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## Large-Scale Immigration Worksite Raids and Mixed-Status Families: Separation, Financial Crisis, and Family Role Rearrangement

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### Abstract

**Background:** Mixed-status families—whose members have multiple immigration statuses—are common in U.S. immigrant communities. Large-scale worksite raids, an immigration enforcement tactic used throughout U.S. history, returned during the Trump administration. Yet little research characterizes the impacts of these raids, especially as related to mixed-status families.

**Objectives:** The current study 1) describes a working definition of a large-scale worksite raid and 2) considers impacts of these raids on mixed-status families.

**Methods:** We conducted semi-structured interviews in Spanish and English at six communities that experienced the largest worksite raids in 2018. Participants were 77 adults who provided material, emotional, or professional support following raids. Qualitative analysis methods were used to develop a codebook and code all interviews.

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Conflicts of Interest:

We have no conflicts of interest to report.

**Results:** The unpredictability of worksite raids resulted in chaos and confusion, often stemming from potential family separation. Financial crises followed due to the removal of primary financial providers. In response, families rearranged roles to generate income.

**Conclusions:** Large-scale worksite raids result in similar harms to mixed-status families as other enforcement tactics, but on a much larger scale. They also uniquely drain community resources, with long-term impacts. Advocacy and policy efforts are needed to mitigate damage and end this practice.

### Keywords

immigration; deportation; families; raids; Latino

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## Background

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) removes hundreds of thousands of non-citizens from the United States every year<sup>1</sup>. Increasingly, researchers have used the analytic frame of the mixed-status family<sup>2,3</sup>, or a family composed of members with differing immigration statuses, to consider how the impacts of immigration enforcement extend beyond those removed. For example, the deportation of financial providers often forces families to rearrange roles to compensate for lost income<sup>4</sup>. Mothers may become “suddenly single mothers,” taking over the deported father’s duties while coping with their own psychological challenges<sup>5</sup>. Children of detained or deported parents show significantly higher PTSD symptoms compared to peers whose parents were citizens<sup>6</sup>, and children with a deported parent are more likely to display internalizing and externalizing problems<sup>7</sup> and depression<sup>8</sup>. Fear of immigration status disclosure results in avoidance of social services, including Medicaid resources for citizen children<sup>9</sup>. Ultimately, deportation can lead to family dissolution, such as the end of marriages or severing of parent-child relationships<sup>4</sup>.

Worksite immigration enforcement has been used by various presidential administrations throughout U.S. history<sup>10</sup> to arrest non-citizens, especially those without work permits<sup>11</sup>. While the worksite enforcement operations of the Obama administration relied heavily on audits of I-9 employment verification forms<sup>12</sup>, previous administrations, including that of President George W. Bush, relied on agent entry into commercial spaces to arrest hundreds of noncitizens as well as to express a militarized, enforcement-focused stance on immigration policy<sup>10,13</sup>. Worksite enforcement became a preferred tactic during the Trump administration, breaking several enforcement records. For example, the largest single state worksite enforcement operation in U.S. history occurred on August 7, 2019, when 680 individuals were arrested in a sweep of processing plants in Mississippi<sup>14</sup>.

On the ground, immigrant communities, advocates, and media generally refer to ICE worksite enforcement operations as immigration “worksite raids”<sup>15</sup>. And, while there is no official designation for what constitutes a “large-scale” worksite raid, this oft-used categorization<sup>14,15</sup> reflects a communal understanding of geographically concentrated enforcement, often in small, isolated, predominantly white, rural communities composed of mixed-status families. Communities may even hold events commemorating these raids<sup>16</sup>, which were characterized by their wide-spread impact (e.g., community-wide

unemployment), intense periods of media coverage, and historical memory of the event<sup>10,17,18</sup>.

