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A Narrative Toolkit | February 2024

The Impact of ICE Surveillance Technology on the Well-being of the Children of Immigrants

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INTRODUCTION

This toolkit was prepared alongside the publication of new peer-reviewed [research on the social, emotional, and mental effects of electronic monitors \(EMs\) on the children of immigrant families](#). The criminalization of immigrants has been a defining feature of immigration policy and enforcement over the last four decades. Successive administrations have implemented laws, policies, and practices that treat immigrants as criminals and security threats, subjecting them to harsh detention, deportation, and surveillance.

This repressive, restrictive approach has relied heavily on new technologies to track and monitor immigrants. Electronic monitoring (EM) shackles immigrants to ankle bracelets equipped with GPS tracking, enabling Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to surveil their movements 24/7. Although touted as an "alternative to detention," EM imposes continuous state surveillance on immigrants, many of whom have no criminal history.

By 2018, nearly 80,000 immigrants were monitored through EM or other surveillance methods under ICE's Intensive Supervision Appearance Program. The Trump administration expanded the program, shackling immigrants to EM at unprecedented rates. While enrollment has declined under the Biden administration, close to 15,000 immigrants remain monitored through EM as of December 2022.

EM surveillance permeates the everyday lives of immigrants, producing fear, anxiety, and stigma while fracturing parent-child relationships and contracting social networks. The devices frequently malfunction, putting immigrants at risk of being detained again or deported over technological glitches. Visually, the ankle bracelets mark monitored immigrants as "criminals," leading to social isolation and discrimination. This harsh form of supervision also enables ICE to map immigrants' movements and social networks.

Although research has examined the experiences of immigrants shackled to EM, less is known about how children are affected when their parent is marked as a "criminal alien" under relentless state surveillance. How does the trauma of immigration enforcement extend to impact family relationships? As parents endure criminalization, ongoing punishment, and exclusion through EM monitoring, what are the consequences for their children's well-being?



PURPOSE

This toolkit takes a peer-reviewed study and compiles the real stories of Los Angeles-based immigrant families to show how EMs impact the well-being of children, many of whom are US citizens and legal permanent residents. These immigrant families' stories

illustrate how "Alternatives to Detention" (ATDs) are not a silver bullet and can themselves have harmful, traumatic impacts on immigrant children, families, and their communities constituting an "extended punishment." This document compiles their words to use as a storytelling resource for those who want to center immigrant children and families in their narratives. All names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Storytelling and Advocacy

Storytelling is a key part of persuasive advocacy. State and federal legislators put more weight on feedback from someone who is (1) from their district/state and (2) directly impacted by an issue. We can use storytelling to connect the human impact to public policies. Telling stories:

- Lends credibility to the impact of a piece of legislation.
- Gives vital context to the impact on individuals' lives and futures.
- Can break through rhetoric to put a human face to the problem.
- Gives urgency for a solution.
- Can engage your listener and move them to action.
- Demonstrates the harms or unintended consequences of policies and can generate alternative solutions from directly impacted individuals.

How to Use This Toolkit

Pair the talking points below with the real words and experiences of immigrant families grappling with the consequences of invasive ICE surveillance technologies.

Advocates

- Bring these stories to meetings with Congressional offices, voters, and press.
- Cite the peer-reviewed study in written materials—quote their narratives.
- Service providers—Incorporate the complex mental, social, and emotional effects of ICE surveillance technologies into your services, with acknowledgement of the impacts to parent-child relationships and community social network contraction.

Congress Members and Staffers

- Cite the peer-reviewed study in analyses and written materials.



- Highlight these stories in speeches and public forums—bring these perspectives and experiences to the House and Senate floors.
- Los Angeles and California Congressmembers—Highlight the experiences of your Los Angeles area constituents and community members.

