

The aftermath of enforcement episodes for the children of immigrants

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Abstract

For 30 years, U.S. immigration policy has increasingly focused on enforcement. This article goes beyond cataloging the harms of such policies to document the processes by which they become more or less salient in the lives of children of immigrants over time. In-depth interviews with 86 young adults raised in New York show that enforcement policies shape children's lives either through lived experiences of *enforcement episodes* or through *diffuse fears* arising from indirect threats. Qualitative analysis of narratives of (a) deportations post-incarceration, (b) removals, (c) arrests and detentions (d) direct threats, and (e) diffuse fears identifies characteristics related to each that may affect children even after they age into adulthood.

“Because we were undocumented,” explained Leilani sitting across from Joanna at a midtown coffee shop. It was a Tuesday early evening in mid-May. Together for the past 2 h talking, Joanna had long finished her cappuccino, but Leilani's iced coffee sat in front of her barely touched.

This statement surprises because Leilani, at 22, seemed a quintessential New Yorker, born and raised in Brooklyn, a graduate of a Manhattan performing arts high school and a SUNY 4-year school upstate with a 3.0 GPA. As the child of Mexican immigrants, she is just one of a growing demographic. As of 2018, 26% of children under age 18 in the United States lived in an immigrant household, up from 13% in 1990 (Batalova et al., 2020). Children of immigrants like Leilani have been raised during a period marked by a major shift in U.S. immigration policy to increasingly emphasize enforcement; removals doubled between 2001 and 2009 and peaked at a high of 432,281 in 2013 (Gramlich, 2020). The U.S. government's focus on penalizing immigration violations rather than promoting integration has a series of harmful impacts, prompting some young citizens like Leilani to feel uniquely shaped by their parents' immigration status (Castañeda, 2019; Enriquez, 2015).

“It is funny you said we were undocumented; do you do that all the time?” asked Joanna.

“Yeah 'cause when they can't do something, it does affect all of us. Yeah, friendly reminder that we aren't all ok. Half of the team truly is dying being undocumented.”

Interestingly, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had never arrested, detained, or deported a member of Leilani's family. Yet Leilani felt that the threat of a possible deportation shaped her so significantly that as a young adult she described herself as undocumented. This is because the police had been to her apartment three times, the first time when she was 6, in response to calls related to domestic violence.

I think when she [mother] was pregnant, that's [the time] where the officer mentioned to us, 'are you documented' and then like everybody got real quiet ... And I told him, we are not going to answer. We plead the fifth ... I think he asked sincerely. When I told him, 'we plead the fifth,' ... they got quiet. And I said we plead the fifth as a family. He said, 'I don't actually wanna know, you are right, don't tell me, but I want you to know, like, ICE is out there and if you give them the opportunity, they are gonna come and get you.'

Although in the re-telling Leilani suggested that the police officer tried to be friendly, the fact that he brought ICE into the conversation with her—a minor at the time interacting with the police on behalf of her family—felt like a direct threat. Growing up Leilani thought about ICE frequently; as an adult, she spoke at length about how deeply U.S. immigration policies had impacted her despite her birthright citizenship.

U.S. immigration enforcement activities, such as deportations and raids, affect a variety of populations. This includes children like Leilani (Dreby et al., 2022; Rabin & Menjívar, 2019; Zayas, 2015), deportees who are primarily Latino men (Brotherton & Barrios, 2011; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013), their partners and spouses who are primarily women (Dreby, 2015; Lopez et al., 2018), and communities navigating the increase in criminalization (Hagan et al., 2010; Lopez, 2019). Fears related to legal status, what De Genova (2002) terms “deportability,” can be devastating for those living with an insecure status, and for legal migrants and citizens in mixed-status families (Abrego, 2011; Aranda et al., 2014; Castañeda, 2019; Gonzales et al., 2019; Menjívar, 2006). Yet, with some notable exceptions, the monolith of enforcement needs to be more fully unpacked. What about these experiences have the most sustaining impacts? For Leilani, no family separation occurred and yet her fears heightened with time. In this study, others described arrests and, in some cases, deportations as not having impacts. We need to better understand what accounts for such variations.

In this article, we dissect what Aranda et al. (2014) describe as the “widespread spillover effects” of the U.S. immigration enforcement regime by considering from children’s perspectives what specifically about experiences with enforcement during childhood affect them as they age into adulthood. To do so we analyze narratives from 86 young adult children of immigrants interviewed about the salience of immigration policies in their lives. None faced risks related to their own legal status, and all were raised in New York State or the metropolitan New York City region. Thirty-three spoke of ways enforcement targeted a parent as minors, while 53 did not, but knew of members of their extended families and communities who were.

Young adults’ varying accounts of enforcement targeting different members of their social orbits suggest that four types of what we term *enforcement episodes* have unique characteristics: (a) deportations post-incarceration, (b) removals, (c) arrests and detentions and (d) direct threats. These differ from (e) diffuse fears of enforcement not connected to episodes. We define episodes as a contact moment with law enforcement entities, whether ICE, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) or another agency that may work in tandem with ICE. By conceptualizing episodes, we do not intend to suggest they are insignificant or episodic; to the contrary, we show that enforcement policies at the structural level become salient due to specific characteristics of children’s lived experiences of these policies, which helps to explain disparate experiences over time. Experiences within families related to the nature of parent–child relationships, uncertainty caused by episodes, involvement in episodes and the timing of episodes can intensify their aftermath, whereas events outside of families activate diffuse fears. Additionally, episodes that build on each other have the most enduring consequences, whereas some strategies for support work to protect children. Our bottom-up approach to enforcement research helps better conceptualize the *breadth* of enforcement practices with spillover effects and the *depth* with which they unfold over the life course.

THE MODERN ERA OF IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

Historically, U.S. immigration enforcement efforts focused on what Gonzales and others (2019: 79) describe as both “heavy enforcement measures” and “soft enforcement measures” to prevent the long-term settlement of immigrants who met labor demands in the United States (Molina, 2014; Ngai, 2005). “Soft measures” force communities to self-police, often employing fear tactics that create hostile environments for immigrant members (Goodman, 2020; Johnson, 2011). Fear is not the only soft measure tactic, however. Local ordinances that make it illegal for undocumented immigrants to rent apartments, for example, make it challenging to settle in a given community (Coutin, 2000; Longazel, 2016).

Over the past 30 years, enforcement efforts have taken a more directly punitive turn, employing heavy enforcement measures that police and criminalize immigrants’ daily lives (Gonzales et al., 2019). For example, changes resulting from the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), and the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) made documented migrants vulnerable to removal. These two immigration legislations targeted for deportation proceedings those who had lived in the country for many years without status. And IIRAIRA implemented long-term and permanent bars to readmission as “penalties” for time spent in the country without a legal status (Newton, 2008).

