

THE IMPACT OF A

BROKEN

IMMIGRATION

SYSTEM

ON U.S. STUDENTS  
AND SCHOOLS

IMMIGRANTS  
make  
America  
GREAT

FAMILIES  
BELONG  
TOGETHER

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# CONTENTS

**03 Introduction**

**03 Methods**

**04 Immigration Policy and Enforcement’s Impact on Students**

- Academic Performance
- Attendance
- Grade Retention & Dropout Rates
- Bullying & School Safety
- Peers

**08 Immigration Policy and Enforcement’s Impact on Schools**

- Parental Engagement

**09 Immigration Policy and Enforcement’s Impact on Educators**

**10 Conclusion**

**10 Policy & Practice Recommendations**

**11 References**

**12 About the Authors**

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## INTRODUCTION

Our broken immigration system denies millions of students who are legal U.S. citizens by birthright their right to an equitable education. These are the children of the 10 million individuals who have lived, worked, and raised families in the U.S. for decades without legal authorization.

**In 2019, one in eight U.S. residents (12% of the country's population) was a native-born U.S. citizen with at least one immigrant parent.**

*(American Immigration Council, 2021)*

While the public's attention remains directed to the border—the epicenter of the debate about immigration policy—the children of undocumented immigrants who have already crossed the border exist in permanent limbo, fearful every day that their parents will be snatched away from them, and wondering if they have any future in this country. Many of these students identify as Latinx. Instead of focusing on their education, these students struggle with this uncertainty and as a result are often absent from school or inattentive. Their teachers also struggle to motivate them and sometimes to protect them. The broken immigration system hurts schools and creates victims across the spectrum of race and ethnicity in the United States, but it is especially acute for these students.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric and immigration enforcement affect not just the children of immigrants, most of whom were born in this country and are American citizens, but their friends, schools, and ultimately their entire community. Ironically, the United States is dependent on the children of immigrant workers to fill the jobs that the declining U.S. population cannot fill. As of 2019, one in six U.S. workers was an immigrant and contributed billions of dollars in taxes *(American Immigration Council, 2021)*. Immigrants are essential to the economic well-being of the nation.

This policy brief summarizes key findings from “Schools Under Siege: The Impact of Immigration Enforcement on Educational Equity” by Dr. Patricia Gándara and Dr. Jongyeon Ee. Their book brings to attention the degree to which millions of U.S.-born students and their school communities are impacted by aggressive immigration enforcement.



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## METHODS

**“Schools Under Siege” uses data from a 2017–18 national survey of over 3,600 educators from 13 states and over 760 schools to examine the impact of immigration enforcement on the nation's schools.**

The survey evaluated the extent to which educators observed reactions to heightened immigration enforcement among students and parents and how, if at all, it also affected both teaching and learning in their schools.

## IMMIGRATION POLICY AND ENFORCEMENT'S IMPACT ON **STUDENTS**

In 2019, 5 million children who were U.S. citizens under age 19 lived with an undocumented family member—in most cases, a parent. This represents about **7% of all children in the United States** (*American Immigration Council, 2021*).

Since 2009, immigration enforcement has increased significantly in America fueled by the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Trump administration and the staggering numbers of immigrants deported during the Obama presidency (more than 5 million). Agreements over the last many years between the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and many state and local police departments allow these law enforcement officers to perform functions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents (*Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2021*). As a consequence, the country has seen an increasing number of arrests by ICE officers of immigrant parents near schools and other federally protected locations such as hospitals and courthouses, although ICE instructs officers to refrain from making enforcement actions inside these places to avoid restricting people's access to essential services (*U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2023*).



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**Increased immigration enforcement affects students’ academic performance.**

Over 60% of teachers surveyed reported an impact on immigrant students’ academic performance. Instead of thinking about academics and post-high school plans, students are distracted by fears about their families’ safety and situation in this country. Harsh enforcement can also lead to reduced academic motivation and impact school performance and test scores.

**Immigration enforcement affects student attendance.**



Educators surveyed shared how their students are frightened and sometimes remain absent from school for days when there are immigration raids in the area, or because of fear that their parents will be deported or detained while they are at school. Persistent absenteeism immediately impacts student outcomes, as well as classroom instruction and school climate.

