



Research Brief

Lived Experiences of Federal Immigration Enforcement in Colorado

Elizabeth Kiehne, Quinn Hafen, Débora Silva Viana, Laura Peniche, Jesús Castro



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Executive Summary

This research was conducted to better understand immigrants' experiences with federal immigration enforcement in the state of Colorado. A total of 17 immigrants with in-depth experience with immigration-related arrest and detention participated in interviews and focus groups.

Using inductive thematic analysis, 7 themes were found to characterize participants' experiences with federal immigration enforcement and perceptions of treatment by individuals within the system. These themes included: (1) **treatment as aggressive and authoritarian**, (2) **basic rights ignored**, (3) **coercion to take voluntary departure**, (4) **racism fuels rights violations**, (5) **criminal treatment as unjust**, (6) **treatment as neglectful**, and (7) **deceptive practices sow community mistrust**. These themes found across the data are summarized below, with direct quotes from research participants.

This research brief also provides an overview of the mental health impacts of these experiences and offers implications for state-level policies that would protect immigrants and support more just and thriving Colorado communities.

Research Methods

Four focus groups and 15 individual in-depth interviews were conducted with $N=17$ individuals. Study participants were recruited in partnership with the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition's Docuteam Hotline and through snowball sampling (word-of-mouth). All participants were adults born outside of the U.S. and had in-depth experience with federal immigration enforcement in Colorado. Some had been arrested and detained themselves while others had had one or more close family members arrested and detained, and in some cases

both. The majority of participants were from Mexico and, on average, had resided in the U.S. for 16 years. The majority were parents with an average of 2.5 U.S.-citizen children. Participant ages ranged from 18-65 years old, with a mean age of 39-years-old. Twelve participants identified as women, and 5 as men.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted in Spanish. A semi-structured interview script with open-ended questions was used and captured

participants' perceptions of and experiences with federal immigration enforcement and the meaning they made of their experiences (e.g., *How do you feel immigration enforcement treats immigrants?*). The focus groups lasted 90 minutes in length and the interviews lasted, on average, 56 minutes in length. A community advisory board informed the open-ended interview questions as well as the recruitment and data collection procedures used.

The audio from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. The Colorado State University research team employed inductive thematic analysis with multiple rounds of team-based coding to identify themes across the data and reach interpretive convergence.

Findings

1. Treatment as aggressive and authoritarian:

Across narratives, participants suggested immigration enforcement authorities were overly aggressive toward them and exercised an unreasonable amount of power over them. They used words such as “predatory,” “aggressive,” “tyrannical,” “overbearing,” and “authoritarian” to describe immigration and customs enforcement (ICE) officers. Many participants also described experiencing verbal or physical abuse, including yelling, intimidating and bullying, pushing and pulling, and threatening physical violence.

“Regarding treatment, it’s very bad. I mean, there are no words to explain. From the moment the officers have you there, in every way possible they are very aggressive toward you. And for no reason, they yell at you. They humiliate you. They are incredibly cruel.”

Ángel, 67-year-old man, has lived in the U.S. for 45 years, father of 3 U.S.-citizens

“And even here, us neighbors have seen that [ICE agents] have knocked down the doors. They have pulled down the doors. They have dragged them out because the people don't want to leave. They enter, they drag them out, they take them, and they handcuff them.”

Carmen, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 19 years

“I also had a very, very bad experience with them. They treated me badly. They yelled at me. I almost felt like they wanted to hit me. One is afraid of them, to be honest, how they treat you and yell at you. In fact, I'm still seeing a therapist because I can't get out of the memory of how they treated my son, how they took him away, and how they yelled at me. So for me, it is something traumatic, really.”

Josefina, 38-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 17 years, mother of 4 children 3 of which are U.S.-citizens, 19-year-old son was detained

“I think that ICE does not see immigrants as people. And how they treat families, I think there is no words for it. The feeling that one feels when being separated and the delight they feel to be doing their job, it is something that cannot be explained. It's just inhumane.”

Francisca, 32-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 11 years, mother of 4 children 2 of which are U.S.-citizens, husband was detained

2. Basic rights ignored:

Participants consistently reported feeling devoid of rights during their immigration-related arrest and while detained. There was a sense that even basic human rights were disregarded. Participants described their rights “for simply being human beings” as being “violated,” “ignored,” and “trampled over.” The overly authoritarian demeanor of ICE officers contributed to feeling like they did not have any rights in the immigration enforcement system. The feeling of being rights-less was a shared and widespread experience. Indicative of this dehumanizing disregard for rights, multiple participants discussed being treated like animals.