Press

- Cite the peer-reviewed study and its findings.
- When reporting on ICE surveillance technologies, include the voices of those directly impacted by EMs and other government surveillance tools.
- To speak with the researcher or willing participants of the study, contact admin@iwbcollab.org

Activists and Public

- Use the peer-reviewed study as a vehicle to speak out against ICE surveillance technology in an evidence-based way.
- Share research on social media using suggested draft tweets contained in this toolkit.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Electronic monitoring inflicts trauma and fear in immigrant children, eroding their emotional health. Children dread the prospect of family separation if a parent is detained or deported over EM issues.
- The visual stigma of electronic monitoring disrupts children's lives, causing feelings of shame and isolation. Older children understand the "criminal" implications of the device.
- Constant EM surveillance impedes parent-child bonding. Monitoring causes stress and limits activities, harming the quality of relationships.
- Electronic monitoring fractures children's social connections and support systems. Friends avoid children of parents with EM to distance from "criminality."
- The unreliability of electronic monitoring puts immigrant parents at perpetual risk of deportation, creating instability and anxiety for the whole family.
- Although touted as "humane," electronic monitoring extends the trauma of immigration enforcement to children. The burden of state surveillance spills over to harm kids' well-being.
- In summary, electronic monitoring operates as a form of state surveillance that radiates out to negatively impact children of immigrants. The threat of detention



and deportation created by unreliable EM technology disrupts family life and damages child development.

TALKING POINTS ON ELECTRONIC MONITORS & ICE SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY

Below are some talking points and general statistics on EMs and ICE surveillance technologies from the peer-reviewed article, *The Impact of ICE Surveillance Technology on the Well-being of the Children of Immigrants*. For more information on EMs and ICE surveillance technology research and advocacy, see Section: Additional Resources of this toolkit.

Talking Points

- **Electronic monitoring shackles immigrants to unreliable technology that frequently malfunctions, putting families at constant risk of separation** through detention and deportation.
- The **visual stigma** imposed by electronic monitors associates immigrant parents with criminality in the eyes of their children and co-ethnic community, **inflicting trauma, shame, and feelings of isolation**.
- **Constant GPS tracking under electronic monitoring disrupts family life**, impeding parent-child bonding and causing chronic stress and anxiety for immigrant parents.
- ICE's electronic monitoring program operates under the guise of providing a "humane" alternative to detention, when in reality it **extends the harms of immigration enforcement to children**.
- **Abolishing electronic monitoring and halting the adoption of even more invasive surveillance technologies like smartphone tracking apps is crucial** to protecting the rights of immigrants and their families.
- **The U.S. should invest in case management programs and community-based alternatives** that mitigate the damage done by immigration enforcement rather than relying on electronic shackles.
- Immigration reform must address the root causes of immigrant criminalization and mass detention **by providing pathways to citizenship and promoting the dignity and humanity of all people**.
- Electronic monitoring **tears apart families and communities** while failing to accomplish any legitimate purpose – this unreliable and unjust surveillance tool has no place in a society that **values human rights**.



Statistics

- Nearly 300,000 immigrants are under ICE surveillance through electronic monitors, phone reporting, or smartphone apps as of March 2023.
- Usage of electronic monitors expanded under Trump and remains high under Biden, with around 15,000 immigrants shackled as of December 2022.
- There are approximately 6 million children under 18 who live with an undocumented parent in the United States.
- In 2020, Los Angeles had one of the highest numbers of individuals enrolled in the Alternative to Detention (ATD) program at approximately 4,000 participants.
- More than half (55%) of all children in Los Angeles County are second-generation immigrants.
- The study was based on interviews with 40 immigrant parents monitored via electronic shackles in Los Angeles between 2015-2018.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

What are Electronic Monitors (EMs)?

Electronic monitors (EMs) are ankle shackles equipped with GPS tracking technology that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) uses to monitor immigrants. Under ICE's "Alternatives to Detention" program, immigrants are required to wear these devices that allow 24/7 surveillance of their movements and location.

The bulky monitors frequently malfunction, putting immigrants at risk of re-detention or deportation. Visually, EMs stigmatize wearers as "criminal aliens."

How many immigrants in the custody of the United States are subjected to EM surveillance?

