Data Appendix: How many children are affected by parental immigrant detention?

May 2026

This document describes the methodology for producing the estimates shown in the May 2026 data interactive. The interactive relies on several data sources. One is individual-level detention data from the Deportation Data Project (DDP). This is merged with information from the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS). We also estimate detention totals using the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detention Management Report (DMR). The data and methodology are described below. We also discuss the interactive tool and compare our estimates to existing estimates of children affected by enforcement.

Terminology.

We use the term undocumented and unauthorized interchangeably here to refer to individuals who are living in the United States without firm legal status, including those with or without some form of protection from removal. This includes those with parole, those in the queue for an asylum hearing, those with temporary protected status or other forms of liminal status, those who have overstayed a visa, and those unknown to the government. We consider all of these individuals to be at risk of detention in a sufficiently expansive enforcement environment.

We note that our analysis focuses on book-ins to detention rather than removals. The terms deportation and removal are used interchangeably below. In some cases, children affected by their parent's detention are reunited with their detained parent, though of course the separation is likely to be a traumatic event even if short-lived. In the current environment, however, it is likely that detention leads to removal. A ProPublica study following ICE arrests of mothers of U.S. citizen children over the first seven months of the administration found that 60 percent had been removed and 17 percent remained in custody at the study's conclusion (https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-family-deportations-ice-citizen-kids).

When we describe children, we refer to minor children, i.e. those under 18 years of age.

DDP data.

To learn about characteristics of detainees, we rely on ICE detention data obtained by the Deportation Data Project (https://deportationdata.org/data/processed/ice.html). We use the detention data release that was available when this work began in February 2026, which includes individual-level data on ICE detentions through 10/15/2025. We restrict the sample to book-ins to detention that occurred 1/1/2025-10/15/2025. We further restrict the sample to eliminate arrests at the border and other non-interior enforcement cases,

we de-duplicate individuals appearing more than once in the data, and we drop the approximately 1 percent of detainees who are under age 18 (N=2,112). This yields a sample of 213,506 detainees.

We use the DDP information to characterize the demographic characteristics of detainees. Of the sample detainees, 194,378 (91.04 percent) are coded as male in the data. For 85 detainees (0.04 percent) with missing sex information, we assume they are male. This is a conservative assumption in the sense that it likely lowers the estimated number of affected children, because men are less likely to have children in their households. We define three age groups that are correlated with parental status and the number of children: 18-29, 30-49, and 50+. We define country or region of origin by accounting for the ten most prevalent countries of origin among these detainees (Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Cuba, and Dominican Republic). Detainees who are not from these countries are grouped into regions: Other Caribbean/Central America/South America, Asia, Africa, and Rest of World. Of the detainees, 15.2 percent are described as married in the dataset. This field is missing for 25.4 percent of detainees, and we assume they are unmarried. This is a conservative assumption because unmarried individuals are less likely to have children in their households.

Separately, we characterize the distribution of the state of residence of detainees by examining the distribution of the apprehension state when a valid state of apprehension is reported.

ACS data.

We use the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) data to obtain information on household structure of likely undocumented immigrants. The ACS is a household survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau which includes a roughly 1 percent representative sample of the United States population; we use a version cleaned and disseminated by IPUMS-USA (https://usa.ipums.org/usa/). The ACS allows us to observe each person's household members, including any spouse and any co-resident children.

The ACS asks about citizenship and place of birth, but does not specify immigration status among non-citizens. We probabilistically assign likely undocumented status by considering observable characteristics of each non-citizen. These include age, time in U.S., age at arrival in the U.S., school enrollment, post-graduate enrollment, educational attainment, English proficiency, employment status, occupation, being married to a U.S. citizen or likely permanent resident, being the parent of an adult U.S. citizen in the

household (which may indicate potential eligibility for lawful status), being the child of a U.S. citizen or likely legal immigrant (which may indicate potential eligibility for lawful status), health insurance status, Medicare participation, Medicaid participation, and income relative to poverty. Survey weights are adjusted to reflect likely undercount for different immigrant status populations. This procedure does not identify any individual's true legal status; rather, it produces a weighted analytic population whose observable characteristics are consistent with those of the unauthorized population for the purpose of describing household structures of the population. This exercise yields a sample of 65,164 likely unauthorized adult immigrants as defined above.

