

Understanding ICE Raids at American Workplaces

Across several presidential administrations, the federal government has used American businesses to enforce immigration law through worksite enforcement. Worksite-specific immigration enforcement encompasses a wide variety of activities, including criminal investigations, business audits, and administrative arrests.¹ This includes high-profile operations primarily conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), where the agency targets one or more businesses to both investigate employers and to arrest employees as a means to deter unauthorized employment. While there is not a common term used for this tactic, it is often referred to as worksite or workplace immigration “enforcement action” or “raid.”²

This factsheet provides a brief history of worksite raids, discusses the agencies involved and the legal authorities relied upon by these agencies to conduct them, reviews legal challenges and issues related to worksite raids, and briefly summarizes the economic and humanitarian consequences of these raids.



History

While workplace immigration enforcement occurred before 1986,³ the contemporary history of worksite immigration raids began that year with the signing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which made it unlawful for employers to hire workers who have not been authorized for employment by the federal government.⁴ Employers are required to have their employees complete the Form I-9, Employment Eligibility Verification, to verify their employees' identity and ability to work lawfully in the United States if the employee was hired after November 6, 1986.⁵ The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), through ICE, periodically audits these forms to ensure employer compliance.⁶

In addition, IRCA imposed certain civil and criminal sanctions on employers who do not comply with the verification procedures, knowingly hire or continue to employ unauthorized workers,⁷ and who violate anti-discrimination provisions aimed at protecting noncitizen workers who are otherwise authorized to work by DHS.⁸ This framework assigns to employers an immigration enforcement role to “screen out” workers who are not authorized to work—and who are less likely to have an immigration status—from the formal economy.⁹ Ultimately, IRCA's employment verification system and employer sanctions were meant to reduce unauthorized immigration by “eliminat[ing] the availability of the jobs that serve as a magnet” for unauthorized labor.¹⁰

The frequency of worksite enforcement has varied across presidential administrations.¹¹ By the late 1990s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)—the former federal immigration agency—de-emphasized the use of worksite raids determining that they were ineffective in reducing the number of unauthorized noncitizens entering and remaining in the country.¹² However, in the mid-2000s, the George W. Bush administration increased enforcement of immigration laws inside the United States as part of a strategy to convince Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform.¹³ This included increasing civil and criminal sanctions against employers and conducting several high-profile worksite raids.



1986

Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) is signed into law

Late 1990s

Workplace raids de-emphasized by the INS



Mid-2000s

Bush administration increases enforcement of immigration laws

September 2006

ICE arrests 126 noncitizens at a poultry plant in Georgia

December 2006

ICE arrests 1,300 noncitizen workers across six meatpacking plants in midwestern states

2007

361 workers arrested at a Massachusetts textile plant

2008

389 workers arrested at one meatpacking plant in Iowa

In September 2006, ICE arrested 126 noncitizens in a poultry plant in Stillmore, Georgia¹⁴ and, in a coordinated operation across six meatpacking plants in several midwestern states, federal immigration officials arrested an estimated 1,300 noncitizen workers in December 2006.¹⁵ The following year, 361 workers were arrested at a New Bedford, Massachusetts textile plant.¹⁶ The largest single-business raid at that time occurred in 2008 at the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa.¹⁷ There, nearly 900 federal agents and multiple helicopters were used to arrest 389 workers.

Shortly after taking office, the Obama administration ended the practice of largescale workplace raids and, instead, focused on “silent raids” by using Form I-9 audits to primarily target and sanction employers for hiring unauthorized workers.¹⁸ While this resulted in hundreds of workers losing their employment for failing to be authorized to work, they were not immediately placed into a deportation process.¹⁹

During the first Trump administration, a new wave of largescale worksite immigration enforcement began leading to the arrest of over 1,800 workers between 2017 and 2019.²⁰ Five largescale raids during this period resulted in at least 100 arrests each.²¹ In August 2019, ICE conducted the largest workplace immigration enforcement action of the first Trump administration by arresting 680 workers at seven poultry plants throughout Mississippi.²²

In 2021, the Biden administration officially ended the practice of largescale worksite raids and returned to focusing on administrative and criminal penalties against employers to enforce IRCA’s prohibition against hiring unauthorized workers.²³ In January 2025, under the second Trump administration, worksite immigration raids targeting businesses alleged to employ unauthorized noncitizen workers restarted.²⁴

What do worksite raids look like now?