Previous studies of large-scale worksite raids focused on the raid of a meatpacking plant in Postville, IA, on May 12, 2008. [Masked] considered birthweight differences among infants the year after the raid and found that infants born to Latina mothers were more likely to be low birth weight than those born to white mothers<sup>[x]</sup>. Through interviews with nine key informants, Juby & Kaplan considered how the raid impacted children, adults, and the community<sup>19</sup>. The authors found that many in the community expressed symptoms of PTSD, school personnel reported behavioral problems, and families were left homeless or jobless.

Given the historical use of<sup>10</sup> and possible return to<sup>20</sup> large-scale immigration worksite raids, we consider how this enforcement strategy impacts mixed-status families and discuss implications to mitigate their harm. We draw on 77 interviews with individuals who provided material, professional, or emotional support to mixed-status families impacted by worksite raids. To honor the community experience of these events, we categorize and refer to them as “large-scale worksite raids,” with criteria described below.

## Methods

### Large-Scale Worksite Raids

We define a large-scale worksite raid as an immigration enforcement in which 1) ICE agents enter a commercial space; 2) in a single enforcement action; 3) on a single day; 4) in a single community. We restrict our sample to raids that occurred in 2018. We confirmed the enforcement events that fit into this criteria by reviewing ICE press releases<sup>21</sup>, media reports, and conversation with activists who responded in each location. As described previously, there is no official definition of a large-scale immigration worksite raid, and data on metrics that would be useful in categorizing their size—such as the number of officers involved, days of planning, or resources used—are not publicly available. We thus use the number of arrests resulting from a given raid as a proxy for the size of a raid. We worked with community partners to arrange visits to and conduct interviews in the six communities in which the most arrests occurred. Table 1 highlights critical details of each raid, including the number of related arrests, which ranged from 32 to 159.

Five of the six raids that fit the criteria took place at a single business, or, in the case of the raid in Sandusky, the same business in two locations. While the operation in O’Neill, NE, targeted multiple employers, including a tomato greenhouse, a cattle feedlot, a restaurant, and agricultural employers, all these operations were centered around the same small community and were part of a single enforcement operation.

### Setting and Sample

This report is part of a larger study that sought to better understand community responses to large-scale worksite raids. The principal investigators visited the six communities (the first author did not visit O’Neill) with other members of the research teams whenever possible. Prior to arrival, we reviewed media on each raid and engaged community partners,

who provided background information and supported recruitment by informing eligible community members of the opportunity to participate. Eligible participants (age 18 and older and provided material, professional, or emotional support following one of the six large-scale worksite raids) were given information about the study and invited to schedule an interview at a time and place in which they were comfortable. We began each interview with informed verbal consent to avoid collecting names to protect participant confidentiality.

We did not limit participation based on race/ethnicity, gender, immigration status, or personal involvement in each raid. Thus, some participants provided support the day of the raid, while others may have been involved weeks after. Similarly, while some individuals provided direct support to detained spouses, or were detained themselves, others, for example, supported the children of detained parents, or may not have a personal connection to a non-citizen in the community. Previous research studying the impact of immigration enforcement often divides study samples dichotomously, contrasting the impacted community with those, like physicians or service providers, who provide them with care.<sup>22,23,24</sup> We did not restrict the sample in this way to allow the data to reflect an observation made during previous fieldwork and advocacy: those who are impacted by immigration raids often also organize to address the harm they cause. Table 2 details sample characteristics.

We drew from advocacy experience, media reports and review of the literature to identify five sectors from which material, professional, or emotional support provided after a worksite raid tended to originate. These sectors included: 1) education (e.g., teachers); 2) faith (e.g., pastors); 3) legal (e.g., lawyers); 4) advocacy (e.g., organizers); and 5) other volunteers (e.g., medical professionals, drivers), and sampled evenly from each sector. Sampling from participants with a diverse range of experiences responding to<sup>22</sup> and at various distances from<sup>25</sup> immigration enforcement events is a sampling strategy used to increase the breadth and depth of understanding of these events.