Additionally, multiple participants commented on speaking up for themselves carrying the risk of making their already-bad situation worse. Participants felt that power differentials were insurmountable, as there was a risk of being perceived as noncooperative and retaliated against if they spoke up for themselves. This paralyzed their ability to self-advocate for basic rights and needs in custody.

“Everyone is treated very badly there, as if they weren’t human. They treat them as if they were animals, as if they wanted them to die.”

Marcela, 62-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 22 years, wife of a U.S.-citizen, 3 children were detained

“An immigrant has many things to heal. We have to heal many things. They make us feel as if we don’t have any rights in this country. Immigration, that is.”

Adriana, 40-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 24 years, mother of 9 U.S.-citizen children

“In my experience and from what I've seen with the people that ICE has detained around me, if you don't cooperate with them, the worse it'll be. If the police or ICE are detaining someone, this person is at a disadvantage, right? They have less power. If you butt heads with them, who's going to be worse off? I mean, the one who has less power, right? If you hold on to this right that you have, believe me, the [officer] is going to go after you more.”

Isabel, 36-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 7 years, mother of a U.S.-citizen

“Imagine yourself getting one-on-one with them. I mean, you can't. And even if you don't do anything to them, they just retaliate because they want to, because they feel they have the power in their hands, and they can make whoever they want to feel worthless.”

“When we are immigrants, we are ignored. Our rights are trampled over.”

Carmen, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 19 years, mother of 3 children one of which is a U.S.-citizen

3. Coercion to take voluntary departure:

Across interviews, it was common that individuals felt coerced to sign voluntary departure paperwork. Different approaches and tactics were perceived, but included: intense pressure, harassment, intimidation (example: ICE agents becoming visibly upset when individuals hesitated to sign),

misleading someone to think they had no choice but to sign, misrepresenting the facts (example: ICE agents saying signing would be better for them or give them less problems), and deceptively omitting information (example: not explaining paperwork). Another coercive measure reported was withholding contact to the outside world through delaying the right to a phone call.

Important to note is that the consequences of signing voluntary departure are severe as it forfeits the right to due process and any opportunity to remain in the U.S. where lives and, commonly, citizen-children are.

“They would pressure me to sign a paper, “Do you want to talk on the phone? Sign here.” “No.” “So, you're not going to talk.” “Well, then I won't talk.” Now I know that when they're harassing you, and they're wanting you to sign something, that's when you shouldn't sign at all.”

Carmen, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 19 years, mother of 3 children one of which is a U.S.-citizen

“But it's horrible. They say, “Here, you're going to sign.” Good vibes—they don't force you. They did not force me. But they said, “This one is better for you.” They cheat you. They want to cheat you and say, “That's good. That's going to help you.” And no, no, if you don't really know, if you don't understand and don't notice because of your nerves, you sign and then they say, “No, because you've already signed your voluntary departure.”

Elena, 41-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 26 years, mother of 5 U.S.-citizens

“I told [the ICE officer], “I am not going to sign anything. Whatever you want me to sign, give it to my lawyer. He will tell me what I will sign or what I won't sign.” And he got mad at me, and he almost hit me because I didn't sign the papers for him. He said, “No, you have to sign. You're not from here. You have to get out of here.” I said, “Well, do whatever you want, but I'm not signing anything.” Yes, they get very angry because that's what they want, is for you to sign.”

Renaldo, 56-year-old man, has lived in the U.S. for 30 years, husband and father to U.S.-citizens

“He felt a lot of pressure. They wanted him to sign those papers as his voluntary departure. He was so traumatized from not wanting to sign anything”

Fabiola, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 20 years, mother of 2 U.S.-citizens, 2 brothers were detained one of which was 15-years-old

4. Racism fuels rights violations:

Many participants shared a belief that what had allowed their rights to be violated in the system was racism. They felt that racist ideology—and the fact that they are Latina/o/x—fueled the dehumanization and trampling of rights they experienced. Racism was most often discussed in the context of interpersonal experiences with ICE agents and detention personnel. They noted how racial biases influenced how they were responded

to and treated. As several participants pointed out, insufficient mechanisms are built into the immigration enforcement system to protect immigrants against the consequences of interpersonal racism. For example, ICE officers have substantial discretion to determine how individuals are treated and how cases are processed, potentially making racism a determining factor that guides experiences and outcomes. Multiple participants also believed that the reason they entered the federal immigration enforcement system in the first place—for example, from a simple traffic stop—was due to racial profiling.