As part of President Trump’s efforts to increase the detention and deportation of unauthorized noncitizens, worksite raids have proliferated. In the first seven months of the second Trump administration, ICE has publicly reported at least 40 worksite enforcement actions resulting in over 1,100 arrests.²⁵ Local news and other media have identified dozens of additional worksite raids resulting in more arrests.²⁶ These enforcement actions typically resulted in fewer than 100 arrests per operation and have occurred across a range of industries, often targeting those with a high concentration of noncitizen workers, including restaurants, car washes, automotive repair shops, bakeries, and nail salons.



2009-2016

Obama administration ends the practice of largescale workplace raids and instead focuses on “silent raids” by focusing on Form I-9 audits



2017-2021

Trump administration begins a new wave of largescale worksite immigration enforcement

2017 - 2019

1,800 workers arrested

August 2019

ICE conducts the largest workplace immigration enforcement action of the first Trump administration, arresting 680 workers at seven poultry plants in Mississippi



2021-2024

Biden administration ends the practice of largescale worksite raids, returns to penalizing employers who hire unauthorized workers

ICE has also targeted larger businesses. Before September 2025, the two largest raids at a single worksite during the second Trump administration had been at a construction site near Tallahassee, Florida, which resulted in over 100 arrests,²⁷ and at a meatpacking plant in Omaha, Nebraska where at least 76 workers were arrested.²⁸ However, on September 4, 2025, ICE conducted a worksite raid at the construction site of a Hyundai battery plant in Ellabell, Georgia, arresting about 475 individuals in what DHS called the largest single-site worksite enforcement action in its history.²⁹ The majority of those detained were South Korean nationals (about 300) alongside workers from other countries.³⁰ ICE alleged that, in addition to workers without an immigration status, other workers were in violation of the terms of their visas or entered under visa waiver programs that prohibit employment.³¹ However, lawyers and advocates say many of those detained were lawfully authorized to work on the site.³²



2025-

Trump massively expands worksite raids, targeting industries with a high concentration of noncitizen workers

May 2025

ICE conducts a series of "targeted" worksite operations in Laredo, Texas across two construction sites and a local business detaining 31 people

June 2025

ICE works with federal law enforcement and the Louisiana State Police to arrest 84 workers at the Delta Downs Racetrack

July 2025

ICE executes multiple criminal search warrants on two southern California cannabis farms, resulting in 361 immigration arrests, the death of a farmworker, and the detention of multiple U.S. citizens

September 2025

ICE conducts the largest single-site worksite raid at a Hyundai battery plant in Georgia, arresting 475 individuals



ICE's worksite raids during the second Trump administration often target businesses with a high concentration of noncitizen workers such as restaurants, car washes, automotive repair shops, bakeries, and nail salons.

Pictured: ICE Philadelphia conducted a worksite enforcement operation at a Philadelphia car wash Jan. 28, 2025. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

ICE has also conducted raids that spread across different businesses and sites in a specific region as part of a single operation. For example, in May 2025, ICE conducted a series of "targeted" worksite enforcement operations in Laredo, Texas to ostensibly inspect employers' I-9 records across two construction sites and a local business on the same day.³³ ICE worked with federal, state, and local law enforcement to detain 31 people for immigration violations. In another larger operation conducted in July 2025, ICE executed multiple criminal search warrants on two southern California cannabis growing farms that resulted in 361 immigration arrests, the death of a farmworker, and the detention of multiple U.S. citizens.³⁴

Agencies Typically Involved in Worksite Enforcement

The primary agency that conducts worksite enforcement actions is ICE, which is tasked with interrogating and arresting noncitizens suspected of being unlawfully present in the United States.³⁵ A division within ICE, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), is responsible for investigating a range of criminal offenses, including human trafficking, worker exploitation, document fraud, and other abuses involving criminal conduct related to the hiring of unauthorized workers.³⁶ HSI also conducts worksite I-9 audits and frequently participates directly in worksite raids by arresting workers.³⁷



While ICE has relied on other federal agencies to assist with worksite enforcement actions, raids under the second Trump administration have included a broader range of agencies than in the past.³⁸ This includes other DHS subagencies such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) Fraud Detection and National Security Unit, and the U.S. Coast Guard.³⁹ ICE has also worked with other federal departments and agencies such as the Department of Justice's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), the U.S. Marshals Service, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Department of Treasury's Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and the Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service. Cooperation can include information sharing, joint investigations, and multi-agency law enforcement actions.

ICE also relies on collaboration from certain state and local law enforcement agencies to conduct worksite raids.⁴⁰ For example, ICE worked with the Florida Highway Patrol and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in a construction site raid near Tallahassee, Florida.⁴¹ Similarly, in June 2025, ICE worked with other federal law enforcement agencies and the Louisiana State Police to arrest 84 workers during a worksite enforcement operation at the Delta Downs Racetrack near Vinton, Louisiana.⁴²

What authorities does ICE rely on to conduct worksite raids?

ICE pursues employer compliance with federal employment eligibility requirements using several authorities, including I-9 audits, civil penalties, and criminal investigations and prosecutions. While the focus of compliance is on employers, ICE states that “[d]uring these operations, any [noncitizen] determined to be in violation of U.S. immigration laws may be subject to arrest, detention, and, if removal by final order, removal from the United States.”⁴³ As previously mentioned, the focus of worksite enforcement has shifted between employers and unauthorized workers throughout the past. The following section describes how ICE uses various enforcement tools to conduct largescale worksite raids:

Form I-9 Inspections. Worksite raids are usually the result of months-long investigations into an employer’s conduct and operations. HSI, which audits employers’ recordkeeping of Forms I-9, may use this process to obtain information about potential criminal violations by employers such as harboring, a pattern or practice of unlawfully hiring unauthorized workers, money laundering, and worker exploitation.⁴⁴ I-9 forms can also be used to obtain personal, and possibly incriminating, information about employees as the forms include a worker’s name, date of birth, social security number (if any), address, some information about their U.S. citizenship or immigration status, and the length of their employment authorization.⁴⁵ Employers may also attach copies of documents used to prove employment authorization to the I-9 form, which can serve as incriminating evidence of document fraud or identify theft.

While compliance issues identified during the audit process can expose employers to criminal or civil penalties, information obtained during the audit can also be used as the basis to identify noncitizen workers who are present in the United States in violation of civil immigration law. For instance, in May 2025, ICE executed a search warrant at Buona Forchetta, an Italian

restaurant in San Diego where it arrested 4 workers.⁴⁶ The warrant was obtained using information HSI received after conducting an I-9 audit, which alleged that nearly 50 percent of the restaurant’s 40 employees used a fraudulent green card to obtain employment.⁴⁷



Judicial Criminal Search Warrants. Using information from federal investigations, including I-9 audits, or tips from other sources, ICE can obtain criminal search warrants to enter a business’s worksite. Some criminal activity investigated in the past includes allegations of harboring, human trafficking, labor exploitation, and money laundering.⁴⁸ A judicial criminal warrant allows ICE to enter non-public areas of a worksite when an employer does not otherwise provide consent. However, ICE may only search the areas identified in the warrant and seize the specific items authorized in the warrant within the locations listed. Once it obtains access to a worksite, ICE can detain workers it finds in violation of federal laws, including civil and criminal laws. For instance, at the Hyundai battery plant raid in Georgia on September 4, 2025, ICE executed a criminal search warrant based solely on alleged employer violations including conspiracy to conceal, harbor, or shield noncitizens and unlawful employment of noncitizens. Despite identifying only four individuals as “targets”⁴⁹ in the warrant, ICE arrested 475 workers.

Administrative Inspection Warrants. ICE has also tried to use a specific type of civil administrative inspection warrant—referred to as a “Blackie’s warrant”—to obtain access to worksites to conduct raids.⁵⁰ These civil administrative warrants do not identify specific workers suspected of violating immigration law, but ICE argues that they provide it authority to enter and search worksite premises for potential immigration law violations.⁵¹ However their use is likely unconstitutional. For example, in May 2025, a federal district court rejected ICE’s request to use a “Blackie’s warrant” for purposes of conducting a worksite raid.⁵² The court, in southern Texas, ruled that such generalized warrants violate the Fourth Amendment and that administrative warrants cannot be used to search for people or to probe criminal behavior.⁵³

Community-Based Surveillance and Stops. ICE agents also arrest unauthorized workers by targeting those that work at places known for employing high concentrations of noncitizens—such as farms and day laborer sites—and by conducting enforcement actions while workers travel to or from those worksites.⁵⁴ This includes conducting traffic stops near worksites with the purpose of identifying unauthorized workers for arrest.⁵⁵ In June 2025, for example, ICE conducted worksite enforcement operations at hardware stores and other meeting spots for day laborers, the most widely reported account occurring at a Los Angeles Home Depot.⁵⁶ These raids have led to scenes of panic and confusion with immigration agents flooding sites from unmarked vans. The fear sparked from these raids has deterred day laborers from going out in public and seeking work, which amplified concerns from noncitizens about returning to any worksite.⁵⁷

[Worksite] raids have led to scenes of panic and confusion with immigration agents flooding sites from unmarked vans. The fear sparked from these raids has deterred day laborers from going out in public and seeking work.



ICE officers, with assistance from Homeland Security Investigations and U.S. Border Patrol perform enforcement operations in Delray Beach, Florida on Jan. 23, 2025. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Challenges and Potential Legal Violations

ICE has faced legal challenges for its agents' conduct when executing workplace raids. For example, in 2007, several lawsuits were filed against ICE for its agents' actions during the raids of six Swift & Company meat processing plants across six states the previous year.⁵⁸ The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the union representing the meatpacking workers, filed a class action against ICE alleging the agency violated its members' Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights.⁵⁹ The case was ultimately dismissed because the judge found the class was too vague and that the union did not meet the requirements for standing.⁶⁰ Another lawsuit, filed by workers who were detained, accused ICE of racial profiling and sexual harassment.⁶¹ The case was dismissed in 2009 after a judge found that the actions were justified by ICE's criminal search warrant.⁶²

In 2019, a group of workers challenged ICE's conduct during a worksite raid at Southeastern Provision, a slaughterhouse and meatpacking plant in Bean Station, Tennessee during Trump's first term.⁶³ A criminal search warrant resulting from an IRS investigation into financial misconduct by the slaughterhouse's owner granted federal agents, including ICE, access to the worksite. While there, federal agents, with assistance from the Tennessee Highway Patrol, arrested nearly 100 workers.

During the raid, the lawsuit alleged, officers segregated and detained only those workers they perceived as Latino relying on racial profiling to conduct the operation.⁶⁴ The plaintiffs also alleged that ICE ordered Latino workers to stop work and restricted them from moving freely or speaking.⁶⁵ Unlike the Latino workers, white workers were never restricted or interrogated. According to the lawsuit, federal agents also used racial slurs and pointed their guns at the accused workers while interrogating them about their immigration status.⁶⁶ In addition, one HSI agent punched a worker in the face, and surveillance video from the plant revealed that same agent putting his foot on the neck of a restrained worker.⁶⁷ A 2023 class action settlement in this case resolved claims of unlawful arrest and excessive force in favor of the workers.⁶⁸



These cases highlight that the federal government and its agents may be exposed to liability for civil rights and constitutional claims arising from ICE's conduct during worksite raids, including:

Racial discrimination: Several lawsuits allege that federal agents use race as a basis to question workers during workplace raids. For example, in the Tennessee case, workers at the Southeastern Provision plant reported that ICE agents targeted Latino employees—subjecting them to racial slurs, physical force, and prolonged detention—while white workers were allowed to remain free. Years earlier in Postville, Iowa, reports indicate that ICE used race or ethnicity to identify unauthorized workers during the raid at the Agriprocessors plant and that agents handcuffed all employees presumed to be Latino until their immigration status could be verified.⁶⁹

In Postville, Iowa, reports indicate that ICE agents handcuffed all employees presumed to be Latino until their immigration status could be verified.

Sections

Los Angeles Times

CALIFORNIA

A U.S. veteran spoke out against his wrongful arrest by ICE. Now he's being accused of assault



George Retes Jr. is seen in 2020 in Baghdad. The U.S. veteran wrote about what he says was his unlawful arrest during the Glass House ICE raid in July. He says the Department of Homeland Security is now spreading falsehoods against him for speaking out. (Courtesy of George Retes Jr.)