## Interviews and Analysis

We conducted and recorded 77 interviews in participants' preferred language (Spanish or English), used pseudonyms, and transcribed all interviews. Most (78%) of these interviews occurred in person. Others (22%) were via video chat or phone. We used a semi-structured interview guide<sup>26</sup> that encouraged us to focus the interviews on impacts of and responses to large-scale worksite raids while also allowing participants to direct the conversation based on experience, sector, and personal distance from the raid. Average interview length was 32 minutes (SD = 14 minutes).

Interview transcripts were imported into QSR's Nvivo 12 and coded in the following way<sup>27</sup>. The study PIs, both of whom are bilingual and have worked extensively with mixed-status families, reviewed and coded interviews. Memos were used to create initial impressions of emerging themes<sup>28</sup>. Memos included, for example, initial reactions or questions to consider during later coding. The PIs then met to compare themes and generate selective codes<sup>29,30</sup>. This resulted in seven parent codes and twenty-two subcodes. A codebook was compiled and codes were defined and given inclusion and exclusion criteria if necessary<sup>31</sup>.

When coding discrepancies arose, we discussed, took notes, and came to a resolution<sup>30,32</sup>. Additional codes were added when necessary.

Our analytic approach was not to draw distinctions within sectors, but to identify common themes emerging across the sample<sup>33</sup>. The codes that most illustrated the impact of large-scale worksite raids on mixed-status families (and were thus used in this analysis) include “chaos-confusion”, “disaster response,” “family reorganization,” “family separation,” and “unemployment-finances.” To protect privacy, we avoid reporting specific details. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the Universities of Michigan (HUM00146458) and Iowa (201811206).

## Results

We begin by detailing a theme repeated across participants from all sectors and all six communities: these raids are chaotic, confusing, and resemble natural disasters. We then detail three ways these raids harm mixed-status families: family separation; job loss and financial insecurity; and family role rearrangement.

### Chaos, Confusion, and Disaster

Across all sites, interviewees described a sense of chaos and confusion as news about the raids spread unpredictably. Raids occur without warning so that agents may detain targets while they are clustered in one location. While some events—such as an influx of ICE agents in a motel or a helicopter overhead—provided clues that enforcement was forthcoming, interviewees reported having to piece together what was occurring via texts, calls, emails, or social media. These communications occurred across languages, or while one was at work and unable to step away.

Sarah was an English Language Learner (ELL) teacher in Tennessee whose students’ parents worked at Southeastern Provision, the meat processing plant raided in Bean Station. Sarah described the convoluted way in which many in her school learned of the raid, which later affected how educators could support families:

[My ELL co-teacher] got a text from someone asking about what was happening... And it was in Spanish so it was like, do “I not understand this” because I don’t understand enough Spanish or because this message is confusing... Then we kept researching on Facebook and getting more and more info, texting a few people back and forth... by the time we got back to school, we went and asked our principal, “Have you heard about this? Do you know what’s happening?” [And we asked the secretary], and she’s like, “No, but parents have been coming in and getting their kids.” Every parent that would come in would give us a little bit more information.

Participants in other communities shared similarly. Nilda, a Latina advocate in Iowa who worked with a bond project that supported the release of detainees, described the moments after the raid as a “big jigsaw puzzle” of attempts to source information as it was happening. Rumors spread quickly, and it was unclear where the enforcement was taking place, how long it would last, or if it would extend elsewhere. Father Brian, a priest in Iowa, shared,

“The biggest response is panic.” Juana, who worked in a food pantry after her husband was detained in the raid at Midwest Precast Concrete in Mt. Pleasant, described the feeling as “shock.” Sally, an attorney in Ohio, described “mass chaos,” saying, “It was just like panic. I think everyone in every city was freaking out wanting to know, are we going to be next?”