As of March 2023, there are nearly 300,000 immigrants under ICE surveillance through electronic monitors, smartphone tracking apps, or phone check-ins. Approximately 15,000 immigrants remain shackled to electronic monitors as of December 2022. However, it is important to exercise caution when using data reported by ICE as in December 2022, ICE numbers for EM were erroneous, with an estimated 15,000 people enrolled instead of 60,000. Usage of EMs expanded significantly under Trump and remains high under Biden. By 2018, around 80,000 immigrants were monitored through electronic shackles under the Alternatives to Detention program.



Studies show that children of immigrants regardless of citizenship status exhibit feelings of fear that their parents might be deported. How do we know that sentiments of fear among children will be reduced if we address these issues?

Research shows that immigration enforcement tactics like EMs that criminalize parents and threaten deportation instill profound fear in immigrant children. Children experience nightmares, anxiety, depression, and emotional trauma from the looming possibility of family separation.

Replacing unreliable EMs with non-punitive, community-based alternatives would reduce the constant threat of parental detention that terrifies immigrant children. Mitigating the trauma of immigration enforcement on families would directly address the source of children's fears.

Do enforcement mechanisms have a significant correlation with court appearance rates or are there studies that show these patterns exist regardless?

Studies show that immigrants overwhelmingly appear at immigration court hearings and ICE check-ins even without invasive surveillance like EMs. Detention and harsh enforcement are not necessary to ensure compliance. Immigrants have strong incentives to pursue their legal cases and mitigating circumstances like family ties and community connections already ensure high appearance rates.

How does an immigrant become eligible for Alternatives to Detention programs?

Eligibility for ICE's Alternatives to Detention program is determined on a case-by-case basis. Factors considered include immigration history, criminal record, community ties, and flight risk. The process lacks transparency and clear guidelines.

Some immigrants are shackled to EMs upon release from detention while others are compelled to enroll in ATD to avoid detention. Many have no criminal history and are only accused of immigration violations.

What are some community-based programs that could be implemented instead of ICE surveillance technologies? What are some other non-surveillance methods that could be deployed that are less invasive?



Effective alternatives to EMs and detention include case management programs, referrals to community organizations, and social services access. Community-based supports like legal aid, housing assistance, medical care, education, and counseling can facilitate compliance without criminalizing immigrants.

Regular check-ins can also be accomplished through less invasive telephone reporting rather than GPS tracking. Ultimately, we should strive for immigration policy grounded in human dignity, due process, and family unity.

NARRATIVE REPOSITORY

Impact of EMs on Children's Well-Being

Rita, an immigrant from Mexico, and mother of seven- and nine-year-old US citizen children:

"It breaks me to see my children scared when it makes noises...I talk to them, hold them, and tell them everything will be fine; what else can I do? They cry anyways...the oldest is constantly asking me if I'm going to leave them."

Joshua, a migrant from Honduras, father of a 12-year-old daughter, Amanda:

"I could tell she was worried that I came out [of detention] with a *grillete* [EM]... She didn't want to go to school. She said, 'I don't want them to take you while I'm at school'...At night, she had nightmares and would wake up sobbing because she was afraid they [ICE] would take me."

Gisela, a Mexican immigrant, mother of a seven-year-old son, Brian:

"She [caseworker] called my name, but I couldn't hear because the [waiting]room was crowded. She yelled at me, 'Why did you bring your kid? Children are not allowed here!'... and then she yelled at everyone, 'You all don't like to follow the rules!' and other rude things, and my child would see all of that. He was afraid to go there...and when ICE came to the house, he would hide and would not speak at all until they left."

The Shame of Criminal Stigma

Domenico, a father from Guatemala of two teenage children, David and Gema:

"People look at you like you're a criminal. I can deal with that, but it hits differently when they do it in front of your kids. It's like I failed them...We went to the park, and



security pulled me to the side because they wanted to look at it [EM], and everyone stared at us. They [teenage children] were ashamed.”

Ceci, mother of Ivan and from Honduras:

“My son doesn’t want me to go to his high school because he is embarrassed that his friends are going to see the *grillette* [EM] and make fun of him. I said, ‘I wouldn’t go.’ I don’t want to put him in that situation, and I don’t want the other parents or the teachers to look at us badly.”

