

# Fear and Uncertainty in Santa Barbara, California: How ICE Raids are Reshaping Schools, Workplaces and the Community

As immigration enforcement ramps up under President Trump, Santa Barbara residents grapple with potential economic instability, declining school attendance and heightened fear. Local leaders, businesses and nonprofits mobilize to respond.

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Reporting from Santa Barbara, Calif.  
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Hundreds of local residents gather on Jan. 31 to support immigrants and protest ICE activity in Santa Barbara. Courtesy of: *Noozhawk*.

Santa Barbara City Council Member Oscar Gutierrez never thought his mother—now a U.S. citizen from Mexico for nearly 30 years—would fear deportation again. But as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids have increased in Santa Barbara in the past month, old anxieties have resurfaced.

“Should I start carrying my passport everywhere?” Gutierrez’ mother asked him last week. Growing up hearing stories of his parents’ struggles as immigrants, even Gutierrez was unprepared for this question.

Her fear isn’t unfounded. Decades ago, she had been deported by immigration enforcement agents—twice. The second time, it happened just weeks after giving birth to Gutierrez’s older sister. “She was in the hospital when the doctor came and told her, ‘ICE was just here. They

came to deport you. You need to get out of here fast and know they are looking for you,” Gutierrez said.

Despite her efforts, ICE agents eventually found her as she was leaving work, after a coworker revealed her location to agents. “She was taken outside of work, and my newborn sister had to go without her mom for weeks before she returned,” he said.

Now, decades later, Gutierrez describes history repeating itself in Santa Barbara. ICE raids are drastically increasing with aggression under President Trump’s administration, leaving families, students and workers in constant fear. “My mom is now a legal citizen in her 70s but she is still triggered and afraid,” said Gutierrez.

Prior to the Trump administration, ICE agents were prohibited to raid churches, schools, hospitals and other so-called sensitive public spaces that were once prohibited for arrests under the ICE Sensitive Locations Policy. Trump recently revoked this protection.

As fear floods undocumented communities in Santa Barbara, even legal citizens—especially in the Latino community—fear being profiled by ICE agents.

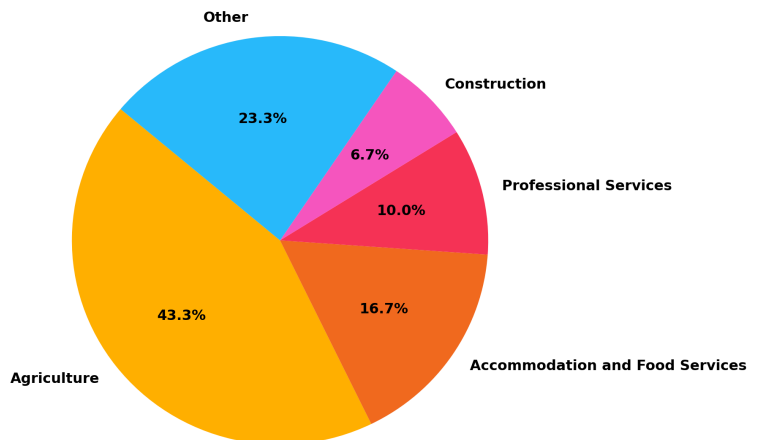
According to Gutierrez, at least 15 raids have already been carried out in the county since the inauguration in January. Local officials, business owners and educators are grappling with uncertainty, rushing to come up with protocols while immigrants wonder: What safeguards, if any, remain to protect them?

The undocumented community in the Santa Barbara population is one of the largest contributors to the local economy, culture and community.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there was a 22.3% foreign-born population in Santa Barbara County in 2023. Of this population, around 59.2% are not U.S. citizens.

The Migration Policy Institute based in Washington, D.C. estimates a current 44,000 undocumented immigrant population in the county. The vast majority—91%—originate from Mexico and Central America. Many of these individuals contribute to essential industries, with 73% of the unauthorized

**Industries of Employment Among Undocumented Immigrants**



population employed, primarily in agricultural work (43%), hospitality/food services (15%) and others represented above.

In a county where a significant portion of the labor force is undocumented and heavily concentrated in public industries vulnerable to workplace raids, the fear of ICE affects employers, customers and workers alike.



Local ICE arrest spotted in westside Santa Barbara neighborhood on Jan. 26, 2025. Courtesy of: 805UndocuFund.

Employers and educators indicate that undocumented employees are missing work, children are staying home from school and businesses serving Hispanic communities are seeing fewer customers.

“Many individuals, including those who are fully documented, have expressed fear of being targeted,” said Mary Lynn Harms-Romo of the Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce. “We have seen a significant impact on the hospitality and food service industries, where some workers are choosing to stay home.”

Economic concerns are rising among business owners and workers alike. Gutierrez noted that some of the city’s most conservative business owners—including hotel and restaurant industries—have spoken out against new deportation efforts.

“California’s economy depends on immigrant labor,” Gutierrez said.

The Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce’s Public Policy Committee and Board of Directors are developing plans to support both employers and employees, ensuring businesses understand their rights and HR teams are prepared for immigration-related challenges.

“Some employers have taken independent action, such as hiring attorneys to provide legal guidance for their workers,” Harms-Romo said.

Beyond economic concerns, local schools are also grappling with the heightened presence of ICE.

Santa Barbara High School, located near Milpas—a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood—has seen a decline in student attendance. School secretary Barbara Bermudez explained that with about 60% of students identifying as Hispanic, concerns from parents have intensified in even dropping their kids off at school.