Though a few participants had experienced raids of this size before (e.g., an advocate in O’Neill responded to a raid in Grand Island, NE, in 2006), most interviewees had never experienced a raid of this scale. To describe the aftermath, many drew on natural disasters. This included the immediate response to the raid, when some participants attempted to triage the needs of hundreds of community members, all reeling from the potential disappearance of others and separation of families.

Sarah, the ELL teacher above, compared the scene to a hurricane response: “...after Katrina in Knoxville they had a Red Cross center set up and that was the only thing that was kind of similar to it.” Stacy, the head of an advocacy organization who organized food distribution to impacted families after the raid in Bean Station, likewise compared it to a natural disaster: “It just felt like we were scrambling to get basic resources, that it had been like a tornado or an earthquake or something.” Al, an advocate in Mt. Pleasant who recalled the sound of the helicopters the morning of the raid, shared, “I take this, as a community member, as very analogous to a tornado coming down and taking out 30 houses on the edge of town.”

This disaster-level confusion regarding the scale, location, and duration, of the raids significantly shaped the impacts of the raid on mixed-status families, as described below.

### Family Separation

Central to the chaos and confusion described were mixed-status family members scrambling to find out if their loved ones were detained, where and under what terms. Destiny was a Latina organizer who responded to the raid in Sumner, who herself had undocumented parents. Speaking with us in the church in which families huddled after the raid at Load Trail, Destiny shared, “I guess the biggest need within the community is getting my loved one out. That was the first immediate need, is ‘how can I go about getting my loved one out [of detention]?’” Many arrested workers were detained hours away from where they lived. For example, some detained in Sandusky, were sent to Battle Creek, MI, three hours away, or Youngstown, OH, two hours away. Once the location of detention was clear, family members could begin to address myriad problems that followed, including finding an attorney, arranging a visit, or putting money on commissary accounts. Affordable legal representation, often located in large cities, was difficult to find in the rural towns where the raids occurred.

While there are no official reports of the number of detained individuals that were part of families or had children, interviews show that many children were impacted, some of whom had multiple caregivers or relatives removed. For example, 97 people were arrested in Bean Station; Stacy, introduced above, shared, “I think we counted like 160 direct children of people who were arrested that day.” Gordon, who was among the first points of contact for legal response in Salem and Sandusky, shared that “there was 26 kids that first night

with both parents taken” following the raid in Salem (in which over 140 individuals were arrested).

Other families had multiple members detained. Leah, an ELL teacher in Mt. Pleasant, described a teenage boy whose grandfather and two uncles were arrested. Teodoro, a pastor who provided support in O’Neill, described a pregnant mother of one child whose brother and husband were detained. Jaime, an advocate who responded to the raid in Sumner, recalled a time he was asked by neighbors to visit the home of a family known to have worked at the raided facility: “And we went to go see this, and these kids were alone for like three days straight. They were like, ‘We didn’t know where our parents are. We have no idea where they’re at.’”

### **Job Loss and Financial Insecurity**

The most immediate repercussion of worksite raids is the loss of employment. In many mixed-status families, a working father is the primary economic provider, and the consequential loss of income is financially catastrophic. Kathy, who lived in Iowa, invited the teenage son of a detained worker to live with her. Reflecting on the economic impact of removed financial providers, she shared, “If their husband has been taken, then they don’t have money. And so, that means you can’t buy food, you can’t pay your rent, you can’t pay your electric bill.” Troy, a middle school teacher near Sumner, said, “I’m going to say it’s the norm for everyone, the breadwinner’s the male in the family. He’s the one that is supporting economically. Mom’s running the household and she’s taking care of the kids, and for the most part their school business and anything like that. And so dad’s not working, there’s not any money coming in, and so it’s made it very difficult on some of our families.”

Paying rent and utility bills and purchasing necessities like diapers was especially challenging amid an influx of financial demands, especially attorney fees and bonds. While some detainees obtained pro-bono legal representation, many paid out of pocket. Bond costs were frequently thousands of dollars, such as a reported \$10,000 in Mt. Pleasant or \$12,000 in Sandusky.