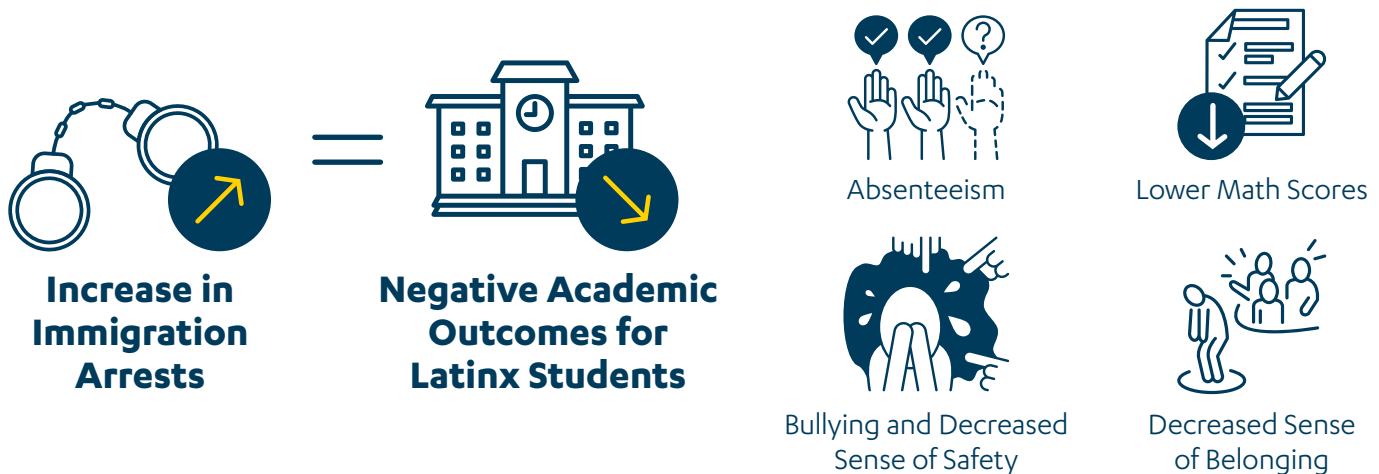
**Immigration enforcement affects grade retention and dropout rates.**



It raised the probability of repeating a grade for children of “likely unauthorized immigrants” aged 6 to 13 years by 14% and the likelihood of dropping out for young people aged 14 to 17 by 18% (Amuedo-Dorantes and Lopez, 2017). Sattin-Bajaj and Kirksey (2022) along with other colleagues found that increased arrests of immigrants related to a decline in English Language Arts (ELA) scores for secondary Latinx English Learners (ELs) roughly equivalent to one month of learning loss (Sattin-Bajaj & Kirksey, 2022). They also found that increased immigration enforcement led to declines in math test scores, sense of belonging and safety and bullying for all Latinx secondary students in their sample (not just ELs). In addition, absenteeism rates worsened by about 5 percentage points in areas where immigration arrests occurred (Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2021). The true scope of the academic impact will be a major concern for years to come, especially when compounded by the complexity of the COVID pandemic and its impact on schools, students, and families.

They are not thinking about college, or the test next week or what is being taught in the classroom today.  
**They are thinking about their family and whether they will still be a family; whether their family will remain intact.”**  
 Tennessee high school administrator

**Figure 1.** Declines in Educational Outcomes With Increases in Immigration Arrests





### Immigration enforcement activities increase bullying and compromise students' sense of safety in school.

Almost half of the educators surveyed reported an increase in bullying of immigrant students, creating a heightened sense of insecurity and anxiety in students. Students are impacted by immigration enforcement happening around spaces where they expect to feel safe, like schools. An elementary school teacher described the day after the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, a student of theirs was:

huddled underneath playground equipment, crying. I ask, "What's the matter?" **They say they think that people hate them [the students] so they'll have to go away.** Another educator shared how their students are not only afraid of ICE but feel as if they are targets because of "their names, their skin colors, their accents, their status. They worry they cannot trust anyone."

Students worried that because of the strict ICE policies created and the negative rhetoric that emerged under the Obama and Trump presidencies, ICE agents could appear at their schools and take them away at any moment.

I had one student who came back the day after prom and would not eat or talk to anyone. I finally found out from one of her friends that **she came home from prom to find her mom deported** and never had the chance to say goodbye or anything. She was suffering but did not know what to do.

California high school teacher

### Immigration enforcement affects all students in the classroom—even those without immigrant family members themselves.



Students are not the only ones who are directly impacted by anti-immigrant rhetoric and ICE enforcement; the school community as a whole is as well (Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2021). *Educators surveyed shared that if a student arrived at school crying, or disappeared for several days due to an ICE action, other students in the same classroom would show concern for their peers, which affects school climate.*

The fears immigrant students experienced also impacted how they engaged in the larger school community. Teachers said parents feared that if their children stayed after school for extracurricular activities they might be seen as "different" or "other" because of their home language or immigration status and, therefore, they wanted them to come home immediately after school instruction ended. This meant that immigrant students were less likely to participate in after-school activities like sports, music, or clubs, which bring students together informally around shared interests and create a positive and inviting school climate. The changing of a school climate and learning environment has rippling impacts for all of those in and around school.

