

Untangling Immigration Data

Key points & resources for the City of Boston

Austin Kocher, PhD • Relevant Research • July 2026

Over the past year, immigration enforcement changed in kind. It grew in scale, moved into the interior, and shifted toward people with no criminal record, and the human cost now falls on people well beyond the intended targets, including U.S. citizens and long-settled families here in Boston. The data to see this is public, and you can check it yourself.

A useful way to read the year is to sort each practice into one of three tiers, then walk from arrest to detention to deportation. **Amplified normal:** lawful practices now intensified. **Abnormal:** technically lawful, but new and extreme. **Illegal:** blocked or found unconstitutional. Most of what is happening is amplification of the normal, which is why it helps to name the escalations plainly.

What changed nationally

- **Detention nearly doubled.** People held on a single day rose from 39,703 in January 2025 to a peak of 70,766, and stand near 65,765 as of July 2026. The number of facilities roughly doubled.
- **The “warehouse” model.** ICE is shifting to very large facilities designed for 7,000–10,000 people, a projected \$38.3 billion, in a hub-and-spoke system officials compare to Amazon fulfillment.
- **Who is arrested changed.** The fastest-growing group is people with no criminal conviction and no pending charge. By ICE’s own categories, that group grew about 25x during 2025, versus 1.8x for people with convictions.
- **More force, in the community.** About 85% of arrests now happen in the community rather than at a jail, a growing share are warrantless, and the Washington Post recorded 1,460 use-of-force incidents by ICE between January 2024 and February 2026.
- **Local police, federal role. 287(g) agreements,** which let ICE deputize state and local police, expanded quickly. A **detainer** asks a local jail to hold a person for ICE, which raises a Fourth Amendment concern when it extends custody with no local basis.
- **The courts, and the human cost.** Immigration courts sit inside the executive branch, not the judiciary, asylum denial rates run above 80%, and a lawyer changes the outcome by roughly 15x. At least 22 people died in ICE custody in 2026, about one every nine days.

What the data shows in Boston and the region

- **Enforcement changed regime in 2025.** ICE arrests in Massachusetts now run about 4–5x their 2024 baseline, with monthly spikes above 1,300.
- **Most had no record.** About 6 in 10 people arrested in Massachusetts had no criminal conviction or pending charge, and about 85% were arrested in the community, not handed over from a jail.
- **Removal moved out of the courtroom.** New removal cases filed in Boston fell about 85% from 2024 to 2025, because removal now runs through reinstated and expedited orders that never create a court case.
- **A large resident population is affected.** 190,290 New England residents had an open immigration case as of May 31, 2026. Of those, 127,686 live in Massachusetts, and 92% of those in the seven Greater Boston counties.
- **“Immigrant” is not one variable.** Boston’s two most exposed groups, Brazilians and Haitians, do not appear in the Hispanic-origin category. The census measure that tracks exposure here is **nativity** (where a person was born), rather than ethnicity. About half of the foreign-born are already U.S. citizens.

Tools you can use (free & public)

Deportation Data Project • deportationdata.org

Researchers at UC Berkeley and UCLA obtain raw federal enforcement records through FOIA litigation and publish them: case-level ICE arrests, detainers, detention, and immigration-court data. This is the primary source dataset behind the Massachusetts and Boston figures. Best for the most granular data available anywhere.

Immigration Enforcement Dashboard • [EnforcementDashboard.com](https://enforcementdashboard.com)

An interactive dashboard (built by Relevant Research) that turns the latest ICE arrest and detention data into maps and charts a non-specialist can read. Filter by state, date, age, and criminal history, and download the underlying data. Best for a quick, credible answer to “what is happening in our area?”

DetentionReports.com • Relevant Research

Facility-level detention statistics drawn from ICE’s own biweekly spreadsheet, made searchable and sortable. Best for questions about a specific detention facility, capacity, and population over time.

Detention Pregnancy Tracker • [DetentionPregnancyTracker.com](https://detentionpregnancytracker.com)

Tracks pregnant and postpartum people held in ICE detention, a group the headline totals hide.

TRAC Immigration • tracreport.org

Syracuse University’s long-running clearinghouse for immigration-court and enforcement data. Best for immigration-court trends: backlog, outcomes, asylum grant rates, and representation, by court and nationality.

ICE detention spreadsheet & EOIR • original government sources

ICE publishes a periodic detention statistics workbook at ice.gov/detain/detention-management. The Executive Office for Immigration Review maintains the courts’ case database. These are the original releases other tools build on, so a figure can always be traced to its origin.

Where to learn more

Recorded conversations I have hosted with the people behind this reporting:

- **ACLU**, on ICE’s attacks on American communities, with Naureen Shah and Denise Bell: austinkocher.substack.com/p/agents-of-chaos-and-cruelty-a-conversation
- **Human Rights Watch**, on the Minneapolis enforcement surge, with Brian Root and Reagan Williams: austinkocher.substack.com/p/what-did-ices-enforcement-surge-cost
- **The Washington Post**, on ICE’s mass detention system, with reporter Doug MacMillan: austinkocher.substack.com/p/investigating-ices-mass-detention-fba
- **National Immigration Law Center**, on the \$70 billion enforcement bill, with Heidi Altman: austinkocher.substack.com/p/do-not-give-one-more-dollar-to-ice
- **American Immigration Council**, on rethinking interior enforcement, with Nayna Gupta and Aaron Reichlin-Melnick: austinkocher.substack.com/p/rethinking-interior-enforcement-a

How to read any immigration statistic

- **Ask what the unit is.** A “detention” number can count facility book-ins or a person’s whole stay. An “arrest” number can be an administrative arrest or a book-in. They are not the same.
- **Ask for the date.** Detained population and pending caseload are moving totals, so always attach a date.
- **Ask about geography, and define the term.** Some data (courts, census) is local, while ICE arrest data stops at the state level. And words like “undocumented,” “qualify” for asylum, and “ordered removed” each have precise, often surprising, meanings.

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