From this sample, we define cells based on sex, age group, country/region of origin, and marital status. These are defined to align with the DDP data. We collapse the data by weighted demographic cell to find the probability of being a parent, the average number of children, the average number of U.S. citizen children, and the ages of those children. We also assess information about children by whether any likely undocumented parent has a co-parent in the household and, if so, whether that co-parent is also likely undocumented. Therefore, for a given set of individuals defined by sex, age group, country/region of origin, and marital status, we describe the household structure of likely unauthorized individuals.

Merging data sources to estimate the number of children of detainees.

Because the DDP detention data lack information on the presence of children, we use the collapsed ACS information to impute parental status. Specifically, we merge the collapsed data from the ACS with information on household structure among likely unauthorized immigrants to the DDP data based on sex, age group, country/region of origin, and marital status. We then apply the ACS information about children and co-parents to detainees in each sex, age group, origin, and marital status category. The implicit assumption in our baseline approach is that those booked into ICE detention following an interior arrest have similar household structures as the overall likely undocumented population within the same sex, age group, country/region of origin, and marital status.

Using the merged data, we estimate that 26.9 percent of detainees are parents of a child and 20.2 percent of detainees are parents of a citizen child. For comparison, we estimate that the comparable rates in full unauthorized population are 38.1 percent and 27.2 percent respectively. Detainees have demographic characteristics that make them less likely to be co-resident parents – for example, most detainees are men, and unauthorized men are less likely to be living with children than unauthorized women.

To assess the robustness of our estimates to the assumption that detainees have similar households to demographically comparable likely unauthorized immigrants, we offer alternatives in the interactive. The lower bound assumes the probability is only 80 percent of that implied by the ACS matching procedure, the upper bound assumes it is 120 percent.

As discussed below, the ICE Detention Management Report (DMR) also includes a fiscal year total of the number of detained parents with U.S. citizen children. For fiscal year 2025, this number was 18,277. (To find this number, go to the April 9, 2026 release of the Detention Management Report, find the tab called "Semiannual".) We compare this to the total number of book-ins to detention from interior arrests in FY 2025 to get the implied probability of being a parent of a citizen child of 8.2 percent. This is less than half (~40 percent) of the comparable number using our preferred approach. For a scenario aligned with the DMR number, we scale our estimates of the number of children by citizenship and age accordingly. This generates a scenario with a much lower number of detained parents and affected children.

Developing per-detainee estimates and converting them to aggregate numbers of affected children.

For simulated detention levels up to 400,000, we use the merged ACS and DDP data to produce per-detainee estimates of the number of children, the number of citizen children, and each of these by family type (single-parent family, two-parent family with another unauthorized parent, or two-parent family with a second parent not classified as at risk of deportation). We also construct this separately by age of the child and by country/region of origin of the detained parent. We do this for the baseline scenario as well as for the alternative scenarios described above: ACS lower bound, ACS upper bound, and the DHS/ICE-reported parental-status scenario.

To estimate the number of children affected at detention levels above 400,000, it is not appropriate to simply use the per-detainee information multiplied by the number of detainees to produce a total number of affected children because of possible double-counting. Two co-parents may both be detained, and we need to adjust for this possibility so their children are not counted more than once. Our baseline assumption is that enforcement is random, so that the probability that a co-parent in a two-unauthorized parent household was previously or simultaneously detained is proportional to the overall risk of detention (total detentions divided by an estimated 13 million at-risk adults). This

risk is low when detention levels are low but increasingly probable as the total number of detainees increases. We adjust the count of the number of children accordingly.

In the interactive, we offer alternative assumptions as well: that the probability of a co-parent being detained is lower than random (80 percent of random probability) or higher than random (120 percent of random probability). These choices affect the double-counting adjustment described above as well as the probability that a child is left without any co-resident parents.

Extrapolating to higher detention levels.