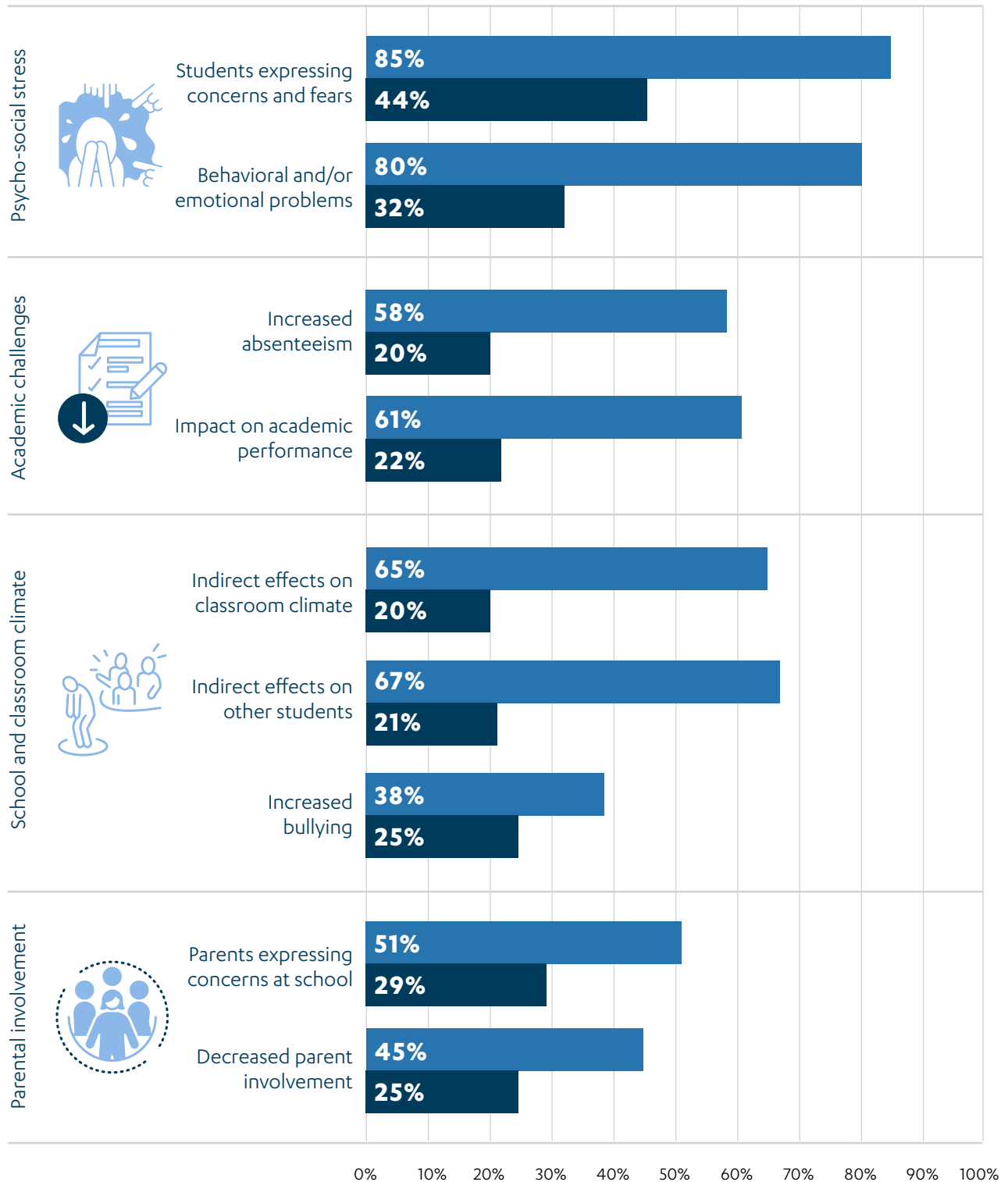


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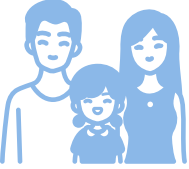
**Figure 2.** Impacts of Immigration Enforcement as Reported by Educators and School Staff

■ Observed ■ Perceived it as being “a lot” or “extensive”



Source: Gándara & Ee, Eds. (2021)

## IMMIGRATION POLICY AND ENFORCEMENT'S IMPACT ON **SCHOOLS**



### **Immigration enforcement affects schools through diminished parental engagement and relationships with students' families.**

Parental engagement among immigrant parents and low-income populations tends to be low, given how much these parents need to work to make ends meet. However, survey responses revealed that parental engagement was even lower for families feeling the threat of deportation. Undocumented immigrant parents avoided schools for fear of being targeted by ICE. Many parents believed that because schools are public spaces funded by the government, they were especially vulnerable there. Not surprisingly, parental involvement declined.