Since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002, heavy enforcement efforts have also drastically extended regulatory activities beyond border enforcement and unauthorized entry, to the removal of immigrants in the country’s interior (Lopez, 2019; Rosas, 2016; Wadhia, 2019). The last few administrations prioritized the removal of non-citizens who committed crimes, had been charged with crimes, or had removal orders (Brotherton & Barrios, 2011; Caldwell, 2019; Golash-Boza, 2015; Macías-Rojas, 2016; Wadhia, 2019). These efforts resulted in militarized-style small- and large-scale raids with widespread family and community-level impacts (Golash-Boza, 2019; Lopez, 2019; Sampaio, 2015). Like mass incarceration, enforcement policies devastate an unprecedented and growing number of immigrants and their family members, some who are not the objects of enforcement activities themselves due to their birthright citizenship (Ceciliano-Navarro & Golash-Boza, 2021; Golash-Boza, 2019). Notably, the criminalization of Latinos as disproportional targets of enforcement—what scholars refer to as “cimmigration”—codifies a legal system that racializes immigrants and the undocumented (García, 2019; Menjívar, 2021; Stumpf, 2006).

The impacts of enforcement on children

Estimates of the number of children of immigrants, 90% of whom are U.S. citizens, who have been affected by the turn to hard tactics are difficult to determine. One report suggests that more than 500,000 U.S. citizen children experienced the apprehension, detention, and deportation of at least one parent between 2011 and 2013 (Capps et al., 2015). Substantively, research identifies three ways enforcement actions change children’s lives: separations related to deportation, instability resulting from raids, and the climate of fear associated with possible enforcement.

Deportations increase the probability that children will live without a parent in the immediate household (Amuedo-Dorantes & Arenas-Arroyo, 2019; Heidbrink, 2019). This can expose children to poverty, as families face major economic challenges in the fallout of a deportation, especially when living with what scholars describe as “suddenly single mothers” (Dreby, 2015, p. 31; see also Caldwell, 2019; Lopez, 2019). Older children in families may become what Golash-Boza (2019, p. 11) describes as “abruptly adults” after a removal, particularly because their deported parents face significant barriers to finding employment, furthering children’s likelihood of experiencing poverty post-deportation (Brotherton & Barrios, 2011; Caldwell, 2019; Golash-Boza, 2015). Additionally, separation from parents impacts children’s mental health. Children of immigrants targeted by

enforcement may develop symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma (Allen et al., 2015; Brabeck & Qingwen, 2010; Gulbas et al., 2016). Children of deportees exhibit internalizing and externalizing behavior at a higher rate than those living with their immigrant parents, even those with undocumented parents at risk of deportation (Rojas-Flores et al., 2017; Zayas et al., 2015).

Large and small-scale raids, which may or may not result in a final order of deportation or long-term separations, also affect child wellbeing. Following workplace raids, schools may intervene to avoid children being left alone, without caregivers; families struggle economically to recover (Capps et al., 2007). Children and their family members exhibit emotional difficulties that do not dissipate quickly, in some cases evident more than a year after the event (Chaudry et al., 2010). Children absorb community-level stress, experiencing hypervigilance, regressive behaviors, and school absenteeism (Lopez, 2019).

More broadly speaking, a culture of fear related to the possibility of an immigration raid or other type of enforcement action has amplified in immigrant communities over the past decade (Asad, 2020; Hing, 2018). Although grounded in immigrants' relative sense of disposability, fears may extend beyond the individual directly at risk and manifest as an aspect of everyday life for those living in mixed-status families, shaping parent-child relationships and parenting practices (Dreby, 2015; Enriquez, 2015). Many parents experience anxiety while driving, or in interactions with police officers, due to the racialized nature of immigration enforcement (Prieto, 2018; Schmalzbauer, 2014; Sun & Yuning, 2018). Parents fear children may be left alone in the country, or worse, that they will go into foster care (Hing, 2018); such fears can be transmitted intergenerationally (Berger Cardoso et al., 2018; Lopez et al., 2018). Fears also affect children with insecure legal statuses, like recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), who straddle inclusion and exclusion even when having spent most of their lives in the United States and when having family members who are U.S. citizens (Abrego, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Menjivar & Abrego, 2012).

Children of immigrants may express enforcement fears even if they themselves—or their family members—are not directly at-risk because they are citizens or legal migrants (Dreby, 2015). Children may face “de facto undocumented status” as policies intended to target their parents extend to their lives (Enriquez, 2015, p. 4). Those in mixed-status families experience legal uncertainty as a point for solidarity and togetherness, but also as a possible source of tension (Abrego, 2016; Castañeda, 2019). Additionally, children's fears of separations spill over into daily activities, particularly in schools (Lopez, 2019). They may have poor educational achievement, attendance rates, and graduation rates due to the stress of parents' legal vulnerability (Ee & Gándara, 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2017). Children may feel overwhelmed in school due to this underlying stress (Gulbas et al., 2016).

Current literature that catalogs the stressors related to family separations, raids and enforcement fears typically posit harms as unfolding and compounding over time. That is, heavy enforcement measures are assumed to have rippling effects on child well-being and on families and communities. But which children are most affected by a raid in their community and why? Similarly, a deportation strains households (Brotherton & Barrios, 2011); yet we know less about nuances in the ways tensions unfold from a distance (for an exception see Andrews & Khayar-Cámara, 2020). How might members of families actively surmount stressors related to enforcement? Scholarship shows legal uncertainty and separations to be consequential. In this article we explore—from children's perspectives—what about enforcement, and the complexities it entails, cause enduring hardships and how children may manage these stressors differently.

Notably, new research shows such contextual variability geographically, in the extent to which immigration status may influence how individuals navigate their daily lives across different communities. Some law enforcement agencies have signed 287 g agreements to deputize officers as immigration agents; other local governments have declared themselves as “sanctuary cities” to limit cooperation with federal immigration officials. That is, locality matters in determining how people manage legal status, the choices they make about where to live and where to attend school, and their interactions with law enforcement (Castañeda, 2019; Conley, 2019; García, 2019). For instance, in

some communities, immigrants who drive without licenses create routes and networks to avoid police stops that could involve ICE, while in other locations this is not possible (Prieto, 2018; Schmalzbauer, 2014). Immigrants also may use identity expression differently across space, a strategy of “legal passing” (García, 2019).

In this paper, we use retrospective interview accounts with children raised during the era of enforcement to understand the temporal variability in how enforcement experiences during childhood may—or may not—come to shape the lives of the children of immigrants into adulthood. Similar to research on geographic variability related to enforcement, we show that certain characteristics of childhood experiences with enforcement, particularly episodes that involve parents and that build on each other over time, likely have longstanding consequences. We also identify which family-level processes, and events outside of families, amplify or ameliorate impacts on children.

INVESTIGATING THE SPILLOVER EFFECTS ON THE SECOND GENERATION

This paper draws from interviews collected with 86 young adults with foreign-born parents regarding the saliency of immigration policies in their lives. The overall study couples in-depth interviews with a short questionnaire from a purposive sample of three groups: (a) those whose parents were directly targeted by enforcement while under the age of 18, (b) those whose parents were not targeted, but whose extended family members were, and (c) those without family level experiences with enforcement as children. The majority of participants ($N = 73$) were born in the United States; 10 had immigrated as legal permanent residents (LPR) while they were children and had since naturalized, while 3 had LPR status and were in the process of naturalizing. This allowed us to focus on effects not associated with individual risk. All grew up in urban, suburban and rural communities across New York State and the metropolitan region of NYC. Fifty-four grew up in the metro NY area and 32 in a variety of upstate and western NY communities, and we collected information on factors such as the prevalence of foreign-born populations, availability of social service support, contours of the educational system, and practices of local law enforcement. Due to space, we do not focus on those factors here, but rather explore characteristics that appear to transcend specific geographic contexts.