“I think they're racist. I think they treat people according to their bias. I was treated well. My husband was treated well. It wasn't the same treatment for everybody that ICE caught at that time. I have friends who were also detained by ICE that were handcuffed, that were treated badly. They never handcuffed me. They never treated me badly.”

Isabel, lighter skinned 36-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. 7 years, mother of a U.S.-citizen

“He let us drive about three miles. Behind us, he was going slowly. And when he stopped us afterwards and they gave us, well, you know, on suspicion of non-documents, for what reason? Because we were dark-skinned? Because we didn't speak English well? So I have always said that this is racial profiling, and it is an injustice.”

Elena, 41-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 26 years, mother of 5 U.S.-citizens, was detained following a traffic stop

“I feel sad because they violate people's rights. It's sometimes because we are Hispanics, because we're Latinos. Like, we're not worth the same as white people, as other people. Like, our rights are not valued the same way.”

Fabiola, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 20 years, mother of 2 U.S.-citizens, 2 brothers were detained one of which was 15-years-old

“Personally, I have seen that they are very derogatory or rude in the way they treat us. They discriminate against us for the simple fact that we are Hispanics, Latinos.”

Carmen, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 19 years, mother of 3 children one of which is a U.S.-citizen

“I think that ICE treats people with... I think it's racism. I feel even physical abuse was done to me and the only thing I could do was keep my head down because I can't be in my country.”

Alondra, 27-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 8 years, wife and mother of U.S.-citizens

5. Criminal treatment as unjust:

Many participants reported feeling treated as if they were dangerous criminals for not having a social security number or current legal status. It was clear that participants invested a lot of energy into processing the stark contrast between what they know to be true of their character and lives—or their family members'—and how they perceived the immigration enforcement system to see them. Being viewed as and treated like a criminal in the system was experienced as unjust and traumatizing.

“From what I experienced, it is true that ICE does not have a heart. They don't care about seeing someone else suffer. They treat you like a criminal because you don't have a social security number. That is why they treat you very badly.”

Elena, 41-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 26 years, mother of 5 U.S.-citizens

“Here in the system, yes, I'm a criminal for a traffic ticket. For anything you're a criminal. When they have you step foot in federal court they treat you as a criminal.”

Alondra, 27-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 8 years, wife and mother of U.S.-citizens

“You have behaved so well. You have done everything you could to be a good citizen, to have a good reputation. And suddenly, someone comes along and tells you that you're the opposite of everything. That you're a criminal. And sometimes they say that to you in front of your kids or sometimes they yell at you in front of the community. It's humiliating. It's deplorable and definitely irrational. I don't understand why they have to act in such a way.”

Emilia, 40-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. 13 years, multiple close friends were detained

“They treat those they arrest like criminals, as if they had killed someone for the right to come to work.”

Isabel, 36-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 7 years, mother of a U.S.-citizen

“When someone does or commits a crime, well, you pay the consequences, right? But there are people who are innocent. But I mean, they're seen as delinquents. So, sometimes the law is unjust, you know? I used to say, we are in the U.S., the laws are fair. But, no. Its not fair. A lot of things are not fair.”

Fabiola, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 20 years, mother of 2 U.S.-citizens, 2 brothers were detained one of which was 15-years-old

“ICE was always looking for a way to catch as many people as possible to deport. And they didn't do it because you have a ticket, because you are criminals, because you robbed, because you killed, no. Just to get out every immigrant possible that they can, catch them, and deport them. That's the way they do it.”

Mary, 43-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 5 years, mother of 3 children 2 of which are U.S.-citizens, husband was detained

6. Treatment as neglectful:

Participants commonly described the immigration enforcement system as neglectful of their needs during arrest or while detained. Three specific scenarios came up repeatedly: being ignored despite painfully tight handcuffs, languishing in frigid facilities, and not receiving medical care.

“The handcuffs were digging into my wrists, and he didn't pay attention to me. He ignored me. So, I said, “Why are you treating me like this? I'm not an animal. Loosen my handcuffs a little bit because they're cutting off the circulation.” And he didn't listen. I was angry there because my hands couldn't take it anymore. And they turned a deaf ear and locked me in a room there. And I was very cold. It was winter. And I was asking for blankets and they didn't give me blankets for a long time.”