When asked about parental fear, *51% of educators reported that parents had expressed concerns and sought advice about their families' vulnerability.* About half of surveyed educators saw a decrease in parental involvement in schools after immigration enforcement activities. Furthermore, educators shared that parents were fearful of potential traps set by ICE and opted out of coming to school, even for special events like graduation or open houses. Parental involvement is important for school climate and success: Higher levels of parental involvement are related to lower absenteeism and greater academic achievement (*Gottfried & Gee, 2017*).

The fear of deportation extended to other areas of parents' engagement with school. Parents expressed being afraid to disclose information that would qualify their students for free lunch or field trips out of concern for the "public charge" edict that the Trump administration had announced, which would make individuals ineligible for permanent residency if they benefited from any government services.



Image credit: Allison Shelley for EDUimages



## IMMIGRATION POLICY AND ENFORCEMENT'S IMPACT ON **EDUCATORS**

### The heightened tension around anti-immigrant legislation and sentiments in the country impacts teachers and administrators.

Teachers shared their feelings of responsibility to create a sense of safety for all of their students and experienced secondhand trauma, which can be defined as feelings of emotional pain and despair as a result of caring for and about children who are undergoing distressing circumstances (e.g., ICE raids) (Gándara & Ee, 2021). An elementary school administrator shared:

This past year, my job has felt simultaneously more important and more pointless than it ever has before. Pointless because I felt helpless.

### I felt like math and science pale in comparison to safety, security, and family stability.

But how do I affect that? How do I truly help my students? More important because I know that we are a safe place for our students and now, more than ever, that's what our children need.

Teachers felt a deep sense of responsibility for their students that transcends their classrooms. Latinx teachers were more likely to take on responsibilities like translating for students, advocating for students of color, and aiding students to overcome discrimination and mistreatments from other teachers and school leaders (Colomer, 2019; Unda, 2023). Teachers felt anxious and stressed when they did not know how best to help their students cope with their fears (e.g., going home and finding that a family member has been deported or detained). An elementary school teacher shared:

(I know my students are) going through a little bit more with immigration; they have to worry about coming home and having that fear of walking home and **“Oh, is my mom going to be here? Is my dad going to be here? Is my sister or my auntie going to be there?”**



Image credit: Allison Shelley for EDUimages

## CONCLUSION

Children of undocumented immigrants live with great uncertainty about their families and their own future. This uncertainty affects all aspects of their lives, including education. As has been documented in this brief, immigration enforcement that threatens to separate these families has a negative impact on academic performance. It also hurts students' academic motivation, attendance, and behavior in school. Children whose families are subject to immigration enforcement feel less safe at school and report higher incidence of bullying incidents. Parents who are subject to these types of enforcement are less engaged in their children's schooling. The heightened tension around anti-immigration legislation and sentiment in the country hurts not only these children, but their friends, peers, teachers, and schools, ultimately hurting our entire public school system.

## POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

To counter these harmful effects, school systems can implement several measures:

- **Urge Congress to pass comprehensive Immigration Reform** that provides pathways to citizenship and permanent legal status, ensuring the stability and well-being of immigrant families and children.
- **Invest in community schools** that offer wraparound services for children in poverty at the school site (see, for example, UCLA Community School's [Parent and Community Center](#) and [Immigrant Family Legal Clinic](#)).
- **Engage community members who can establish trusting relationships with undocumented parents** so they can better participate in their children's schooling and understand their options in a culturally and linguistically appropriate way.
- **Establish partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) that specialize in providing support services to immigrant families.** These partnerships can offer resources such as legal assistance, mental health support, and social services to address the unique challenges faced by immigrant students and families.



Image credit: Jhon David/Unsplash

- **Uplift support and care for teachers**, especially those serving schools with high proportions of undocumented students and/or families:
  1. **Support hiring of more counselors and school support staff**, particularly those who come from immigrant backgrounds and speak the home language of the students, as they can better connect with students and their families.
  2. **Implement strategies to improve diversity in the teaching profession**, particularly in terms of Latinx teachers through retention and recruitment practices.
  3. **Offer professional development opportunities** to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills in supporting immigrant students. Recommended topics include trauma-informed teaching and culturally responsive teaching.
- **Offer State Department of Education "Know Your Rights" Guidance** to immigrant-serving schools.

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Patricia Gándara is Research Professor of Education and Co-Director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. She is an elected fellow of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the National Academy of Education. In 2011 she was appointed to President Obama's Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, and in 2015 received the Distinguished Career Award from the Scholars of Color Committee of the American Educational Research Association.

She has been a fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center in Italy, the French-American Association at Sciences Po Graduate Institute, Paris, and an ETS fellow at Princeton, New Jersey.

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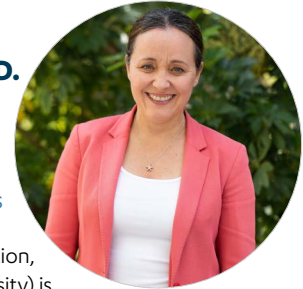
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