Impact on Intimate and Communal Relationships

Miguel, an immigrant from Mexico and father of 8-year-old son, Matias:

“When he first saw it [EM], he didn’t say much about it...But then we went to the beach. He was so excited because he wanted to go in the water with the boogie board. I told him he couldn’t use the boogie board because I was afraid that if something happened, I would have to jump in, and it [EM] would get destroyed. He was mad and punched the boogie board...Jessica [Matia’s mom] says that he has been having issues with anger at school and getting in trouble...when I asked him why he got mad, he said, he just wanted it [EM] gone so we could go in the water together.”

Irma, an immigrant from Mexico and mother of two:

“I felt sick and tired because it [EM] would not let me sleep. It was painful! My leg was burning...Some nights it would not stop beeping. It would wake up my husband too. We would argue because he was too tired to go work. Before my check-ins [with ICE], I had moments that I would yell at the kids and cry...and the kids would ask me, ‘mommy, what’s wrong?’.”

Lorena, a migrant from El Salvador and mother of five-year-old Dalila:

“She would ask, ‘mommy, what is that?’ and point to it. I would tell her that it was to charge my cellphone...as parents, we try to protect our kids from hurtful things, even if I have to lie to her, but I could tell she picked up on what was happening.”

Community Networks Contract

Leslie, a migrant from Guatemala and mother of Zoe:

“Friends wouldn’t return my calls after they saw me with this [EM]. They think that because I have this, I have some problems with the police...my daughter texted their



daughter, and she said that they [her parents] are afraid of ICE because they also don't have papers."

Tania, an immigrant from Mexico, and mother of Jairo:

One loses friends. You think you know them, but when they see you with this [EM], things change...He [Jairo] would come back upset from school because a kid he used to be friends with said he didn't want to hang out anymore because I was "illegal." I tried talking to the kid's mom—she's a friend of mine—but she made me feel less...I don't blame the kids. I blame the parents, they teach the kids to say mean things.

DRAFT SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

- New study reveals how ICE electronic monitoring harms children's mental health and parent-child relationships. Surveillance tech causes fear, stigma, and isolation. Learn more: <https://www.iwbcollab.org/briefing>
- Kids endure trauma when a parent is shackled to an ICE electronic monitor. The device disrupts family life and damages emotional bonds. Read new article and policy brief here: <https://www.iwbcollab.org/briefing>
- ICE electronic monitoring impedes immigrant parents from fully engaging in children's lives. Surveillance tech limits activities and causes stress/fear. Learn more: <https://www.iwbcollab.org/briefing>
- Study shows ICE electronic monitors stigmatize immigrant families. Children feel shame & anger when parents are marked as "criminals." Read article and policy brief here: <https://www.iwbcollab.org/briefing>
- ICE surveillance via electronic monitors fractures children's social connections. Friends avoid kids with parents who wear the devices. Learn more: <https://www.iwbcollab.org/briefing>
- When parents are shackled to electronic monitors, kids miss out on key parental involvement at school due to stigma. Read new academic research and policy brief: <https://www.iwbcollab.org/briefing>
- Study reveals extended punishment of immigrant families through electronic monitoring. Surveillance tech threatens children's well-being including US citizens and legal permanent residents. Learn more: <https://www.iwbcollab.org/briefing>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Vera Institute of Justice, [People on Electronic Monitoring](#)



- African Bureau for Immigration and Social Affairs (ABISA), Boston Immigration Justice and Accountability Network (BIJAN), Community Justice Exchange, Detention Watch Network, Envision Freedom Fund, Freedom for Immigrants, Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR), Just Futures Law, La Resistencia, Long Beach Immigrant Rights Coalition (LBIRC), Mijente, Organized Communities Against Deportations (OCAD), and Youth Justice Coalition,
- George Washington University Law School, [ELECTRONIC PRISONS: The Operation of Ankle Monitoring in the Criminal Legal System](#)
- Austin Kocher, [ICE's Data on Alternatives to Detention Raises Ongoing Quality Concerns + Recap of New Immigration Data](#)
- Human Rights Watch, [Dismantling Detention: International Alternatives to Detaining Immigrants](#)