Juana, the young mother in Mt. Pleasant above, described having to pay thousands of dollars in bond fees: “This was many years-worth of savings. And I know some folks who had to ask for money that they had sent to their countries of birth to be sent back to them.” Marco, a volunteer at a food bank who was detained in a raid in O’Neill, shared similarly about his inability to support his parents in Mexico, “I have to send them their pension... But now I can’t. It’s been nine months [since the raid], nine months where you are in anguish because you are unable to help.”

### **Family Role Rearrangement**

The detention of parents and resulting financial need often resulted in more chaos and instability, as families were forced to shift roles and responsibilities. One ELL teacher described, “In the situation with one of my students, her dad’s getting ready to have to go back to Honduras. She’s not seen him, and so everybody in the house who’s of age is working.” Reginaldo, who opened his home to community members after the raid in Mt. Pleasant, described its impact on higher education: “Youths from 12 to 18 that this happened

to, I think it was a very heavy blow (*un golpe muy seco*) for them. They were deeply impacted (*les marcó mucho*) and it was a big change. I know of a few who, their parents stopped working and they had to start working 100% and abandon their university studies... to take charge of the expenses of the house.”

To compensate for lost income, mothers sometimes worked more hours or took additional jobs, limiting time with their children. Juana, introduced above, described the situation for women who, like her, had husbands detained in the raid:

[There are two women who] have daughters, sons, and their husbands are still detained from the raid. They have been detained for eight months, and the women are working so hard... They are working Monday to Sunday overtime, sometimes taking other jobs, not spending any time with their kids. Not because they don't want to; they have to pay for calls that their husbands make, send them money for food. They are going to visit them. Pay lawyers.... One of them, she used to live in her own house, but she just had to move with her family because she couldn't pay with just her income (*no puede seguir pagando ella solita en la casa*).

With the removal of a parent from the household, siblings cared for younger relatives. Valeria, who worked in a migrant education program and supported mixed-status families in O'Neill, described a family whose parents were both detained: “For about five months, they [the children] were by themselves with the older sister, the 20-year-old sister. And it was very heartbreaking. Finally, they deported mom. But dad was able to stay and is taking care of them.” Leslie, a teacher, also described siblings taking caregiving roles in Bean Station:

So, a lot of these women [who were detained] have older kids. So, you would see 15-year-old kids taking care of their younger siblings. Or they had a friend, you know, that would check on the kids. ... But most of the kids... had an older sibling, or they had somebody like a neighbor that would go over and watch for them, or cook for them. But that's mainly how the kids were taken care of, until mom got back.

Caretaking needs also fell to other relatives. Gordon described the situation in Sandusky, “[T]here were a lot of people where they took both the father and the mother in Corso's, and then the kids were the babysitters, or with cousins.”

## Conclusions

Mixed-status families are a regular feature of immigrant communities, with as many as 16.7 million people living with at least one undocumented family member<sup>34</sup>. A growing body of research illustrates that immigration enforcement that targets the most legally vulnerable<sup>2</sup> family member “spills over” to impact others in the family regardless of immigration status. Large-scale worksite raids, an immigration enforcement tactic used throughout U.S. history<sup>10</sup>, became a preferred tactic during the Trump administration. Yet partially due to the lack of definition of “large-scale worksite raid,” little research characterizes the impacts of these raids, especially as related to mixed-status families.