We set the maximum level of the slider at 13 million adults based on estimates of the undocumented population from the Center for Migration Studies (https://data.cmsny.org/). CMS estimates that there are ~12.5 million adults without status or with a liminal status as of 2024. These estimates are based on the American Community Survey, which reflects average population throughout the year, and additional inflows in late 2024 could have added to the total, so we round up to 13 million as a January 2025 estimate of the adult unauthorized population. Although detaining 100 percent of this population is highly implausible operationally, the slider extends to this benchmark because the full-population benchmark helps users understand the scale of potential exposure.

Using observed DDP detainee characteristics is sensible when detention levels are at moderate levels, but is nonsensical when enforcement approaches 100 percent. As detention levels continue to increase, the characteristics of detainees will necessarily become less like the current detainees and more like the overall unauthorized population. To account for this, we interpolate immigrant characteristics at higher levels of detention. Specifically, for detention levels above 400,000, we linearly interpolate the demographic composition of detainees from the observed DDP composition toward the demographic composition of the full likely unauthorized adult population in the ACS.

We estimate the number of citizen children affected in a 100 percent enforcement scenario to be 4.6 million. This number is slightly lower than the 4.7 million estimate of citizen children generated in our previously released analysis (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-will-deportations-mean-for-the-child-welfare-system/). The previous analysis was based on 2023 rather than 2024 ACS data and used a different methodology for assigning unauthorized status in the ACS, developed by Center for Migration Studies New York, than the one used here.

DMR detention data.

We allow users of the interactive to select any number of adult detainees up to 13 million.

There are two preset values in the interactive. The first is the number of detentions based on interior enforcement to date in the Trump administration. To calculate this, we use the Detention Management Report (https://www.ice.gov/detain/detention-management) monthly data on recorded initial book-ins to ICE detention stemming from ICE arrests. In the FY 2025 spreadsheet, the January 2025 through September 2025 data are found in cells M22 through U22 on the "Detention FY25" tab. A prorated value for January is included in the administration to date figure. For the FY 2026 spreadsheet released on April 9, 2026, the October 2025 through April 2026 data are found on the "Detention FY26" tab, cells J22 through P22. Only a partial value for April 2026 is reported. Summing data from January 20, 2025 to April 9, 2026, yields 398,591 ICE detentions stemming from ICE arrests. We round to 400,000. A few of these may be detentions of children, but the DDP data analysis described above suggests that almost all (more than 99 percent) are adults.

Another preset value is the projected number for the full four years of the Trump administration. To generate this number, we use the reported data through March 2026 as described above. We then use the average number of book-ins over January-March 2026 (31,462 monthly) and assume that monthly rate will stay constant for the remainder of the administration. This yields 1.45 million detentions as a projection for the four year total.

We can also use the DMR data to corroborate the DDP detention data. From January 1, 2025 to October 16, 2025, we identified around 213,506 unique adult detainees stemming from an interior arrest in the DDP data. Using monthly DMR totals and prorating October 2025 yields 217,661. This gives confidence that most ICE detention book-ins recorded in the DMR totals are unique adults.

Using the interactive.

To use this interactive tool:

- Select a hypothetical **number of detainees** booked into detention after an interior arrest. The pre-set baseline option is the Trump administration total of about 400,000 to date (through April 9, 2026, the last data available at the time this work was produced). It is also possible through a pre-set benchmark to examine the total for the full Trump administration assuming the current rate continues (1.45 million).

Alternatively, you may use the slider to choose any number up to 13 million, the estimated total number of adults living in the United States without status or with a liminal status such as Temporary Protected Status or humanitarian parole.

- Select an assumption about **how many parents are among the detainees**. In the baseline, detainee characteristics are matched to the likely undocumented population in the American Community Survey (ACS). The detainees are assumed to have the same probability of being a parent and number of children as likely undocumented immigrants living in the United States with the same country of origin, age, sex, and marital status. You may alternatively assume that they are 20 percent less likely (lower bound) or 20 percent more likely (upper bound) to be parents than in the ACS baseline. Or you can use the lower number based on Department of Homeland Security reports on detainees with children.

