

Life for immigrants in the US during COVID-19 pandemic

ICE raids continue, asylum seekers turned away, and detention facilities remain potential hotbeds for coronavirus

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Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration is intensifying its abusive and violent crackdown on immigrants. Even as the virus has spread to every state in the country, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has continued immigration raids, targeted arrests, and deportations. In addition, the Trump administration is now reportedly turning back all migrants crossing the US-Mexico border—in blatant defiance of international law—under the pretense of containing the spread of the pandemic.

As part of an initiative called “Operation Palladium,” hundreds of additional ICE officers are being deployed in unmarked cars to “sanctuary cities,” those cities that, due to public pressure stemming from sizable immigrant populations, restrain their local police from fully complying with ICE agents’ deportation requests.

The operation began last month just as the coronavirus outbreak was getting under way and will reportedly continue through the end of the year. On Wednesday, ICE announced that it would carry out “mission critical” arrests until the threat from COVID-19 was over.

Some of the targeted cities include Boston, New York, Newark, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, New Orleans, and Atlanta.

Many of these major cities are currently under or are considering “shelter in place” orders because of the rampant spread of the virus. ICE is using the pandemic as a means to ramp up its efforts. The *New York Times* reports that the goal of Operation Palladium is to “arrest as many undocumented immigrants as possible” and to “flood the streets.”

ICE officials told the *Los Angeles Times* that “precautionary” measures may be taken due to the

outbreak of the virus; however, the precautionary measures referred to are, of course, not for the immigrants but rather to protect the ICE officers. Most precincts have issued agents masks and hand sanitizer.

Dozens of local and national papers are reporting that ICE officers have been stalking individuals as long as 12 hours a day in order to arrest them outside their homes or places of work. There have been a slew of arrests in the last two weeks alone:

? In Denver, Colorado, ICE arrested two people on Friday, March 13. One of the arrests was a woman who was on her way to pick up her children. Her kids had to find out what happened from a neighbor after they found their mother’s car nearby, the *Denver Post* reported.

? In Scranton, Pennsylvania, ICE arrested a man as he left a hospital emergency room on Monday.

? There have been at least six raids by immigration officials in El Paso County in the past two weeks according to Fernando Garcia, the executive director of the Border Network for Human Rights.

? In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a group of ICE officers in collaboration with local law enforcement raided at least two homes on Wednesday morning before arresting three young men from Guatemala.

? In February, a man in Brooklyn was brought out of a hospital in handcuffs after ICE agents Tasered and shot his girlfriend’s unarmed son.

The intensified ICE activity has prompted concerns among advocacy groups that the approximately 11 million undocumented workers and youth currently living in the US may avoid seeking medical treatment amidst the pandemic due to fear of deportation.

According to ICE’s website, hospitals and other

medical treatment facilities are supposed to be “sensitive locations,” meaning they are largely exempt from actions of immigration enforcement. However, a spokesperson for ICE did not rule out the possibility, saying arrests at hospitals would only take place “under extraordinary circumstances.”

For those who remain in detention facilities, no measures have been taken to guarantee their protection. Due to the horrific conditions and the extremely close quarters, all the detention facilities and prisons in the US are at high risk of becoming epicenters of the pandemic.

The experience in China with prison systems gives an indication of the possible catastrophic results if no measures are taken. By late February, Chinese prisons were reporting more than 500 cases spreading across at least four prison facilities in three provinces.

The American criminal legal system holds almost 2.3 million people in prisons, jails, detention centers and psychiatric hospitals. Eduardo Canales, founder of the South Texas Human Rights Center, told the WSWs, “The Trump administration may try to argue that being held in the detention jails is similar to quarantine and therefore safer for migrants, but this is just not true.”

Detention facilities have a host of correctional staff, vendors, health care workers, and visitors, constantly coming and going, all of whom could potentially introduce the virus. If measures are not taken now, health officials are warning that it is not a matter of if but when jails and prisons will become major epicenters—a stark warning for a country that jails nearly 25 percent of the world’s prison population.

Canales went on to note his deep concern for the immigrant population both inside and outside the detention facilities: “The continuing of the ICE raids under these circumstances shows the complete inhumanity and cruelty of the whole system. Trump, and even more so [senior advisor] Stephen Miller, are hell bent on eradicating ‘foreigners’ from the US. It shows once again the brutal character of ICE.”

Canales also pointed to the criminal role the Obama administration played in beefing up the border patrol and filling immigrant detention centers under his administration, paving the way for Trump.

“What we are dealing with is a humanitarian crisis. ... For those immigrants in detention facilities, they are facing a double whammy—it is double terrorism. They are, first of all, apprehended and then subject to horrible conditions, and they may contract this virus.”

Amidst the growing pandemic, the usually awful

conditions in the detention centers have become much more severe. Representatives from RAICES, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, who spoke with the WSWs, have heard from detainees in Karnes Detention Center in Texas that they are not being provided the most basic necessities, such as hand sanitizer.

One statement from a Karnes detainee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, provided to WSWs reporters, reads: “Here at this detention center, we do not have access to hand sanitizer or masks, or anything else that could protect as we are all stuck together in close quarters. The officials here have not said anything to us about what is happening outside, or any extra precautions that we should take.”

It continues, “We are scared because nobody will tell us anything, and we fear that nobody will take care of us. We are scared because we don’t know how to protect ourselves, nobody will share anything with us. I fear that many people could die without the proper healthcare. If we were released, we would be able to live with family and friends and help slow the spread of the virus.”

Gabriela Domenzain, senior immigration advisor at Brooklyn Defender Services, described the situation in a statement on March 18: “We know that on any given day, immigrants in detention are mistreated and that their access to medical attention is abysmal. And now, it’s even worse. Our clients are being denied soap, hand-sanitizer, and even basic information as to the existence of this pandemic and how to avoid contagion. Brooklyn Defender Services has joined the advocacy community in New York State to ask that ICE release our clients under safe conditions, but they’ve refused.”

Her statement ended by stating “COVID-19 knows no borders or prison walls and it’s in our country and our client’s interest to ensure that everyone is allowed to protect themselves and keep safe during this time.”



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