

Neighbors, Not Threats

The Truth About U.S. Immigrants Detained and Deported



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Executive Summary

The dominant political narrative surrounding immigration often stands in sharp contrast to the lived realities of immigrants and the communities they live in. Drawing on findings from Kino Border Initiative's (KBI) *Congressional Year-End Report 2025* and firsthand testimonies from immigrant deportees received from the United States at the Mexican government's "México Te Abrazo" reception shelter in Nogales, Sonora from May 2025 to April 2026, this policy brief presents evidence on the realities of U.S. immigration enforcement. Public discourse often portrays immigrants as criminals or economic burdens to justify widespread punitive immigrant enforcement measures, including arrest, detention, and deportation. However, empirical data reveals individuals with established lives in the U.S., raising children, supporting their families, running businesses, working across many different industries, and contributing to their local communities.

The evidence shows serious violations of fundamental human rights, including family separation, denial of medical care, racial profiling, barriers to legal access, degrading detention conditions, and loss of personal belongings. The impact of immigration enforcement extends well beyond the individuals directly impacted. Children face emotional disruption, families lose financial stability, and communities become more fearful to trust in public institutions. Local schools, faith communities, and healthcare systems are left to navigate the enduring effects of trauma.

The recommendations promote the need for humane policies, including greater accountability, transparency, and approaches rooted in compassion, fairness, and respect for our shared humanity. They call for policies that protect families, uphold human rights and due process, center immigrant voices, expand safe legal pathways, promote evidence-based understanding, and address root causes of migration. At the heart of the issue is an essential truth: Immigrants are human beings with families, histories, hopes, dreams, and inherent dignity. Regardless of nationality or status, no person should be subjected to treatment that diminishes their worth.

Introduction and Methodology

The Kino Border Initiative (KBI) is a Catholic non-profit organization based in Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. Guided by its vision of *Migration with Dignity*, KBI works alongside migrants, asylum seekers, and deportees to promote justice, inclusion, and equity through holistic humanitarian assistance. By documenting their lived experiences, KBI provides critical evidence of the human impact

of U.S. immigration policies. This policy brief draws on findings from KBI’s *Congressional Year-End Report 2025*, supplemented by additional testimonies from deportees received at the Mexican government’s “México Te Abraza” reception shelter in Nogales, Sonora.

From May 2025 through April 2026, KBI staff visited the Mexican Government’s “México Te Abraza” reception shelter in Nogales, Sonora, five days a week (Tuesday–Saturday) to collect data. Two streams of data were collected: (1) 131 in-depth testimonies of deportees from the United States staying at the reception shelter between May 2025 and February 15, 2026; and (2) a structured intake survey administered to approximately five individuals per day beginning in December 2025, capturing length of U.S. residence, occupation, family ties (including U.S.-citizen relatives), community engagement, the arresting authority, length of detention, and abuses experienced. KBI continued to collect testimonies and surveys at the shelter, describing arrests and detention across multiple states, including Arizona, Texas, Utah, and Colorado.ⁱ However, since April 13, 2026, the U.S. government has been deporting individuals almost exclusively by plane to the south of Mexico with only an average of five people per week arriving at the government reception center, *México Te Abraza*, in Nogales, Sonora.

Facts Over Fear: What the Data Tells Us

The political narrative surrounding immigrants is increasingly through the lens of criminality, border security, and enforcement, often portraying immigrants as threats to public safety or economic stability. However, KBI’s survey data and testimonials challenge false assumptions and illustrate that immigration enforcement extends far beyond the U.S.–Mexico border.

Findings reveal that migration is shaped by a combination of economic pressures, safety concerns, and family reunification rather than the criminal motivations often emphasized in public discourse. Nearly half of respondents identified economic hardship as a primary reason for migration, while 43% cited concerns related to personal safety, and 12% reported migrating in an effort to reunite with family members. Nearly three out of five respondents described leaving their countries because of violence or other serious threats to their well-being.ⁱⁱ Moreover, approximately 50% of those arrested, detained, and deported were not new arrivals, but rather had been long-term residents of the United States.ⁱⁱⁱ Half of deportees interviewed had lived in the United States for more than ten years^{iv} while one-third had lived there for more than twenty years.^v These testimonies underscore that those affected have deep roots in the U.S., including parents of U.S. citizen children, individuals with work permits or pending immigration cases, and people fleeing for their safety.

Myth Versus Reality of Immigrant Residents Arrested and Detained

The following accounts from former U.S. residents illustrate recurring patterns of dehumanizing treatment in U.S. federal detention, including family separation, abuse during arrest and detention, verbal humiliation, and medical neglect. These findings challenge prevailing political narratives and underscore the need for evidence-based immigration policies that value human dignity and the complex realities that fuel migration.