Renaldo, 56-year-old man, has lived in the U.S. for 30 years, husband and father to U.S.-citizens

“They blow very cold air on them there. And they feed them very badly. They treat them very badly. They get sick there, and they are ignored. It's very sad, that situation.”

Marcela, 62-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 22 years, wife of a U.S.-citizen, 3 children were detained

“Yes, I think that a lot of the strategy that they have there in that detention center is to try to make the living conditions so bad that you will want to deport yourself and not wait for the legal process. They're not focused on treating them in a humane way.”

Leo, 29-year-old man, has lived in the U.S. for 26 years, brother was detained

“When my husband was detained he had medical problems and they didn't believe him. They didn't allow him help, nor did they help him either. The second time was when the pandemic started and I was very afraid that he would get sick. My husband said that they did not have antibacterial protection and they did not even give them soap to wash their hands, that they had them totally unprotected from everything.”

Francisca, 32-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 11 years, mother of 4 children 2 of which are U.S.-citizens

“For a while I was sick there too. And they didn't want to give me any medical assistance. [Pause] I would get sick a lot there because they didn't want to give us any medical assistance because we were locked up.”

Miguel, 22-year-old man, brother of 3 U.S.-citizens, detained at the beginning of the COVID pandemic

7. Deceptive practices sow community mistrust:

It is well-documented that immigration enforcement officers utilize strategic forms of deception to detain and deport community members. These tactics include providing false information to gain access to community members or to lure them out of their homes and are endorsed by the Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) division of ICE.¹ These ruse practices were seen in participants' reports of officers using deceit to gain access. Participants also shared that ICE officers infiltrate their

1. Kam, M. K. (2022). ICE ruses: From deception to deportation. *Columbia Law Review*, 122(1), 125-172. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27099735>

communities and blend in to gain access to information through friends, neighbors, and coworkers. This blending in and deception leads individuals to question who they can trust and fosters community mistrust.

Participants also expressed a belief that collaborations between ICE and local law enforcement and courts is "extreme" and represents abusive deception. They noted how these collaborations compromise trust in law enforcement among those directly and indirectly affected, including their children.

"ICE gets into our spaces, into our community, and accesses a lot of personal information. It's their way of operating, gaining trust... And there they go weaving their network and extracting the information. They've arrested me, my neighbors, my family."

Isabel, 36-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. 7 years, mother of a U.S.-citizen

"I could see how people had very little confidence in one another. People didn't know if someone had turned them into ICE, even to this day."

Emilia, 40-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. 13 years, multiple close friends were detained

"My brother was arrested at a court. He was paying a speeding ticket. He was going too fast in the car. The police officer demanded that he had to go to court to pay it. He went to court and he just paid the ticket, right, it was nothing, but when he left the court there were officers waiting who detained him."

Leo, 29-year-old man, has lived in the U.S. for 26 years, brother was detained

"I consider that it is an injustice, that it is an abuse by the police. Because they weren't agents. In a way, it wasn't Immigration really. I felt it was abuse because they could have just given a ticket, go to court, and that's it. But no."

"[My daughter] was terrified to see the cops. She would cry. She would cry and tremble. Because she knows that they were agents of the police who arrested us. And she thinks that all the police are bad."

Elena, 41-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 26 years, mother of 5 U.S.-citizens

"It can be very clearly seen that the police, or agencies, courts, work with [ICE]. And yes, it does have impacts. I have witnessed several people—for example, women victims of domestic violence—and they stop themselves from speaking to the authorities and presenting their case because they think that they are going to be deported, that they are going to be looked into by ICE. It very much affects the community, all the people, and affects the most those who are afraid of presenting their case or talking about a problem they have."

Francisca, 32-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 11 years

Mental Health Impacts

Participants reported an array of negative impacts from their experiences with the immigration enforcement system—from family separation to mental health issues to financial struggles. While the impacts of arrest and detention are numerous and are not fully described in this research brief, among the words participants used to describe their experiences were “trauma,” “pain,” “suffering,” “anguish,” and “nightmare.”