The research involved a multi-disciplinary team of scholars, graduate and undergraduate students from Sociology, Social Welfare and Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino/a Studies. Joanna collected all interviews, but the team worked jointly on recruitment and tasks related to preliminary analysis. Eric focused specifically on sampling, directing undergraduate work, and analysis for this paper. All had IRB approval to work on the project. Undergraduates contributed primarily to pointed conversations on themes identified by Joanna and Eric and helped in pivoting recruitment strategies given the COVID pandemic. Team participation ensured we included multiple perspectives in analysis; most of the research team have been members of migrant households but vary in age, race, gender and migratory experiences.

By design, we primarily recruited young adults with parents who emigrated from Latin America or the Caribbean ($N = 72$) but include a subsample of participants whose parents came from countries outside the Western Hemisphere ($N = 14$). Fifteen had parents from more than one country or region. In total, 27 had a parent who emigrated from Mexico (North America), 11 from Central America (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala), 20 from Spanish-speaking South America (Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Paraguay, Venezuela), 17 from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (Cuba, Dominican Republic), 8 from the non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean (Guyana, Jamaica, Haiti), 10 from Asia (Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines), and 6 from Europe (Albania, Cyprus, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Scotland). This diversity is important to capture in New York state: while nationally all the top 10 countries for removals are in the Americas, removals in New York have targeted more diverse foreign-born populations (TRAC Immigration Data tool, 2020).

Participants' racial identity also varied—with 10 self-identifying as white or white-passing, 14 identifying as Afro-Latinx, Black or Black-passing, 9 identifying as Asian, and 53 identifying as other. Of these, many struggled to label themselves and talked about complex racial identities that varied over time or place. Additionally, many shared that their own identities contrasted sharply to those of their parents. Although race and ethnicity likely structures exposure to different types of enforcement actions (see Aranda & Vaquera, 2015; Menjívar, 2021), our non-generalizable sample coupled with participants' nuanced understandings of their identities limits our ability to identify patterns in exposure to episodes by race or country of origin. However, given that current literature primarily draws on experiences of children of Spanish-speaking migrants, our data suggests that enforcement likely affects many more people than might be expected.

Likewise, legal status certainly shapes risk of enforcement. Although participants themselves were all citizens or had permanent legal status, we included those whose family members have held a range of legal statuses including those who are undocumented, have temporary statuses, are permanent residents and have naturalized. Most, however, reported parental status changes throughout their childhoods, what Pila (2021) terms “legal fluidity.” While legal status matters, conflating legal status with enforcement would be a mistake. Participants shared fears of being targeted for enforcement despite parents' legalized statuses and others had parents who lost status due to an enforcement episode. Indeed, research shows increased fears among Latinos over the past decade regardless of citizenship status (Asad, 2020).

In terms of data collection, Joanna began efforts using connections developed through fieldwork to connect with possible participants. Early on, we learned that typically young adults did not share stories about enforcement with friends or family. Many did not identify as feeling affected by immigration policies; some described incidents occurring before they remembered them and others had memory gaps surrounding incidents. In addition, usual methods to reach immigrant families—through service providers or immigrant-serving organizations—did not work well because young adults did not necessarily feel connected to their parents' networks. Instead, three strategies worked best: contacts with youth groups that young adults had previously participated in but aged out of, connections developed by involving students from immigrant households in the research, and informal research presentations, generally in classroom settings, during which some of those who felt connected to the topic later offered to share their experiences in an interview.

After gearing up for concerted fieldwork in 2020, everything seemingly stopped when COVID infections spiked, and travel restrictions mounted. Outreach appointments at various organizations all canceled. Joanna moved previously scheduled interviews online, which worked surprisingly well. Some commented they felt more comfortable virtually than they would have in a face-to-face setting. The electronic medium made recruitment difficult but did not disrupt the narrative style of interviews. As of March 2020, data collection moved online and of the 86 participants, Joanna met with only 20 in person. One challenge was that women responded better to the virtual format: 18 men participated in the project as compared to 68 women. Regardless of the format, Joanna had multiple contacts with 21 participants and had the option to check back about aspects of their stories for analytical clarity.

As for the interview process, all participants received a consent form and possible interview topics in advance via email, with the intent of giving them time to consider what they wanted to share due to the possibility of trauma related to enforcement. It is likely that those with significant mental health issues related to episodes chose not to participate, although a quarter of the participants disclosed they had sought therapy previously due in part to enforcement episodes. At the start of each interview, Joanna asked participants to begin where they wanted and conversations followed an unstructured format, allowing for analytical attention to both the content and style of narratives. Nonetheless, Joanna covered similar topics with all including school experiences at all levels; relationships with family members, peers, and intimate partners; transnational networks and experiences; work and career pathways; racial identity; COVID (when applicable); political participation and overall well-being.

Our iterative analytical approach, drawn from grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2001), began with an open-coding process. Subjective accounts related to well-being included codes for reports of memory loss, internalizing or externalizing behaviors as children, drug or alcohol use, therapeutic or medical interventions, other adverse childhood experiences (including violence and abuse), or specific relationship tensions. While many of those reporting poor well-being as adults had parents targeted for enforcement, 11 of the 33 whose parents were targeted did not feel these experiences had negative impacts on their lives. In considering what might account for these variations, we identified characteristics related to the episodes themselves, themes we discuss in detail below. Focused coding identified patterns in family-level processes related to these characteristics. We also examined the sub-set of narratives of participants who defined themselves as unaffected and considered how their stories varied, coding for family strategies and other forms of social support. In a final step, we revisited interviews with those who did not report any enforcement episodes, identifying narratives of fears and coding for what activated such fears.

ENFORCEMENT EPISODES

We now turn to a description of participants' lived experiences with four types of enforcement episodes as they unfold in their family contexts and the ways factors outside of families influence a fifth type of experience of diffuse fears, expressed as indirect threats arising from a climate of fear in the family or community. Some reported multiple and overlapping episodes, while others reported none. In total, we counted reports of 12 episodes of deportation post-incarceration, 12 removal episodes (not following incarceration), 23 episodes of arrests or detentions, 20 episodes of direct threats, and 21 accounts of diffuse fears. Reports of each occurred across community types (both in metro NYC and upstate) and from those with parents from Latin America, the Caribbean, and other countries, suggesting breadth in the populations affected by enforcement in New York. To protect confidentiality, we do not map out episode frequency by family or community characteristics, but instead share all stories—using pseudonyms and changing minor details when necessary—including as many of these details as possible. We draw on lengthy quotes in places to preserve participants' often eloquent expressions of, and reflections on, their experiences. We also include accounts from those who did not feel impacted by episodes, as they bring into relief patterns shared among those most affected by them.

Deportations post-incarceration

Deportations following a conviction that involved jail-time targets foreign-born individuals regardless of status, unless they naturalize, and destabilizes families who often previously felt integrated into U.S. communities. Additionally, they are gendered, disproportionately targeting men, resulting in single-parent, female-headed households (Dreby, 2015; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). Finally, these deportations result in permanent household changes because current laws bar deportees from re-entry even after having served time for their crimes. Participants experiencing these types of enforcement episodes described lengthy separations from parents that permanently altered the composition of their family network within and beyond the immediate household. Our analysis suggests that the nature of children's relationships with fathers, and the ways their relationships with mothers unfolded after the episode, most often accounts for variations in the extent to which these episodes significantly altered their lives.

Those who did not feel a deportation following incarceration had affected their well-being described estranged relationships with fathers and strong relationships with mothers. For example, Olivia began by explaining, "I know immigration is a big issue, but personally, I didn't ask questions about it. So I just know what I hear on the TV, or social media, stuff like that." She decided to participate in this study at the urging of a roommate, "she asked if I could help, and I was like 'I can try. I

don't know how much I can do.” Olivia revealed that she harbored much ambivalence about her Ecuadorian father's deportation. Her parents divorced when she was younger; she now thinks that her mother separated from him to protect her from her father's involvement in illicit activities. Olivia remembered visiting her father on weekends, eating out together and renting movies with him, but those visits stopped when she was in fifth grade, “Yeah. And it wasn't until college that I had found that he got deported. But I didn't really know anything about it, I didn't really ask either.”

In another example, Krystal, raised in the Bronx, started by talking about her Albanian father who had been deported when she was only a year old. At 27, Krystal felt she had a story to share, but revealed she knew nothing of her biological father, never having met him or any of his family. Not until after a 30-minute discussion of her interest in her father's heritage did Krystal share that she did not know about her biological father until she was 15. At that time, her stepfather—from Trinidad—who she assumed was her father, left her mother, and told her “the truth” to explain why he would not remain in contact after the divorce. Both Krystal and Olivia's accounts suggest they felt a sense of loss of a potential relationship with a biological father, but no other socio-emotional difficulties arising from the episode. Notably, they both spoke of strong mothers, who were, in Krystal's words, “both a mother and father to me.”

In contrast, Natalie at age 19 had pieced together the details about her father's deportation because her mother never explained anything about the case. She felt deeply affected by an unjust episode that targeted a father to whom she was emotionally close to as a child.

Born in the Dominican Republic, Natalie's father came to New York City when he was just 15 and had completed high school in Washington Heights where he met Natalie's mother, also born in the Dominican Republic. His deportation—which her family explained as arising from a case of “mistaken identity” when Natalie was 6—spiraled the former permanent resident into depression, alcoholism and other mental health issues. At first, Natalie remained in contact during his jail sentence: her mom told her they were visiting him in “police school.” After his deportation, when Natalie was 8, she visited every summer until her parents divorced when she was 11. She continued to speak regularly with her father until his death, from a heart attack, a year prior to our interview. Natalie harbored many emotions about her relationships with family members and her perception that they failed to support her father after the episode. “I feel like I'm the only one from my siblings who had like a real relationship with him.” She felt devastated by the way the deportation ruined her father's life, and the fallout of the episode shaped her own well-being as a child; she described herself as deeply introverted and emotionally withdrawn because of the episode.

Penny too felt affected by the episode targeting her father, but not because she felt close to him, but rather because it dramatically changed her family situation. “My dad... Uhm... He went to jail, I don't know, he really just messed up.” She was 9 at the time. The arrest could have been a relief as she recalled severe physical violence towards her mother, but instead it weakened her family relationships. “Because it was just my mom, who was also an immigrant, so it was just her and her income.” Economic pressures meant they moved often, Penny's daily life increasingly unstable. And, her brothers bullied her. “I feel like my [older] brother carried that anger [about the father] ... towards me, and my younger brothers actually looked up to my older brother so they would follow him and taunt me.” Penny ended up in conflict with her mother too, and moved in with an uncle for a time after getting expelled from middle school. For Penny, the episode destabilized relationships with her mother, who became economically vulnerable and emotionally unbalanced after the deportation, and with her brothers, who expressed their emotional reaction to separation in behavior that targeted Penny. Penny took out the stress at home by acting out at school.

For these young women, the details of the crime—about which they provided vague or uncertain details—seemed relatively unimportant. Olivia and Krystal introduced themselves as not affected by their father's deportation because their mothers raised them. Penny also felt estranged from her father, but deeply affected due to the period of severe instability in her life which ended when she moved in with her uncle. Natalie felt close to her father; she described a stable, yet sterile, home

environment with her mother after the episode, to whom she felt resentful and estranged due to the rupture of the relationship with her father.

Together, these experiences attest that it is the nature of children's relationships with fathers and mothers, and mother's relationships with fathers, which shape the aftermath of this type of enforcement episode. When children's single-parent households are stable environments, they may not feel a deportation post-incarceration affects their well-being. However, when deportations post-incarceration strain mothers and fathers' relationships with each other, and children's relationships with either or both parents, longstanding impacts are more likely. Notably, young adults whose fathers persisted in retaining contact after a deportation in hopes of developing a legal pathway to return to the United States felt this to be an ongoing stressor. Olivia distrusted her father's attempts to re-establish contact for his immigration case. Although Natalie felt close to her father, his insistence on her finding him an immigration lawyer became a source of conflict. Permanent bars to readmission set up an untenable situation for young adults who worry about retaining relationships with fathers who hold onto a false hope for reunification (see also Dreby et al, 2022).

Removals

We categorize other types of removals separately, which could include a voluntary departure, a court order for a removal or other scenarios, because many young adults knew vague details about them and used imprecise and at times contradictory legal terminology to describe them. Reports of removal episodes shared the characteristic of not always resulting in long-term separations and more often targeting male and female family members. Clearly, legal nuances related to removals can be consequential, yet from children's standpoints what was most tangible was the concrete experience of having a family member removed from the country without having "done anything wrong." Accordingly, young adults' accounts of long-term impacts most often varied by how much they knew about or remembered episodes, and whether episodes had been, or continued to be, a source of significant uncertainty in their families.

At one extreme Stephen spoke about his Peruvian father's removal years before he was born and before his parents had met. Because the episode occurred before the 1996 bars to admission, Stephen's father naturalized while Stephen was in middle school, causing him to feel few consequences from the episode except, and notably, being aware of ongoing tensions with his older stepsiblings arising from his father's pathway to legalization. Noemi, at age 18, in contrast, continued to feel stress from her Mexican mother's removal, which occurred after a workplace raid in 1996, but before she was born. Noemi also knew little of the episode and had always lived with her mother; she only learned of it when her father naturalized and the lawyer advised her mother not to join his application, as she would be at risk of a deportation order and permanent bar to readmission. Throughout high school and into college, Noemi constantly worried about her mother's immigration status because the case was unresolved. Neither Stephen or Noemi knew much about the original episode, but Noemi's mother's inability to legalize carried over, affecting her into young adulthood, whereas for Stephen it had not.

Resolution, however, is not everything. Some young adults spoke about removal episodes as powerfully affecting them even if resolved because they had caused significant uncertainty in their lives at an earlier point of time and children knew the details, having experienced episodes alongside their parents. Nancy's story exemplifies. Nancy's father owned a pizzeria in a relatively immigrant-friendly small city upstate—which had not signed 287 g program and was declared a Sanctuary City in 2017—where she was born and raised. He had two DUIs, one in 1994 before she was born and one in 2001 when she was 6. The DUIs triggered an early morning raid in 2013, when Nancy was 17. Nancy helped fight the deportation order, garnering support from local politicians, successfully at first; her father was released from detention. But after a 2-year legal battle, and under the duress of health issues and a second detention, Nancy helped arrange for her father's voluntary departure to

Mexico as this way he would not be subject to the bars of readmission. In a heartbreaking turn, Nancy's father died due to health complications and so the case was not ongoing. When Nancy shared her story at age 25, she described the episode as deeply difficult, but also empowering. She felt gratified at mobilizing support for her father, and her work to defend him improved their relationship while he was alive.

Lisette also felt that her mother's removal to Mexico shaped her entire life because she lived all aspects of the episode, both before and after the actual removal order, alongside her mother. Lisette's parents split up when she was four; she lived with her mother and sibling just outside of the five boroughs.

I went to so many different schools, I was always changing schools. I was always the new kid and I never really had friends and we were always moving. I didn't really understand why we were always moving, but she was running; my mother was running away from the law, from it catching up to her.

According to Lisette, during one of her parents' earlier fights, her father filed charges. Although he later dropped them, Lisette believes this flagged her mother to ICE, identifying her as someone out of status and a priority for removal. "[Eventually] they did catch up to her in the house where we were living ... and like when we left to Mexico she had like an escort all the way until we got on the plane. A little woman with two little kids crying and then [the] escort, like right next to us." Lisette was in the 8th grade when they moved to Mexico City.

Lisette liked her life in Mexico, finding some of the social aspects liberating. Quickly, however, the family's economic situation deteriorated. Even after Lisette started working full time hours at age 16, she could not help her mother enough to make ends meet. She cried in recalling the day she resolved it was best to return to New York.

I remember one day we didn't have enough money to buy some eggs, and...I just sat down with her. I was like "mom, we looked in the pants, we looked in the cushions for coins; it's okay, I think it's better over there." ... In our culture, we have this utopia... about the United States and how it's supposed be the best thing out there. So we [her and her sibling] had this idea, and we told her "we'll work hard, get an education," and bring her back [to the US], and she'll be back with us and we'll be together.

Lisette moved back to New York at age 16 with her sibling and, remarkably, into their own apartment, although she counted on rent support from their father, with whom she still had a relationship, and on her maternal aunts representing her in school until the courts declared her emancipated. At the time of our interview, Lisette felt hopeful about reunifying with her mother as she was petitioning for her mother's legal immigration now that she had turned 21. As for the impact on her life, Lisette commented, "I'm a very like distrustful person and I think my life made it that way and home made me more distrustful." She pointed out various ways she felt emotionally withdrawn because of the instability caused by the removal.

For both Lisette and Nancy, living the episode alongside parents made the removal feel impactful even though from a legal perspective it had resolved. Those who described especially severe aftereffects from removals lived unresolved episodes alongside parents. As examples, neither Fatima nor Nadia knew the specific details of their fathers' departures, one to Mexico and one to Guatemala, after incidents in which someone in the family called the police for domestic violence. Both said their mothers did not press charges and that their fathers' departures were not the result of a criminal prosecution. In these cases, one might consider the removal episode to provide the family some relief. Indeed, one young man lamented, "I wish my dad had been deported," when talking about the violence he witnessed at home. Yet both fathers returned within a few years, the removals ultimately escalating levels of family violence and increasing long-term impacts on children. In middle

school, after her father's return to the United States, Nadia attempted suicide and described regular and problematic drug use—which she attributed to stress at home—until school social workers intervened and “saved my life.” Similarly, Fatima found some respite only at college where she saw a therapist who prescribed medication for her anxiety. Family violence heightened the aftermath of removal episodes; removals may, in turn, cause children to experience higher levels of anxiety or depression when they further weaken family relationships already under stress (see also Dreby et al., 2022).

These removal stories also illustrate that children can find support outside their families, like the school social workers who helped Nadia and the network Nancy activated for her father. In other cases, children accessed family support to help surmount disruption caused by removals, like Penny moving in with an uncle. Of course, family support has limits. For Fatima, the family tensions that sparked the enforcement episode were further aggravated by her father's removal, exposing her to greater family conflict alongside increased fears once he returned due to his greater risk given the previous removal. Ambiguity surrounding episode resolution paired with little social support can heighten the salience of removal episodes over time.

Arrests and/or detentions

Sometimes an arrest escalates to a detention, or incarceration, and an eventual deportation, or a voluntary departure under the duress of deportation. Oftentimes, however, episodes did not crescendo with such intensity. Arrests or detentions can be short-lived and resolve quickly. In cases in which arrests or detentions do not end in removal, children's involvement in the cases shaped the extent to which young adults felt enduring impacts. At age 23 Nina, for example, did not feel her father's situation was that important saying, “It didn't affect me until now when we're trying to fix his legal status, along with my mom.” When Nina was still in preschool, ICE arrested her Mexican-born father on an Amtrak train and detained him in the Batavia detention center for a few days. She did not remember the episode, but knew he had to travel more than 5 h from the city where they lived to the Buffalo immigration court on more than one occasion. Ultimately, Nina's father received a deportation order, a detail Nina did not know until she was an adult and her mother naturalized, but her father could not because of this earlier episode. Nina did not describe any insecurity about her father's status as a child; her parents protected her from knowing the details of his case, and he had only ever been separated from the family for a few days. Only more recently in trying to regularize his status did Nina start to feel that enforcement represented a barrier, but it was not a source of relationship tensions or emotional trauma.

Briana also recounted that immigration policies had not shaped her well-being. Ironically, the episode targeting her mother did change her life. When Briana was 9, she spent a summer with her grandmother in Venezuela. During this time, her mother visited Niagara Falls with her Puerto Rican husband, whom she had just married, although she had not yet legalized her status. Not thinking, the couple crossed into Canada. Coming back to the U.S. side of the falls, Briana's mother was arrested.

She was in the immigration jail for, I don't know how many days... because she was detained for a few days. I forget how long it was. She couldn't take her—you know they take everything away—she couldn't take her birth control pills, and so it was like an ‘Oops. I turned out to be pregnant.’... Yeah, so that whole thing gave me a little sister. I don't know anything about it because I'm in a different country.

Briana's stepfather arranged for her mother's release, and then her legalization, and Briana actually did not learn the story of her sister's conception or her mother's detention until years later when she came across some of her mother's paperwork and her mother told the story, making “jokes about

Julissa [younger sibling] being an accidental child.” For Briana, a lack of any involvement in the episode or its resolution contributed to her feeling no consequence, despite the episode leading to the birth of her sister.