MYTH 1 Migrants Are Primarily Recent Border Crossers

Neighbors, Not Strangers. Many deportees were long-term U.S. residents with deep family and community ties, including parents of U.S. citizen children, individuals with work authorization or pending immigration cases. In 2025, 57% of deportees arriving at KBI had been detained by ICE while living in the U.S. interior, including 50% who lived in the U.S. for more than 10 years and 33% for more than 20 years.^{vi} From January to April 12, 2026 (land deportations were halted on April 13), the number of deportees that Kino served and were detained while living in the U.S. increased to 73%, of which 57% lived there for more than 10 years and 38% for more than 20 years.^{vii}

“What worries me most is that I have seven U.S. citizen children, and I am now separated from them. I am afraid of losing them.”^{viii}

Testimony of a Mexican mother who lived in the United States for 30 years, had no criminal record, and had a pending legal case.

“He was approached by a police officer at a gas station ‘simply because they saw I was Mexican—based on my physical appearance or the way I was dressed.’ The officer followed him until he was stopped, at which point the officer took his green card and tore it up in front of him. ‘I had gone through the entire process and spent a significant amount of money to obtain it,’ he recounted. He informed the officer that he had been residing in the United States for 25 years and possessed legal authorization to remain. The police officer responded, ‘Not anymore.’”^{ix}

Testimony of a married father of U.S. citizen children who had lived in the U.S. for 25 years with legal authorization to remain.

After living in the United States for 25 years, one deportee in detention reported being pressured to sign documents he did not understand. He was deported before his case was resolved, and even his attorney questioned why he had been removed.^x

MYTH 2 Treating Migrants Like Criminals Justifies Inhumane Treatment

Inhumane and Illegal Treatment Can Never Be Justified. The testimonies reveal recurring reports of degrading treatment, verbal abuse, excessive force, overcrowding, medical neglect, and dangerous detention conditions. More than 50% of respondents reported experiencing some form of mistreatment during migration. The abuses attributed to U.S. authorities (46%) include ICE personnel (34%), Border Patrol (26%), and detention staff (21%).^{xi} The data also reveals the severity for deportees in U.S. custody and how abuse extends beyond specific facilities and individual incidents.

“The food was rotten, they mocked us, yelled at us, and shined their flashlights to our faces. There were many of us in the cells. When they saw that the food they gave us had maggots, they laughed and shined the light on the food to scare us even more, emphasizing the maggots.”^{xii}

Testimony of a Honduran mother attempting to reunite with her seriously ill U.S. citizen child described conditions while detained in Florence, AZ.

“When they transferred us from El Paso to Denver, they kept us chained on a bus for 25 hours. For 19 of those hours, they gave us no food or water. My hands and feet were swelling because the chains were too tight, but the officer refused to loosen them. When people became sick and requested medical attention, ICE refused.”^{xiii}

Testimony of a Mexican father transferred from Texas to Denver, Colorado while in ICE custody.



“The agent who was going through my belongings asked me what the medicine was for. I told him it was for my seizures because I suffer from epilepsy. As soon as I told him that, the agent threw the medicine into the trash.”^{xiv}

A Mexican man detained in Florence, Arizona described denial of medical care during a 30-day detention.

One respondent lived in Arizona for more than 60 years and was detained for over a year. During his time in detention, he was diagnosed with colon cancer and deported without receiving medical treatment.^{xv}

MYTH 3 Immigration Enforcement Simply Solves a Border Problem

Collateral Damage Left Behind.

Immigration enforcement separates parents from children, interrupts legal proceedings, disrupts long-established community ties, and leaves lasting emotional and psychological consequences for families. 55.1% of those detained while living in the United States reported family separation, including 34% who were separated from their children.^{xvi}

“They handcuffed me in front of my children.”^{xvii}

Testimony of a young Venezuelan mother whose six-year-old daughter was interrogated and nine-year-old son frightened by Border Patrol. After deportation, her family did not know where she was for days.

A young mother of two was asked whether she wanted her children deported with her. She refused because she feared they would be separated or placed in unsafe conditions. She was pressured to sign English-language documents she could not read and was ultimately separated from her husband and children.^{xviii}

“What worries me most is that I have seven U.S. citizen children, and I am now separated from them.”^{xix}

Testimony of a Mexican mother who lived in the U.S. for 30 years, was detained for years at the Eloy Detention Center in Arizona, and was later wrongfully deported to Nogales while her legal case remained pending.

Together, the evidence highlights serious mistreatment and threats to health, safety, and well-being experienced by immigrants and asylum seekers residing in the U.S. Respondents consistently reported experiencing physical and psychological trauma during detention and immigration enforcement proceedings, frequently identifying ICE agents, Border Patrol, and detention staff as the primary perpetrators. The accounts document a profound human toll and expose serious systemic failures for vulnerable individuals.

Consequences for U.S. Families, Local Communities, and Public Institutions

Family separation, prolonged detention, and the sudden removal of parents and caregivers can create significant emotional and psychological distress for both adults and children. Abrupt removal destabilizes households, disrupts support networks, and creates emotional and financial hardship for those left behind. In addition, reports of racial profiling and mistreatment by authorities diminish trust in public institutions and weaken communities. When individuals fear interactions with law enforcement

or public agencies, they may be less likely to report crimes, seek healthcare, access local resources, or engage with their children's schools.