Secondary trauma and mental health impacts on family members are a common occurrence. As Francisca described, “They arrested [my husband] in front of my children. They just pulled us away from him, put him in a truck and took him away. [Pause] I’m sorry, this just makes me sick [Cries]. At that moment, what affected me the most was seeing my children, how they saw the way they took their father away.” Emilia, who experienced multiple friends and community members being arrested and detained, noted the impacts of immigration enforcement on immigrants’ children: “The community has this great emotional pain, anxiety, depression, suicide attempts among kids. It’s something that you can’t ignore.” Similarly, Josefina, whose 19-year-old son was detained and deported shared, “I’m still in therapy because it’s already been a year and I can’t get over everything that I went through with [ICE].” Elena’s youngest daughter—a U.S.-citizen—is still dealing with the consequences of her mother’s detention. Elena said, “The little girl still has panic attacks. She had it for more than two years. This is a sequel that the government, that Immigration, does not realize, right? What about our children, right? Hopefully one day we can close this circle and they are calmer, and get therapy so that they are well.”

“It destroys many families. It separates families. It divides them. And it’s difficult for our children. It’s something very, very traumatizing. It causes trauma for children.”

Fabiola, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 20 years, mother of 2 U.S.-citizens, 2 brothers were detained

“We are still in limbo. And what hurts me the most is that my children have also suffered a lot. It hurts me as a mother. That’s why I tell you it’s a nightmare, because I can’t bear to see my children suffer. That’s why I like it when they invite me and I can share my story with a legislator or someone. I like it because what I want is that all these things that we immigrant families live to come to light. I don’t want to keep quiet, because I know that my family and I have suffered a lot and I don’t want any other family to go through what we are going through. [Sighs] I don’t want them to suffer this—the anxiety, the panic attacks, the fears, the trauma.”

Elena, 41-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 26 years, mother of 5 U.S.-citizens

“Finally, the blessed day came when they let me out [of detention]. Oh, I even felt like I could finally breathe, and I felt like I was alive again. When I saw my baby girl, I hugged her and she said, “Mami, I missed you.” And I said, “Me too, mija.” And she asked me where I went. And I said, “I went on vacation, hija.” “And why didn’t you take me with you?” I said, “It’s because I was going to work,” I said, “And you couldn’t be with me.” “Don’t go anymore,” she said, “Don’t leave me anymore.”

Carmen, 42-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 19 years, mother of 3 children one of which is a U.S.-citizen

"The most difficult thing is that you are very scared. And that is when you form trauma that impacts the rest of your life. Because nowadays, there is COVID, right? And for us immigrants, the pandemic is the same. We have always had to be hidden in the shadows... And what we want is to work, and move forward in life, and fulfill our dreams. And don't think that they are big dreams. They are dreams that are so, so simple. What we want is peace. We want to be in our community. We want them to hear our voice, to hear our needs. How do we bring attention to the fact that I'm here? Listen to me, please."

Adriana, 40-year-old woman, has lived in the U.S. for 24 years, mother of 9 U.S.-citizen children

Summary

Findings from this research project reveal trends in how immigrant community members in Colorado experience federal immigration enforcement. The federal immigration enforcement system and actors within it were experienced by participants as aggressive and authoritarian, negligent of human rights and needs, coercive, neglectful, and unfairly treating immigrants as criminals. Participants identified racist ideology as a driver of the dehumanizing treatment they received by immigration authorities. Moreover, strategic forms of deceptive practices by immigration enforcement compromised trust within the community and toward local law enforcement. Combined, these experiences result in multiple mental health consequences for immigrants detained by immigration enforcement, their family members, and their communities.

Policy Recommendations

The current federal immigration enforcement system deprives people of their liberty, separates them from loved ones, excludes them from their communities, and puts them at risk. This goes against America's deepest values. Fairness, freedom, and opportunity should be at the core of our immigration system, yet current immigration laws and the enforcement system are not set up to uphold them. Abuses, rights violations, neglect, and injustice in the immigration enforcement system are permitted to go on because federal immigration rules do not currently center and prioritize human rights.

The Colorado General Assembly can enact policies that protect immigrant community members against abusive federal immigration enforcement, promote community safety, and safeguard immigrants' rights. Colorado should work to limit ICE overreach in the state.

Specifically, Colorado municipalities and local law enforcement agencies should not be permitted to utilize local personnel and resources to engage in federal immigration enforcement. As supported by the findings of this study, Colorado lawmakers should consider taking a strong stance against cruel abuse of power by immigration enforcement in our state.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Elizabeth Kiehne, PhD MSW
Assistant Professor
School of Social Work, Colorado State University
Elizabeth.Kiehne@colostate.edu



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COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY