounding asking for assistance prevented many children and their caregivers from seeking mental health services.

How Communities Respond
In the three study sites, the community mobilized to support immigrant families after the raids. Churches were perceived as safe and therefore served a central role in outreach efforts. Immigrant organizations and coalitions that had gained the trust of immigrants also helped coordinate responses and worked to identify affected families... gaining trust in the immigrant community is a barrier that social services agencies will need to overcome to ensure these children receive available services and benefits.

Improving Responses
As workplace raids rise as an immigration enforcement approach, arrest rates are increasing dramatically, affecting many children. Protections for these children are needed, as well as clear guidance and support for how communities should respond when raids occur. The researchers attempt to fill this gap by providing recommendations for Congress, the federal office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), public schools, state and local government and nonprofit service providers, and immigrant community institutions and community leaders. These recommendations are summarized in the report’s executive summary and are reproduced below. See the report to view the full recommendations.

✓ Congress should provide oversight of immigration enforcement activities to ensure that children are protected during worksite enforcement and other operations.

✓ ICE should assume there will always be children—generally very young children—affected whenever adults are arrested in worksite enforcement operations, and should develop a consistent policy for parents’ release. Single parents and primary caregivers of young children should be released early enough in the day so that their children do not experience disruptions in care; they should not be held overnight.

✓ ICE should provide detainees access to counsel and advise them of their right to confer with their country’s consular office.
Detainees should be allowed access to telephones, and the confidentiality of their telephone conversations should be ensured.

✓ Schools should develop systems to help ensure that children have a safe place to go in the event of a raid, and to reduce the risk that children will be left without adult supervision when the school day ends.

✓ Social service and other public agencies should prepare plans to respond to immigration raids and develop outreach strategies to assure parents and other caregivers that it is safe to seek emergency assistance and benefits for children under such circumstances.

✓ Churches and other religious institutions should be considered central points of communication, distribution of assistance, and outreach to families affected by immigration enforcement operations.

✓ Social services and economic assistance need to be provided over a prolonged period of time—often many months—until parents are released from detention and their immigration cases are resolved. Longer-term counseling for children and their parents to mitigate psychological impacts may also be necessary.

✓ Relatives, friends, community leaders, and service providers should develop plans for immigrant families in the event of a single parent’s or primary caregiver’s arrest and be ready to provide ICE with necessary documentation for a parent’s release.

✓ Immigration lawyers, advocates, community leaders, and others should be honest with arrested immigrants about their chances of remaining in the United States, and be strategic in choosing which cases to fight. Arrested immigrants should not have to pay large legal fees if their cases have a low probability of success, especially when they are already facing substantial economic hardship.

✓ A clearinghouse of information about responses to raids should be developed nationally. Such a clearinghouse could be a repository for stories about raids, a conduit for sharing information, and a setting for developing best practices in service delivery.

Claire S. Chiamulera is the editor of CLP.

For more information:
Access the full report online at www.urban.org/publications/411566.html