By Melissa Gomez
Staff Writer | Follow

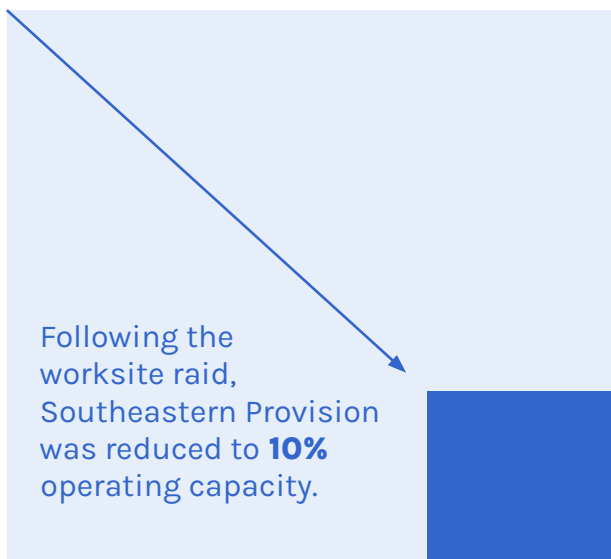
Unlawful detention: ICE worksite raids increase the risk of arbitrary detentions, including of U.S. citizens or noncitizens with lawful status, which infringe on Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable seizure. During the 2006 Swift & Company meatpacking plant raids, ICE agents detained numerous U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents.⁷⁰ More recently, in July 2025, during a raid at a cannabis farm in Camarillo, California, George Retes—a disabled U.S. citizen and veteran—was pepper-sprayed, tear-gassed, forcibly dragged from his vehicle, and held without explanation, legal counsel, or basic necessities for three days before being released without charges.⁷¹

Excessive force: Claims also include the use of excessive force during worksite enforcement operations. Plaintiffs in the Southeastern Provision plant raid in Tennessee claimed that ICE agents physically assaulted them and pointed firearms at Latino workers without provocation.⁷²

Consequences of Worksite Raids

Worksite raids can result in harmful economic and humanitarian consequences for immigrant and American communities, including:

Economic disruption. Raids disrupt labor forces and local economies, particularly in small towns and places with declining populations.⁷³ For example, coordinated worksite raids across several businesses in Nebraska in 2018 led to an acute workforce shortage forcing at least one business to rely on volunteer labor to keep it afloat in the immediate aftermath.⁷⁴



Targeted businesses also face reduced operational capacity following the worksite raid at Southeastern Provision in Bean Station, Tennessee—the third largest business in the county—the meatpacking plant was reduced to 10 percent operating capacity.⁷⁵ This resulted from immediately losing workers who were arrested during the operation and the fear other workers faced of being targeted by ICE in the future if they returned to the worksite.⁷⁶

The effects of worksite enforcement actions reverberate beyond targeted businesses too. For example, the worksite raid at the Agriprocessors plant in Postville, Iowa meatpacking plant in 2008 has been frequently used as a case study of the larger impacts of individual worksite raids.⁷⁷ Reliant on noncitizen labor, the local economy in that town faced a decrease in its overall workforce as many immigrants subsequently stopped going to work, even closing their own businesses.⁷⁸ Patronage at local businesses dropped and schools nearly closed due to the immigrant community member's fear of being out in public. Some residents left permanently, and property values dropped significantly.⁷⁹

Community distress. Worksite raids also have a deep negative emotional and psychological impact on individuals, children, and the wider community. In one study, researchers conducted interviews with more than 70 individuals across six different communities impacted by the largest worksite raids in 2018.⁸⁰ The study found that immigrant families experienced the same harms documented in other forms of targeted immigration enforcement—such as family separation, financial hardship, and the reshuffling of family roles—but concentrated on a much larger scale in a single place and at a single time.⁸¹ Unlike individual arrests or smaller enforcement actions, worksite raids sweep up dozens or even hundreds of workers at once, creating immediate community-wide crises. Another study of the 2008 Postville, Iowa worksite raid found that members of the immigrant community exhibited a pronounced increase in both mental and physical health symptoms.⁸² Some children suffered trauma after discovering their parents had been detained while they were at school.⁸³ A separate study found that the newborns of parents affected by the Postville raid demonstrated lower birthweights.⁸⁴

ENDNOTES

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