Migration with Dignity: Re-Centering Policy Based on Evidence and Humanity

Rather than depicting immigrants primarily as security threats and economic burdens, the findings center on the human stories of parents, long-term U.S. residents, survivors of violence, and individuals seeking safety or reunification with loved ones. These harms do not end with the individuals who are detained or deported. They ripple through families, schools, workplaces, and communities. Children are separated from caregivers, families experience financial and emotional instability, and communities are disrupted by the removal of long-term residents who have lived, worked, and contributed in the U.S. for years.

Findings and Policy Recommendations

Findings challenge common misconceptions about migration and point to the need for policies that are informed by evidence, responsive to lived experiences, and reflective of our shared humanity. Among the report's most urgent findings is the widespread separation of families, including the deportation of long-term U.S. residents. Families who have built their lives in the United States are suddenly torn apart. The report further documents barriers to due process and medical care, degrading detention conditions, racial profiling, and other practices that leave lasting effects on children, schools, healthcare systems, employers, and communities. Collectively, the findings underscore the need for immigration enforcement policies that protect family unity, uphold fundamental human rights, and recognize one's dignity.

1. Protect Family Unity

Reform detention and deportation practices to prioritize family unity and prevent the unnecessary separation of parents, children, and family members.

Evidence: KBI found that 55.1% of individuals detained while living in the United States reported family separation, and 34% stated being separated from their children (*KBI Congressional Year-End Report 2025*, p. 55). 60% of deportees arriving at KBI had been living in the United States before deportation, many with established families, employment, and deep community ties (p. 55).

2. Strengthen Oversight and Accountability

Strengthen independent oversight of immigration enforcement and detention systems through transparent reporting, investigations, and accountability for documented violations.

Evidence: 43% of deportations from the U.S. interior to Nogales began following interactions with local law enforcement, highlighting the important role that local agencies play in immigration enforcement (p. 7). Testimonies describe arrests following routine encounters with police in states, including Arizona and Utah. The report documents lack of accountability for the degrading detention conditions, confiscation of personal belongings, and barriers to legal access, with recommendations for expanded congressional oversight (pp. 129, 147).

3. Ensure Humane Treatment and Due Process

Guarantee humane treatment for all individuals in U.S. custody by ensuring access to food, clean water, medical care, sanitary living conditions, communication with loved ones, and due process protections.

Evidence: 46% of migrants reported abuse by U.S. authorities. Among those reports of abuse: 34% involved ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement), 26% involved U.S. Border Patrol, 21% involved guards in U.S. immigration detention facilities. (*p. 25*), while documentation of inhumane treatment in custody, including denial of medical care, inadequate food and water, overcrowding, and restricted communication with loved ones (*pp. 25, 43–44, 127*).

4. Restore Safe and Accessible Legal Pathways

Restore safe and accessible legal pathways for individuals and families fleeing violence, persecution, and instability, reducing the need for dangerous migration journeys and life-threatening border crossings.

Evidence: Approximately three out of every five migrants arriving at KBI in 2025 reported escaping abuse or persecution after legal protections were restricted (*pp. 5, 96*).

5. Center Immigrant Voices and Lived Experiences

Ensure immigration policy development and reform reflect the lived experiences of immigrants and their families, alongside credible, systematic evidence.

6. Promote Accurate, Evidence-Based Public Understanding of Migration

Challenge harmful misconceptions about migration by promoting accurate, evidence-based information that recognizes immigrants' lived experiences, positive contributions, and inherent dignity.

Evidence: 60% of deportees arriving at KBI had been living in the U.S. before deportation, many with families, employment, and community ties (*p. 55*).

7. Address the Root Causes of Migration

Address the economic hardship, violence, political persecution, instability, and family separation that compel individuals and families to migrate.

Evidence: Approximately three out of every five migrants arriving at KBI reported escaping violence or persecution (*p. 5*), while 45% cited economic reasons and 43% cited personal safety concerns as cause for migration (*pp. 5, 12*).

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this brief challenges us all to move beyond political narratives and confront the human consequences of current immigration policies, not just on immigrants, but their extended families, employers, and communities in the U.S. Behind every statistic, detention, and deportation is a human being with dignity and equal worth. The findings call for an immigration system grounded in evidence, fairness, and respect for everyone's human rights.

References

Kino Border Initiative. *Congressional Year-End Report 2025*. 2025.

Kino Border Initiative. *Survey Data 2025-2026*.

Endnotes

- ⁱ KBI, *Congressional Year-End Report 2025* (Nogales, AZ: KBI, 2025).
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 5, 12.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, 6, 10.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 10.
- ^{vi} KBI, *Congressional Year-End Report 2025* (Nogales, AZ: KBI, 2025), 55.
- ^{vii} KBI, *Survey Data 2025-2026*.
- ^{viii} KBI, *Congressional Year-End Report 2025* (Nogales, AZ: KBI, 2025), 44.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, 39.
- ^x *Ibid.*, 165.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, 16.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 30.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 41.
- ^{xv} KBI, *September 2026 Congressional Update*.
- ^{xvi} KBI, *Congressional Year-End Report 2025* (Nogales, AZ: KBI, 2025), 55.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 75.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 73.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, 164.