Gutierrez said educators cannot stop ICE from entering school property, but school staff do have legal safeguards in place.

“If an ICE officer asks about a student or faculty member, the school can withhold that information unless a local judge has signed a warrant,” Gutierrez said.

But these protections offer little comfort to undocumented students and their families, many of whom fear that even attending school could put them at risk of separation.

In response to such fear, City Council members and local police have faced pressure to clarify their stance and role in immigration enforcement. About a month ago, City Administrator Kelly McAdoo released a [statement on ICE](#), affirming support from both the local government and the Santa Barbara Police Department for the immigrant community.

Gutierrez, now in his seventh year on the City Council, said recent City Council meetings have heard concerns among residents about whether local police officers should be feared as much as ICE agents.

Some locals, Gutierrez said, argue in favor of deportation and complain that officers should be arresting immigrants without legal status. He highlights the city's frustration with such complaints, as the police department is not legally responsible for immigration status jurisdiction.

In a [recent interview](#) with *Santa Barbara Independent* columnist Jerry Roberts, Santa Barbara Sheriff Bill Brown said that under [California’s Values Act \(SB 54\)](#), the Sheriff’s Office is legally limited in its cooperation with ICE.

“During an arrest we ask them where they were born but we cannot ask, based on the parameters of SB 54, what their immigration status is,” said Brown. Police departments are only to be involved with ICE in cases involving serious crimes.

Additionally, he emphasized that local law enforcement wants undocumented residents to feel safe reporting crimes as community protection is their primary duty.

“We want people to call us if they’re a victim of a crime or if they witness a crime in progress,” said Brown. “If people are afraid that they or their families could be deported, that doesn’t bode well for public safety.”

Both Brown and Gutierrez stress that Trump’s recent orders to increase ICE arrests in public places, and enforcing mass deportation is outside of the role of Santa Barbara Police Department.

Beyond law enforcement issues, Gutierrez emphasizes the limited power of local officials to directly intervene in federal led ICE operations. “Trump ordered that any elected official who tries to intervene in ICE operations will also be prosecuted for obstruction of justice,” he said. “Some people have asked if I’ll step in, but if I did, I’d go to prison and that person would still get deported.”

Still, local leaders like Gutierrez are determined to spread information and resources, sharing nonprofit organizations and hotline contacts for immigrants and ICE encounters on government websites and social media. The city's primary role during this time is to educate and prepare.



Local Protestor providing local non-profit Rapid Response Hotline information on Jan. 31 in downtown Santa Barbara. Courtesy of: *Santa Barbara Independent*.

In addition to local government leaders, nonprofits and advocacy groups have mobilized to provide support, resources and emergency planning. Organizations in Santa Barbara and nearby counties such as the 805 UndocuFund and the 805 Immigrant Coalition have joined together in assisting immigrants who are afraid to leave their homes.

To combat misinformation and provide real-time support, the [805 Immigrant Coalition](#) has expanded its Rapid Response Hotline at (805) 870-8855, originally established in 2014.

“Our hotline, aside from getting tips on ICE sightings, has also been getting a lot of calls from families asking, ‘What do I do in this case?’” said Beatriz Basurto, a hotline responder for both organizations. “We want the hotline to become more than just a response line—it needs to be a lifeline, something these families can rely on for at least the next four years, if not longer.”

Local organizations have additionally collaborated to create [Know Your Rights](#) workshops to educate undocumented residents on how to handle encounters with ICE and exercise their constitutional rights effectively.

“We also send out an ICE sighting alert to families through a mass text system and social media,” she said. “We want to make sure they have verified, accurate information because there’s been a lot of misinformation circulating since the inauguration.”

Nonprofits aim to help families prepare for worst-case scenarios. Basurto explains the urgency in implementing emergency plans, such as notarizing letters to designate guardians for kids with undocumented parents, or ensuring U.S.-born children have valid passports.

“We’ve been seeing a lot of families just really fearful—afraid to do things like get groceries or go do their laundry at the laundromat,” said Basurto. Their emergency plan recommendations are aimed to reduce this fear.

In some cases, families are even choosing to self-deport to avoid the looming threat of ICE. Basurto is quick to emphasize this is mostly common for Latino immigrants, and those with darker skin at risk of being racially profiled.

Racial profiling is a key component of these policies. In contrast to the fear experienced by Oscar Gutierrez’s mother, Santa Barbara immigrant Garreth Kelly experienced the opposite as a white male from the United Kingdom.

Now a professional filmmaker, Kelly documents immigrant stories and is a vocal advocate for immigrant rights. He lived seven undocumented years in the US, which he describes as a time he was casually “hiding in plain sight.”

“I felt a massive sense of privilege as a white European male in the States because I never once worried about an ICE encounter during my everyday life,” said Kelly. “When people support

mass deportation, they are never talking about the nearly 3 million undocumented Irish immigrants in the U.S., it's always towards immigrants of color.”

Kelly is one of many now-documented immigrants standing in solidarity with the local undocumented community, advocating for their rights. As ICE raids continue to disrupt lives across Santa Barbara County, leaders and organizations play a crucial role, providing support and fueling the growing resistance to immigration enforcement.

“The fear doesn't just come from ICE raids,” said Kelly. “It stems even through terminology and media threats towards immigrants. Not a single human being is an alien nor illegal, and no one should be labeled or treated as such.”