In contrast, those who spoke of being highly involved in helping family members after an arrest or detention talked about the ways these episodes shaped family relationship dynamics, and at times became a source of deep anxiety. They described what others define as brokering, work in their families related to these episodes (Delgado, 2020; Katz, 2014; Orellana, 2009). Mariana, for example, spoke of on-going difficulties throughout her childhood from her parents’ immigration issues. Most notably, she recalled a traumatizing car ride to an upstate immigration facility at age 7. Although the initial episode resulted in the release of Mariana’s Mexican-born parents, throughout her childhood and even as a young adult, Mariana worked with her parents’ lawyers on their cases and described multiple ways she connected the uncertainty of the immigration situation to the anxiety and depression she experienced, often acting out as a teenager. For example, she explained, “I remember my dad had a court date one day, and like I was rebelling a lot because—so when all of this happened, like I ... chose to do a bunch of stupid things.”

Raquel also described deep involvement in her mother’s immigration case and her overall discouragement with the system. Born in a rural community upstate, Raquel lived in Guatemala for 5 years with her mother, from the age of 7 to 13. They moved to her mother’s hometown when a neighbor in New York threatened to call ICE, and Raquel’s mother feared she might lose custody of her children. She decided it would be better to leave before any complaint could be reported. Yet gang violence increased in the town where Raquel lived in Guatemala; after the gang murdered one of Raquel’s uncles, they fled. Raquel returned via plane in 2013 to be reunited with her father who had stayed to work and support the family from his job in New York. Her mother, lacking a legal status, crossed the U.S.–Mexican border where she was detained for a week. Her mother sought asylum; the initial screening found that her claim involved a credible fear of persecution, so she was released. But when Raquel told her story during our interview in 2019, her mother’s application for asylum was still pending, involving Raquel throughout high school. She described the last time she attended court saying,

The system is just broken. Completely. The judge... I just remember the day when, back to last court [date] when we went with my mom, I just remember seeing the judge’s face. And it was just so... Straight, you know? She wouldn’t show emotions. She was just reading paragraph after paragraph. Saying these things about my mom’s case... And I just remember listening to her, and my mom was next to me and this other guy translating. ... And at the end, when she said my mom had 30 days to do this, and I heard the guy translating ... I started crying [in the courtroom]. Yeah! I wanted her to see me cry in a way cause... *Quería que viera* [I wanted her to see] how what she was doing was affecting not only my mom, but me!

Raquel—in talking about the fallout of the detention episode—spoke of the deep emotional toll of her participation in the immigration case.

As these examples show, bearing witness to either an arrest or the aftermath of an arrest or detention, in the form of involvement in court cases, helps to account for how deeply some young people felt affected by parental arrests or detentions (see also Dreby et al., 2022). In one telling counterexample, Nilda, at age 18, spoke of her mother’s traffic stop in a rural area of upstate New York. Community organizers intervened, convincing the local police to release her as she was a single mother and her arrest would lead Nilda, 13 at the time, with no guardian and as a ward of the state. Six years later when Nilda told her story, she explained that her mother had an on-going case which she knew about, but she had not had to advocate for her mother. Instead, a member of the community organization helped. “Karen got in contact with people that she knows, cause she works a lot with like lawyers... I didn’t [know the lawyer]. But like, Karen actually knew him as well, so like...

She got him to my mom ... but he's actually been like a huge help to my mom." Because the lawyer speaks Spanish, Nilda did not need to translate. Nilda did not feel the episode to be impactful because she was not separated from her mother and did not get involved in the case.

Direct threats

Specific moments of threat can in some cases have lasting impacts even when no arrest, detention or removal occurs due to the timing of these threats, especially when they introduced a sense of insecurity and instability tied to a specific incident that increased with time. Leilani in the opening vignette recalled three specific incidents when the police came to her apartment for domestic violence, but emphasized that she lived the aftermath of the direct threats "over the course of 12 years," the first when she was 6 years old and the latest at age 18. For Leilani, the direct threat of enforcement was an on-going characteristic of her childhood, rooted in specific moments of police interaction.

David at age 18 also described the power of a direct threat to create a climate of on-ongoing insecurity so that incidents after the fact also are interpreted through the lens of a threat.

David grew up in an agricultural community in Western New York. As the child of farmworkers, he initially struggled, as he felt different from other kids in his community, "we didn't know many people in my school." He went on to describe himself as exhibiting classic signs of internalizing behavior. "I didn't really talk to anyone when I was younger so I wasn't really close to anyone else other than the few people that I had. But then as I grew older I would feel very introverted since I didn't really put myself out there as much."

David told the story of an episode that occurred when he was in 6th grade. He was the first one up that morning, getting ready for school, when he heard the knocking and saw "the immigration cars." He ran to his room and alerted his parents and uncle who were still sleeping.

I'm scared and so my parents start making calls to the farm owners and everything and all the family friends that they've met now, and so they start calling them. And I'm just crying in my bed ... eventually the farm owners came and they were like, "what are you guys doing in our property? You have like no right. This is private property you're trespassing if you don't have like a warrant for something." And so eventually the cars left and everything and the farmers knocked on our door and told us that everything was alright.

The incident resolved with no further contact from ICE. However, David spoke about police following his parents' vehicles throughout middle and high school—until he had a license and could drive them—and memories of always pulling into a church parking lot until they passed, ever fearful of being targeted in the rural community where they lived. In fact, David did not think to mention that his father had been deported when he was a baby until the last 10 min of the interview. In almost an aside comment, David mentioned the deportation happened when he was so little he forgot about it. It seems likely that David's original description of the way his parents sheltered him may have stemmed from this prior deportation, yet from his perspective, the direct threat that occurred at a time in early adolescence was more salient because it left the imprint of fear on David that resurfaced in any interaction with law enforcement for the rest of his childhood.

Young adults who did not feel threatened by such close-call incidents often did not recall the details sufficiently enough to share them. Danielle—at age 29—was an exception; she spoke of police interactions being a regular part of her childhood in Queens. Her parents—born in Colombia—had been undocumented for most of her life, and she had an uncle who was deported. At the time of our interview, Danielle worked with youth in New York City, many of whom had problematic

interactions with the police and with ICE. Well-aware of the ways immigration could get involved in families, Danielle explained that she did not grow up fearful.

My dad was always super proud ... the police would stop him and he would be like “I’ll see you in court.” And he was always like so... “I don’t care, I’m an immigrant. Whatever.” But he didn’t even care that he was an immigrant; he wasn’t gonna let the police talk down to him, you know? ... he defended himself.

But my mom, every time the police stopped us, I always wondered why she gave different names, like she would never give her name... I remember once ... They were like “do you have an ID?” and she’s like “I don’t have no ID.” I’m like “ma, you walk out without ID?” and she just looked at me with her piercing eyes, she’s like “yes! *No tengo ID.*” I was like “oh, okay.” But yeah. We never felt they were coming for us.

Reflecting on her lack of fear, Danielle said, “we were like unapologetically Colombian, my dad was like ‘yeah, I’m an immigrant and what,’ you know. He was very unapologetic.”

There are several differences in Danielle, Leilani and David’s accounts worth noting. For one, as a pre-teen, first Danielle’s father—and later her mother—naturalized whereas Leilani and David’s parents remained undocumented for their entire childhoods. Those who described episodes of specific direct threats expressed ongoing impacts throughout their childhoods, and at times into adulthood, when threats heightened a sense of insecurity over a longer period of their lives. If, however, a family member resolved their status during this time, the source of the direct threat disappeared, and fears subsided. Timing matters (see also Dreby et al., 2022). Second, Danielle was 29 when we spoke; her childhood recollections of interactions with police in New York City occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s, prior to the rapid rise in deportations across the country. David (age 18) and Leilani (age 25) on the other hand, lived enforcement experiences that coincided with the rise of enforcement activities in New York State. Danielle’s counterexample suggests that aside from timing in a child’s life, factors outside of families can instill fears, something apparent in narratives of those who had not lived specific threats, but rather felt them diffusely.

