



Immigration Enforcement and Absenteeism in a California School District

J. Jacob Kirksey, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, UC Santa Barbara

California hosts the greatest number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., and numerous efforts have been made to ensure that families and children without legal status feel safe engaging with public institutions to receive supplemental income, health insurance, and education. Recently, lawmakers adopted a “sanctuary state” law (SB 54) to reaffirm state support and limit state and local cooperation with federal immigration officials. Still, little is known about the extent to which immigrant-origin youth or students in immigrant-dense communities experience educational consequences during heightened immigration enforcement activity.

One particularly important way in which immigration enforcement might produce consequences for students in schools is via absenteeism. Several incidents across the U.S. have reportedly led to spikes in absenteeism following large-scale raids by the Office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This is particularly concerning given California is one of 36 states to adopt chronic absenteeism as one indicator of school quality under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). I consider this impact from a study examining how immigration arrests and deportations conducted by ICE correspond to student attendance in a California high school district that serves an immigrant-dense community.

Key Findings:

- Between 2013-2016, 27 unique incidents involving ICE arrests led to ~50,000 days of missed school among all high school students across four years. The increase in absences was concentrated in the two weeks following each incident.
- ICE arrests spiked chronic absenteeism by 27% among all high school students in the district.
- Effects were strongest for Latino/a students, students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch, students with disabilities, English learners, and migrant students.
- When considering funding implications from declines in attendance, ICE arrests over four years near this school district translated to a loss of \$1.45 million in attendance funding from the state.

Implications for Policy:

Schools are on the frontlines of confronting potential spillover effects from immigration enforcement policies on students’ right to receive an education. This study examined an issue pertinent on two policy fronts in the U.S. First, policymakers and educational stakeholders continue to raise concerns surrounding how to reduce absenteeism, perhaps best illustrated by the adoption of chronic absenteeism as an accountability indicator by 37 states and D.C. More than ever before, schools are being held accountable for the attendance of students, regardless of the reasons underlying lower attendance rates. In this vein, the second policy concern is the way in which immigration enforcement might be affecting attendance. This concern is especially relevant in immigrant-dense areas, where students and members of the community may be disproportionately harmed either directly or indirectly due to deportations or ICE arrests. Policymakers and educators should consider taking additional steps in and out of school to support students who may be impacted during times of heightened immigration enforcement to mitigate the impact of absenteeism on academic endeavors.

Figure 1: Absences in District in September-October 2015

