

# Deportation fears prevent many Houston immigrants from seeking emergency shelter

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A broad mood of social panic has swept through Houston's undocumented immigrant population, forcing many to risk death in their flooded homes rather than escape to government-run evacuation centers. It is estimated that there were some 600,000 undocumented immigrants living in the city before Hurricane Harvey dumped historic amounts of rain on the city this week.

Rumors of ICE arrests at stores, aid centers, and food banks have spread through word of mouth and on social media. One undocumented immigrant in Houston told the *World Socialist Web Site* that amid the climate of fear, "access to water and food is worrying."

The Department of Homeland Security has announced it will not conduct immigration raids at evacuation centers and immigrants' rights groups in Houston are unanimously urging all immigrants to seek help at evacuation centers.

"People were telling each other that the immigration men were coming to check our papers," one immigrant truck driver told the *New York Times*. VICE relayed the story of an immigrant named Luis: "As the floodwaters rose, trapping Luis and his family in their Houston home and threatening to burst through the door, his anxiety mounted. His one-week-old granddaughter was short on formula; within two days, he'll have to swim to a store. 'We can't leave...but I'm going to have to leave to look for food for her.'"

The panic in Houston is the deadly product of a longstanding, anti-immigrant atmosphere whipped up by the ruling class. In a speech to police and immigration officials in July, President Donald Trump said immigration officials "are liberating our American towns," adding that he loves watching immigrants and criminal suspects "get thrown into the back of a paddy wagon," adding, "Please don't be too nice."

On Friday, just before the storm made landfall, ICE

dropped a busload of immigrant mothers and their children at a bus station in San Antonio in the potential path of the hurricane, even though all buses and public transport had announced they were stopping service. The 50 people were stranded without money or cell phones and were rescued by passers-by who brought them to shelter.

As the flooding in Houston worsened, Texas officials, potentially with a nod from ICE or Customs and Border Patrol, sent border patrol boats, ostensibly to rescue flood victims. Many undocumented immigrants shared the sighting on social media and the posts spread rapidly among undocumented Houston residents.

Cesar Espinosa, executive director of the immigrant rights group FIEL Houston, told the *New York Times*, "Just physically and visually seeing the Border Patrol out there caused panic. They thought they were coming to get them."

Criminal elements emboldened by the anti-immigrant climate have taken advantage of the confusion, posing as immigration officials and knocking on doors to demand that undocumented residents leave the area. DHS was forced to issue a statement stating that imposters hope to "rob the empty homes."

The flood coincides with the implementation of Texas Senate Bill 4, which comes into partial effect in two days, on September 1 after an injunction was handed down by a federal judge Wednesday evening.

SB 4, the "anti-sanctuary" act, is the toughest state anti-immigration bill in the US since Arizona's SB 1070, which was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2010. SB4 provides that state officials will be jailed for failing to help ICE and CBP round up immigrants for deportation, and has already drastically increased immigrants' fear of police and government officials.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed the bill into law

in May with a bellicose rant delivered on Facebook live. “Texans expect us to keep them safe, and that is exactly what we are going to do by me signing this law,” he said, adding that sanctuary city policies “won’t be tolerated in Texas.”

Immediately after the Facebook live signing, Abbott spokesman Matt Hirsch bragged that the purpose of using social media was to instill fear in the immigrant population. He tweeted a screenshot of the video announcement receiving a reach of 400,000 viewers and wrote, “For those wondering why we chose Facebook live. And it’s been an hour.”

While the anti-immigrant hysteria has been greatly exacerbated under the Trump administration, its roots are entirely bipartisan. Barack Obama oversaw the deportation of nearly 3 million people during his eight years in office.

Democratic Minority Whip Steny Hoyer announced in July that immigration and other social issues “won’t be the focus” of the Democratic Party. “Essentially,” he said, “what we don’t want to do is distract people ... we don’t want to distract ourselves.” In other words, the Democratic Party will appeal to the most anti-immigrant sections of the population to win votes in the 2018 midterm elections. Just last month, when 10 immigrants suffocated in the back of an abandoned semi-truck less than 200 miles from Houston, in San Antonio, the Democratic Party leadership basically ignored the atrocity.

The rescue efforts along the Gulf Coast have largely fallen to the working class. The *New York Times* noted Tuesday that while “the response to one of the worst disasters in decades in Texas has been, in many ways, improvised ... Recreational vehicles—airboats, jet skis, motorized fishing boats—have rushed to the aid of people trapped in their homes, steered by welders, roofers, mechanics and fishermen wearing shorts, headlamps, and ponchos. The working class, in large part, is being saved by the working class.”

Many immigrants have joined the rescue efforts despite the fear of deportation.

Officials found the bodies of two Mexican immigrants living in Houston and a third survivor of a crew who had braved the flood to rescue those stranded, the *Daily Mail* reported Wednesday. Jorge Perez, a 33-year-old father of two and 25-year-old Yahir Vizueth were confirmed dead.

As of this writing Benjamin Vizueth, 31, and Gustavo Rodriguez Hernandez, 40, are still missing. Benjamin Vizueth’s wife, Perla Jaquez, told *Univision*, “They found two bodies already ... my brother-in-law’s and his close friend’s.” The immigrant crew were swept away by floodwaters and clung to a telephone pole before being forced to let go due to fear of electrocution from swinging wires.



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