Diffuse fears

Twenty-one young adults had no direct experience with enforcement episodes but expressed fears related to the overall immigration enforcement climate. Analysis of these stories show that it is not within-family dynamics—such as relationship quality, instability, involvement in or timing of the episode—that activated fears. Rather, they spoke of more generalized anxieties correlated to events outside of their families. These could be enforcement episodes targeting people outside of their immediate spheres or the generalized political climate like the Trump election, or—for older participants—the attacks on New York on September 11th, 2001.

Devon, for example, said he had never really thought about enforcement as a possibility in his Haitian-American family, and community, until he saw the news report of a Haitian father in deportation proceedings on Long Island. Similarly, Rosalie—whose parents were from Jamaica—knew her older sister’s visa had expired but had not felt afraid as a child until her sophomore year in high school.

I didn’t worry too much about it, but I have this friend where her family is Dominican and she said that they basically detained her sister’s baby father ... For some reason, I was kind of worried because I knew at that point my sister wasn’t exactly legal per se, so I was worried that they would, you know, detain her.

For some, an incident in broader community brought about awareness and fear of enforcement.

Others talked about the rhetoric surrounding the Trump campaign and presidency as specifically heightening their fears. For Kevin—whose parents were born in Mexico—Trump’s election when he was 14 initiated his worries. “My dad, cause he works in a restaurant, undocumented, like... at any moment right now, it’s like... if immigration were to come through the restaurant, right, for a permit ... they’d just take him right now.”

“Do you think about it a lot?” Joanna asked.

“I think about it all the time, it’s like – What happens when they deport my dad? What if my dad just makes the wrong move or it’s just bad timing ... It’s always in my head... My dad has not committed no crime, you know? He’s... he’s here, but he has nothing against America, America has nothing against him. ... But why?”

Raised in Manhattan, Kevin had not worried about his father until the year of the Trump election.

In another example, 20-year-old Jessica—who lived with her naturalized mother born in Haiti—described going to her high school in an upstate community the day after the Trump election saying, “I thought I was having a fever dream ... I remember that day, there’s these kids - a bunch of white boys - ... they were wearing MAGA hats and were like, ‘oh, you know, all of the immigrants are gonna get kicked out of the country.’ They were saying horrible things.” Jessica described her significant anxiety in our October 2020 interview:

The uncertainty of everything ... the whole political climate and everything right now is actually making me very nervous... It makes me very, very stressed out and I don’t want to feel the way that I felt in 2016 ... because that’s when ... I was also in upstate, in a predominately white area, and a predominately Republican, Trump-supporter area. That was not fun at all.... it feels very scary and knowing that my aunt isn’t a citizen, like that is also adding so much stress and anxietyIt’s really...it’s really very tiring.

Six weeks later, Jessica wrote Joanna an email expressing her elation and relief that Trump had not been re-elected.

Those with undocumented family members were not the only ones to mention fears related to anti-immigrant rhetoric. One daughter of a Dominican naturalized citizen worried that police might arrest her father, a truck driver, and report him to ICE while on a trip to another state. Since the election, she had seen news stories of citizens stuck in detention centers near the U.S.–Mexican border. Similarly, Beto, whose mother had emigrated from Mexico and father from Colombia via Venezuela, also had two naturalized parents. As a child, he did not harbor fears, although he spoke of not feeling he could grow his hair long in middle school so as not to be labeled a terrorist right after 9/11. Yet at age 26, he feels concerned.

It’s mostly based on the news. You know, I think I’ve read like one or two stories of an American citizen who is Latino or Latina and she gets caught up in a raid. And she doesn’t have her ID on her. And she gets locked up for weeks at a time, without contact. And that scares me. ‘Cause like, once they catch you, they take your rights away and all of a sudden you’re a citizen who has these rights but you aren’t given these rights.

These accounts suggest the importance of the political climate to shaping diffuse fears.

Those describing direct threats talked about how these moments affected them throughout their childhoods, often cascading and building over time, and consequently becoming what they described as an acute source of anxiety. Fears arising from indirect threats expressed by participants differ because they tie them specifically to rhetoric—in Jessica and Kevin’s case associated with the

campaign of former President Trump—or news coverage—in Beto and Devon’s cases—or knowledge of an episode in the community—for Rosalie. As such, participants experienced them more diffusely; the intensity of these fears heightened and receded in tandem with the political climate and enforcement practices in their local community rather than factors related to timing or experiences in their families.

DISCUSSION: THE ACCUMULATION OF EPISODES

“Heavy” enforcement strategies have become the primary approach of U.S. immigration policy over the past 20 years, shaping the lives of a cohort of U.S. citizens raised during this period (Aranda et al., 2014; Golash-Boza, 2019). Yet immigration enforcement policies are not uniform in characteristic nor in consequence for the children of immigrants. Our bottom-up analysis shows that enforcement becomes most salient in children’s lives through their experiences of four types of enforcement episode, mediated by specific family contexts and strategies, but can also come in the form of diffuse fears activated by political rhetoric or events outside of the family. Current literature identifies legal structures as having negative consequences for children and their families but does not identify variations in the longstanding lived experiences of enforcement policies. These processes are important to depicting the enduring effects of such policies on children of immigrants, and U.S. society more broadly, and also to understanding how children and members of families respond to these state structures in different ways.

Deportations following incarcerations involve permanent changes to households, and the lasting impact on children is tied to the nature and quality of their relationships with both mothers and father, and to the extent to which fathers draw their children into seeking a legal remedy to their case once they turn 21. Other removals may or may not result in permanent separations. Children who describe the longstanding salience of these episodes typically experienced high levels of uncertainty because of the episodes. They either lived the episodes alongside parents, perceived episodes to be unresolved, or both. Unresolved episodes are especially poignant; they can emerge at different key moments during childhood, like when a court appointment comes up or when seeking a change in legal representative, at times triggering the trauma associated with episodes witnessed earlier in life. When parents can successfully shield children from uncertainty, children less likely feel the aftermath of these episodes (see Dreby et al., 2022).

Arrests and detentions do not always result in removals, but can still have longstanding impacts, depending on the extent to which children are involved directly in resolving the circumstances surrounding the arrests or detentions. Deep involvement in cases—like Raquel attending immigration court with her mother—contribute to feelings that episodes spill over into other aspects of their lives. What Delgado (2020) calls legal brokering in families intensifies the salience of episodes (see also Ceciliano-Navarro & Golash-Boza, 2021; Golash-Boza, 2019). Notably, children of immigrants get drawn into immigration cases related to arrests or detentions—but not deportations following incarcerations—precisely because court hearings consider waivers to deportation based on the impact on U.S. citizen children, and children need to make legal cases on behalf of their parents. The current court system process of petitioning for waivers of deportation heightens children’s involvement in episodes. When children are not drawn into episodes—like Nilda and Briana for whom a community and family member mediated the case—they feel better protected from them.

