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Federal immigration raids net many without criminal records, sowing fear

By [Arelis R. Hernández](#), [Wesley Lowery](#) and [Abigail Hauslohner](#) February 16

Oscar Ramirez and Thermon Brewster walked out of the Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church just before 7 a.m. — when those who sleep at its homeless shelter must leave for the day.

Outside the church in the Alexandria section of Fairfax County, Va., U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents were waiting.

As the two men and others crossed the street toward a shopping center on Feb. 8, about a dozen ICE agents ordered them up against the wall of a grocery store, questioning them about their immigration status. According to Ramirez and Brewster, the ICE agents then indiscriminately arrested seven of the homeless men — all of them Hispanic — and packed them into a van full of other detainees.

ICE tells it differently: An ICE official said officers approached the group, questioned them about a “potential target” and arrested two men, including a legal permanent resident of the United States. Both had been identified in the shopping center parking lot as “criminal aliens amenable to removable” — meaning deportation.

The U.S. government said the series of ICE raids last week netted at least 683 “criminal aliens,” the first major immigration enforcement wave under President Trump. But a growing chorus of activists, lawyers and lawmakers have pointed to a sharp discrepancy between what ICE says it is doing and what immigrant families are seeing and reporting in cities across the nation.

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In Chicago, a student called her high school teacher to tell him that ICE had raided her home the night before, arresting her father, an undocumented immigrant whose criminal record included only traffic violations, the teacher said. In Centreville, Va., a woman told officials at London Towne Elementary School that a student's father had been arrested after dropping their son off at school that morning. And in the Baltimore parking lot of a Walgreens, ICE agents arrested a barber and a local business owner who advocates said also had no criminal records.

The reports of seemingly random arrests, of ICE agents appearing during the day outside schools, shelters and apartment blocks, have sent a palpable wave of fear through the nation's immigrant communities.

"I have never seen the immigrant community, both the lawfully and unlawfully present, with a greater amount of fear than I have in recent weeks," said Faye Kolly, an attorney in Austin.

On Thursday, the agency's top officials traveled to Capitol Hill to meet with members of Congress, some of whom had requested a briefing on the immigration enforcement actions. According to lawmakers present, ICE officials acknowledged that at least 186 of those apprehended in recent days had no criminal history.

"It was hard to not leave that meeting and believe that the Trump administration is going to target as many immigrants as possible," said Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-Tex.), who attended the meeting. "The only hesitation they seem to have was whether they would go after DACA recipients," Castro said, referring to the thousands of young people who came to the United States as minors and were granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals under the Obama administration so they could pursue education and work opportunities.

ICE has arrested at least one DACA recipient during the raids. ICE says the man, Daniel Ramirez Medina, is a gang member.

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Virginia State Sen. Scott A. Surovell (D-Fairfax) accused ICE of engaging in “Gestapo-style” tactics that amount to racial profiling. Some immigrants have been locking themselves in their homes, wary of opening their doors for any visitors; others have kept their children out of school or stopped showing up at work. Supporters protested Thursday, some skipping work, to show the impact of what the nation would be like without immigrants.

ICE has repeatedly emphasized that agents are targeting dangerous criminals who are living in the United States illegally, as the agency did under President Barack Obama. But the agency has declined to identify any of the people who were arrested and has provided fewer than 20 examples of those swept up in the raids who had been charged with or previously convicted of violent or sexual crimes. ICE officials also declined to say how many people the agency arrested in Virginia and Maryland during operations last week and why ICE failed to mention those operations in its earlier acknowledgment of the operations nationwide.

“They’re doing street sweeps,” Surovell said. “Accosting groups of random people in public.”

ICE has denied that its officers have engaged in any “sweeps” or checkpoints, widespread allegations that have frightened immigrant communities from Raleigh, N.C., to Los Angeles. “Reports of ICE checkpoints and sweeps or ‘roundups’ are false, dangerous and irresponsible,” ICE tweeted.

In Austin, where immigration officials detained more than 50 people, news of “raids” quickly spread through immigrant neighborhoods after a bystander captured cellphone video of one of the first detentions and shared it on social media.

Carlos González Gutiérrez, Austin’s consul general of Mexico, visits ICE detention centers each day to provide legal support and interview Mexican nationals held in detention. On a typical day, he said, he talks to between one and three immigrants who have been

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detained. When he arrived last Thursday, he found 14 Mexican nationals in custody. On Friday, there were 30.

“There are cases of mistaken identity, cases of people who were passengers in cars that were pulled over, cases of people who are married to U.S. citizens and who have children who are born and live in this country,” said Gutiérrez, who has spoken with many of those detained in Austin. “It is pretty devastating what happens to the families that were caught in these nets. The destruction that comes after one of these operations is astounding.”

A government social worker for Durham County, N.C., said that the number of Hispanic residents seeking assistance had dropped off rapidly in recent days amid swirling rumors about an ICE checkpoint at a Durham intersection and ICE agents making arrests in a supermarket parking lot.

“Today, I haven’t gotten one Hispanic client in the entire check-in today,” said the social worker, a longtime government employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. “That never happens ... They think that when they come here for assistance, that they’re going to be on some sort of invisible list.”

Rumors of raids and checkpoints — which ICE officials have denied — have residents of Virginia’s immigrant-rich Culmore neighborhood on edge. The cluster of apartment buildings off Route 7 in Northern Virginia house hundreds of immigrants, many of whom do not have legal status.

Rumors have gripped the imagination of neighbors here, forcing families indoors and being vigilant of any law enforcement patrolling their streets. Doors typically open to neighbors and passersby drawn by the smell of pupusas or rice are now closed and locked. Knocks at the front door trigger terror, and occupants are asking visitors to identify themselves first before opening the door.

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One resident, Ulises Martinez, said neighbors are furiously exchanging text messages about officers with dogs stopping people on street corners, but none of those reports has been confirmed. When his neighbor, a teenager, came by and knocked, Martinez asked who it was. The cheeky teen responded saying “Me” in Spanish and half-joking.

But Martinez was serious.

“Who is ‘me?’,” he said, peering hard through the dirty peephole.

Mark Guarino in Chicago, Janell Ross in Los Angeles, and Mike DeBonis, Ed O’Keefe and Sandhya Somashekhar in Washington contributed to this report.