

# Pulitzer Prize-winning immigrant rights advocate detained in Texas

Gabriel Black  
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The US border patrol detained Jose Antonio Vargas, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, leading immigrant rights activist, and undocumented immigrant, for most of the day Tuesday in Texas.

Vargas's detention comes amid a crisis at the US-Mexico border, where tens of thousands of children have been crammed into makeshift prisons awaiting deportation. Vargas was processed and released from custody, with a notice to appear before an immigration judge at a later date.

Vargas had traveled to Texas with a film crew from Define American, a documentary journalism group he founded three years ago that seeks to "shift the conversation around citizenship." The team visited McAllen, a border city with a large border patrol station, for a vigil and press conference organized by another group Vargas founded, *United We Dream*, an undocumented immigrant rights advocacy group.

Before his detention, Vargas wrote an article for *Politico* in which he explained that a lawyer friend alerted him to the fact that he would have to pass a border checkpoint to fly out of McAllen Airport. Vargas tweeted before his arrest "About to go thru security at McAllen Airport. I don't know what's going to happen."

Vargas is Filipino and came to the United States as an undocumented immigrant in 1993 as a twelve-year old. He has established himself as a prominent, if not the leading, public advocate of undocumented immigrants in the United States. He worked for the Washington Post as a reporter and was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize for reporting on the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007.

He revealed the fact that he is an illegal immigrant in an article for the New York Times Magazine in 2011. He wrote, "I've tried. Over the past 14 years, I've

graduated from high school and college and built a career as a journalist. I've created a good life. I've lived the American dream. But I am still an undocumented immigrant."

Vargas, despite his prominent support for immigrant rights, is nonetheless a part of the media and political establishment. He has written cover stories for *Time Magazine* and the *Washington Post*. Vargas's documentary "Documented" aired on CNN this month. The premiere was attended by multi-billionaire Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who was profiled by Vargas for the *New Yorker*. Vargas and Zuckerberg have collaborated on various immigrant-right projects, including a Facebook sponsored undocumented "Hackathon." Democratic politicians, including New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, issued statements in support of Vargas Tuesday.

After his release, Vargas issued a statement praising the "generosity of the American people, documented and undocumented, in the Rio Grande Valley." Referring to undocumented migrants he said "our daily lives are filled with fear in simple acts such as getting on an airplane to go home to our family."

Vargas's appeal, however, was directed largely to president Obama. "With Congress failing to act on immigration reform, and President Obama weighing his options on executive action, the critical question remains: how do we define American?" In a statement on Facebook last year, Vargas also appealed to "President Obama's power" to end deportations through executive action. "We need action ... we need relief. And now," he wrote.

Any notion that the Obama administration can be politically or morally pressured to improve the lot of undocumented immigrants, however, is belied by the facts. The Obama administration has spearheaded the

largest deportation of undocumented immigrants in American history. Since taking office in 2009, Obama has presided over the deportation of more two million undocumented workers and family members. The Obama administration recently asked Congress to approve an additional \$3.7 billion to further militarize the border, construct additional detention facilities, and expedite the deportations of the Central American children who have recently crossed.

More than 52,000 unaccompanied minors have been detained throughout the Southwest this year. The overwhelming majority of these young people come from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras where they are fleeing the gang and cartel violence that has escalated there in recent years as a result of the US-led war on drugs.



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