We present a working definition of “large-scale worksite raid” that foregrounds the communal understanding of these raids as traumatic, formative, events that shape



community memory<sup>10,18</sup>. Through interviews with 77 participants who provided material, emotional, or professional support following the six largest worksite raids in the U.S. in 2018, we argue that these raids are chaotic and confusing, akin to natural disasters, with no clear way to know how they are unfolding nor who has been detained. Drawing from the disaster literature, future research should consider how this chaos and confusion, especially regarding the unknown fate of family members, can harm mental health<sup>35</sup>. In the wake of these raids comes family separations, including the removal of financial providers, resulting in family role rearrangements necessary for additional income. A growing literature has considered the impacts of removing financial providers<sup>5,36</sup>, especially as related to the gendered work that ensues<sup>25,37,38</sup>. Other studies have described the shift in family responsibilities after immigration enforcement<sup>32</sup> or due to differential resource access<sup>39,40</sup>, including health care<sup>34</sup>. Thus, this study confirms that large-scale immigration worksite raids result in many of the same impacts of immigration enforcement more generally, except on a larger scale, in one location, and at one time.

However, the scale of these raids—specifically the removal of dozens to hundreds of financial providers simultaneously—is also uniquely damaging to mixed-status families. Following single instances of deportation, other mixed-status families are able to offer support, the community-wide drain of resources detailed here makes it challenging to mitigate the damage of the raids, partially explaining the long-term economic damage to entire communities detailed in the media<sup>41</sup>. Future studies should consider how these raids additionally shape the economic stability of the towns and industries in which they occur.

This study extends previous research on the impacts of worksite raids,<sup>19,x</sup> and illustrates that this practice has not disappeared as an enforcement strategy but depends instead on the immigration enforcement preferences of the executive branch. Future studies could consider how the political environment shapes immigration enforcement strategies, especially as related to militarized enforcement.

Implications extend from these findings. The types of support provided give insight into strategies to mitigate the damage of these raids, and merit further consideration. For example, since children are in school when raids occur, schools that educate children from mixed-status families should develop procedures for informing and protecting their students. To address the chaos of these raids, community organizations could develop intake systems that streamline documentation and communication following raids to quickly verify who has been detained. Amid the collective drain on familial recourses, bond projects, such as that utilized in Mt. Pleasant<sup>42</sup>, could be established to allow communities and allies to systematically collect donations for detainee bonds.

However, contingency planning and damage mitigation are only stopgap measures to prevent the lives of mixed-status families from unraveling. Simultaneously, we advocate to end this enforcement strategy. As illustrated by this study, research, and media following large-scale single-site raids like Postville, IA, in 2008, multi-site raids like Mississippi in 2019<sup>14</sup>, or home raids<sup>25</sup>, all raids harm undocumented individuals and the families of which they are a part. Large-scale worksite raids simply do not align with any framework of humanitarian

immigration law enforcement; halting them is in the best interests of mixed-status families throughout the country.

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**Table 1:**

**Key Details of Large-Scale Immigration Worksite Raids in 2018, U.S.A**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>Arrests</b>
April 5	Bean Station, TN	Meat processing	Southeastern Provision (1 location)	97
May 9	Mt. Pleasant, IA	Precast concrete	Midwest Precast Concrete (1 location)	32
June 5	Sandusky, OH	Landscaping	Corso's Flower and Garden Center (2 locations)	114
June 19	Salem, OH	Meat processing	Fresh Mark (1 location)	146
August 9	O'Neill, NE	Various	Multiple	133
August 28	Sumner, TX	Trailer manufacturing	Load Trailer (1 location)	159

**Table 2.**

## Characteristics of Study Sample

Characteristics		Number of interviews	% of sample
Raid Site	Bean Station, TN	10	13.0%
	Mount Pleasant, IA	19	24.7%
	O'Neill, NE	19	24.7%
	Sumner, TX	10	13.0%
	Sandusky, OH	16	20.8%
	Salem, OH	7	9.1%
Gender	Man	30	39.0%
	Woman	47	61.0%
Primary Sector	advocacy	29	37.7%
	education	12	15.6%
	faith	20	26.0%
	legal	11	14.3%
	other	5	6.5%
Race/Ethnicity	Latinx	35	45.5%
	White	42	54.5%
Language of interview	English	62	80.5%
	Spanish	15	19.5%
Length of interview		Mean 32 minutes	SD 14 minutes