  These choices apply to the first 400,000 people detained. As detention levels increase above 400,000, the characteristics of detainees gradually approach those in the overall undocumented population.

- Select **the assumed risk of both parents being detained**. The baseline assumption is that if one parent in a two-undocumented-parent family is detained, the probability of the other being detained is random, depending only on the national enforcement environment. You may instead choose to assume this risk is 20 percent lower than random because the remaining parent takes increased precautions, or that the risk is 20 percent higher than random because parents may be together when enforcement occurs.

- Finally, select **the probability that the child separated from all co-resident parents will receive services from the child welfare system**. Children separated from all their co-resident parents are likely to stay with friends and family, or – if the detention leads to removal - to return to their deported parent's country of origin. But a small fraction may receive services from the child welfare system because the care arrangement eventually proves unsustainable. This could include anything from financial supports for caregiving families to foster care placements. Given anecdotal reports of only small numbers of children entering the system so far, the baseline assumption is that 5 percent of children left without any co-resident parents will receive services from the child welfare system. Users can select any proportion of separated parents to receive services from the child welfare system.

For each scenario, the tool generates an estimated number of children affected by having any co-resident parent detained, having all co-resident parents detained, or receiving child welfare services, and the comparable estimates for citizen children. Hover over the bar to see the exact number. Separate tabs show information by age of child and country of origin of the detained parent.

The blog post (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-administration-has-detained-400000-immigrants-what-do-we-know-about-their-children/) shows additional state-specific information. This is generated by examining the distribution across states of detainee arrests among those with valid state data. Household characteristics are not based on state-specific estimates. Estimates for the number of citizen children affected by state are reported per 1000 citizen children. The estimates of the citizen child population in each state are derived from our analysis of 2024 ACS data.

Comparison to other estimates.

Numbers produced by others offer useful benchmarks. For example, as noted above, the number of parents among detainees estimated using the baseline methodology is more than twice as large as that implied by the FY 2025 data described in the ICE Detention Management report. DHS records therefore imply fewer affected children than our baseline estimates. Our preferred approach suggests around 140,000 citizen children have been affected by parental detention in the administration to date, whereas the DHS numbers imply around 60,000.

We suspect the DHS reporting on parental status is incomplete. Anecdotal reports suggest that ICE officers are not consistently inquiring about parental status at the time of an arrest. Immigrants may also avoid disclosing information about their children to avoid putting alternative caregivers at risk and to avoid involving the child welfare system. Given the "wide net" enforcement approach in effect, it also seems unlikely that the administration is systematically avoiding detention among those with children.

A recent ProPublica investigation (https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-family-deportations-ice-citizen-kids) estimated that 11,000 citizen children were affected by parental detention in the first seven months of the Trump administration. That analysis relied on DHS administrative data (in this case I-213 forms completed at the time of arrest) and is similarly likely to suffer from incomplete reporting issues. That study also made several intentionally conservative methodological choices, including excluding women to avoid double-counting and verifying that each parent arrestee was also located in the DDP detention records. This 11,000 number for January 2025 to August 2025 should therefore

be considered a verified lower bound of citizen children separated from their parents due to detention. A Guardian report used the same data to generate a somewhat higher estimate (https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2026/may/08/trump-administration-parents-arrested) . A recent report from the National Association of Evangelicals (https://d31hzlhk6di2h5.cloudfront.net/20260502/9d/38/4b/d7/880f016c93298502166a5d38/Family-Separation-Report_050126_2.pdf) examines the likely number of children affected by a hypothetical 4 million deportations over four years. Using our interactive tool, we can perform the same exercise for detentions. Our overall estimate of affected citizen children at 4 million detentions is higher than their estimate of those affected by deportation (around 1.5 million compared to 910,000) and the number of citizen children with all co-resident parents detained is somewhat lower than their comparable estimate for removals (around 410,000 compared to 665,000). The methodology used in the study relies on ACS household survey data and assumes the 4 million removals are randomly selected from the likely unauthorized population. It differs from our approach in that it does not make use of detainee characteristics, and the method of assigning likely unauthorized status in the ACS likely differs from our own.