Direct threats can have major and enduring impacts depending on the duration and timing of these threats during childhood. Those who spoke of episodes spanning across several years described direct connections between their well-being and the episode. This compounds, of course, when episodes remain unresolved, as young adults may be more likely to get involved in advocating for parents, and they may experience episodes for a greater proportion of their lives, interpreting any interaction with law enforcement officials through the lens of an enforcement threat. This project specifically sought out members of a cohort of young adults raised during a period of heightened

enforcement. Even among this group, we noticed shifts. Episodes occurring after 2007 were less likely to be resolved, and thus often more longstanding in consequence.

Historical timing matters in another way, particularly in how young people experienced diffuse fears, described as more intermittent, but not necessarily less anxiety producing. Many highlighted the negative effects of the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Trump administration, especially those who previously felt unaffected by immigration policies, like one young man, whose father was formerly undocumented but had naturalized and was a Trump supporter, who noted, “I voted against him [Trump] on behalf of my parents.” These moments are important as they illustrate how events outside of families can make children feel vulnerable (Asad, 2020; Canizales & Vallejo, 2021; Wadhia, 2019). Yet diffuse fears waxed and waned, and thus contrast sharply to those who experienced enforcement episodes and direct threats, for whom anxieties often compounded and heightened with time.

Significantly, across all episode types, children more often described longstanding effects when a parent is targeted. Parent–child relationships are more likely to be strained, the uncertainty of an episode more long-lasting, the involvement in cases more direct and the timing of in a child’s life more disruptive, when a parent is targeted, even if a parent outside of the household. Additionally, as the examples above illustrate, episodes often blur and build on each other, either because they remain unresolved or because they prompt a second or third episode. Leilani, for example, felt the threat of enforcement not because of just the one interaction with a police officer who brought up ICE, but over the three times police came to her childhood home, causing her fears to build over time and to recur any time she witnessed a physical conflict in her family. Those who experienced multiple or cumulative episodes reported higher levels of impact on their adult lives.

Finally, young adults’ accounts also show that they can often activate key sources of support, resources that young people can leverage to better come to terms with episodes, whether within or outside of families. Some described families coming together in the wake of an episode to help each other. Penny moved in with an uncle when she felt too disrupted in her mother’s household. Others described parents as shielding them from knowing too much about the enforcement episode—like Nina whose parents did not tell her about her father’s legal troubles until she was an adult or Olivia whose mother raised her not mentioning that visits with her father ended due to his deportation. Notably, quite a few young people talked about parents’ strategies to protect them from episodes increased their feelings on uncertainty, like Natalie who felt her mothers’ silences exacerbated her feelings of loss following her father’s deportation. Family support has limits, particularly in cases when other family-level tensions related to family violence or alcoholism prompted enforcement episodes (Dreby et al., 2022).

Outside families, young adults drew on formal and informal support to overcome episodes. Natalie, who felt so devastated by her father’s deportation, ended up confiding in a best friend who helped her work through some of the emotions of that loss, encouraging her to write her college essay about the experience. Nadia got help from a school social worker to address the mental health fallout of her family situation in middle school; Fatima did the same but in college. David and Nilda both spoke of a strong community network intervening in enforcement episodes, preventing them from escalating into any type of family separation. Nancy had been involved in a youth group prior to her father’s arrest and detention. She leveraged those networks to support the case against his deportation. Social support at critical moments, whether legal assistance so children need not engage in legal brokering or interventions that help come to terms with the emotional toll episodes have taken, can help mitigate hardship over the long run.

CONCLUSION: THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF ENFORCEMENT EPISODES

Current characterizations of enforcement often assume that they crescendo from a threat to an arrest, then a detention and finally a removal, or they characterize fears as widespread rather than

negotiated at the individual level. In this article, we cast a wider net, similar to the way Drotbohm and Hasselberg (2018) theorize “deportation in its broader sense” (p. 2). Doing so identifies variations in micro-level processes that unfold under a macro-level policy approach to provide a more nuanced account of the multiple ways people live enforcement realities over time. This account maps out the myriad ways “legal violence” (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012) shapes the lives of children of immigrants, becoming more, or less, salient over time.

Although we identify the breadth and depth of types of enforcement in experiences, we cannot identify patterns in episode type by race or country of origin, nor can we identify patterns in episodes across rural, suburban and urban community contexts as the sampling strategy is limited in making estimates about the prevalence of episodes for different populations. Future research should consider types of enforcement episodes as they vary by population and geographically. Yet that study participants grew up in vastly different families and communities and still shared ways diffuse fears, direct threats, arrests and detentions, removals and deportations following incarceration shaped their lives, suggests these patterns may transcend family and community characteristics. Of course, narratives also illustrate the ways local environments textured experiences, even in New York where supportive state laws exist, such as the Green Light Law affording those without social security numbers a pathway to apply for a drivers’ licenses. Given the long reach of federal U.S. enforcement policies, our findings suggest key practices that can better protect the rights of children in immigrant households.

First, local communities can curtail anti-immigrant rhetoric which heightens fears and anxieties—and ultimately the well-being—of a large swath of the U.S. population. Local officials, in law enforcement agencies, in schools and in governmental offices, must seek ways to avoid and diffuse such direct threats. Those in this study who grew up in communities declared as sanctuary cities as well as those in areas with both high and low numbers of foreign-born populations reported both diffuse fears and direct threats. Communities in New York State need to do much more to counter this pro-enforcement climate.

Second, community members can mediate on behalf of children in the aftermath of detentions and arrests. Local officials can assign family support advocates in federal immigration court proceedings so that U.S. citizen children are not involved in these cases, but also have a voice. When removals occur, children and their families need even more resources, including access to emergency housing and food support and counseling services, to help reduce levels of uncertainty and the disruptions to their lives. Additionally, interventions—by activists and other providers—can de-escalate enforcement episodes and help avoid the tendency for them to accumulate.

Of course, federal policies also need to be reshaped to protect the rights of children. Short of immigration reform legislation, one pathway to better protect children is to broaden the eligibility for waivers of deportation to cover all parents of minors residing in the United States on the assumption that separation in and of itself causes harm. Currently, the bar to prove hardship is exceptionally high and completely discretionary, requiring children to write letters or attend therapy to support pleas for waivers, practices that heighten their involvement. Lowering the bar so that the removal of a parent is considered an undue hardship will better protect children. Additionally, bars to readmission—implemented in 1996—have proven to be especially harmful, permanently altering children’s families, even in cases when parents served time for their crimes. These bars need to be revoked.

Ultimately, when provided the resources, young adults actively navigate the aftermath of episodes, developing strategies to at times overcome, or at the very least to come to terms with them. Those who leveraged social support fared better than those who did not. The most effective social support is a legal pathway to quickly resolve enforcement episodes. Thus, while countering enforcement rhetoric and increasing access to support at the local level is essential, we must also collectively push for federal reform. This requires shifting narratives about immigration to recognize the breadth and depth by which enforcement has become a major social problem undermining the rights of an increasingly larger number of the U.S. child population.

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