

Some Chicago Businesses Feeling the Impact of Trump's Immigration Blitz

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More customers and workers are staying home, they say, leading to lower revenue and worries of wider economic repercussions for the city.

At Guerrero Auto & Body Repair in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, fall is typically a busy time of year when customers bring in their vehicles for tuneups before the winter.

But since September, when the Trump administration began aggressively stepping up its immigration enforcement in the city, business at the garage has dropped 60 percent, said Marlene Arroyo, who runs the business with her father.

"We're literally hanging onto a thread," she said.

The president's deployment of federal forces into the city has driven up both arrests and tense confrontations with residents. Several business owners say it also has tamped down the local economy, particularly in neighborhoods with higher proportions of immigrants, raising worries of larger consequences for the city.

It is unclear so far exactly how much the president's crackdown, Operation Midway Blitz, is affecting Chicago's economy as a whole. Economic data does not appear to have emerged yet to indicate any trend, and city officials and local economists have not commented on any impact. But several businesses in the city say they have seen a significant decline in revenue since the aggressive federal enforcement began.

Image

"Know Your Rights" signs were seen posted throughout the Rogers Park neighborhood on Tuesday. Credit...Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



A "No Trespassing" sign directed at federal law enforcement agents without warrants was also posted in the neighborhood. Credit...Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

Some neighborhoods that once abounded with local customers and street vendors selling tamales and aguas frescas are now largely empty. Many residents — even those who are U.S. citizens or legal residents — fear getting caught up in immigration sweeps or being temporarily detained while going out to shop or eat.

Some businesses lock their doors until they can verify that people wanting to enter are genuine customers and not agents making a raid.



Several business owners said the impact was worse than what they experienced during the coronavirus pandemic, with some saying that they would have to shut down within months, if such circumstances persisted.

Jason Vincent, the chef and owner of the restaurant Giant in the Logan Square neighborhood, said that his sales were down about 35 percent and that he had one of his slowest nights last week a few days after an incident where protesters were tear-gassed in front of the restaurant. A normal Tuesday in October would guarantee at least \$6,000 in revenue for the restaurant, he said. That was recently down to \$2,700. Tariffs and inflation, coupled with the immigration operations, he said, have also probably contributed to the decline.

Editors' Picks



The presence of federal agents and their enforcement actions have instilled fear in many neighborhoods, business owners say. Credit...Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

Two other restaurant owners who asked not to be named for fear that their businesses would be targeted by federal officials also said that their revenues were down, but added that other factors could be involved. At both restaurants, which have been in business for

decades, fear has permeated the workplace, they said.

One of the owners said he had to pick up and drop off his employees because they are afraid of being taken off the streets. The other said that if U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were to arrive, he has private areas for his workers to go until they show a warrant.

Trump officials maintain that ICE is helping the city. "ICE officers are professionally and heroically arresting dangerous criminal illegal aliens and making Chicago safer for everyone — including business owners and their patrons," Abigail Jackson, a White House spokeswoman, said. She blamed "radical left-wing" activists for harming communities and small businesses.

The economic effects of the immigration crackdown are more pronounced in neighborhoods with sizable Latino populations, like Rogers Park, Pilsen and Little Village, a major commercial corridor in the city.

In the Avondale neighborhood, business at the Monarch thrift shop had been flourishing this year, with more customers seeking secondhand clothing, given rising costs from inflation and tariffs, said Christa Cauley, a founder of the store. Since the end of September, however, sales have dropped by 21 percent, she said, attributing that solely to the immigration raids.

People would normally be shopping for back-to-school or fall clothing, but that has stalled. "We have nice weather and people are not out," Ms. Cauley said. "And those things in Chicago don't go together."

One owner of a clothing shop in a southwestern neighborhood said her business had been thriving until recent months, when enforcement actions began to intensify. The owner, who declined to be named because she said she was undocumented and feared she would be targeted, said that teenage girls and their mothers would come to buy quinceañera dresses and other formal wear.

The owner said she used to make at least \$3,000 in revenue on a Saturday. Last Saturday, she said she made one sale: \$11 on a discounted dress.

In an effort to stay afloat, Ms. Arroyo, at Guerrero Auto & Body Repair, said the shop recently introduced a new pickup and delivery service to customers who are afraid to leave their homes.

Diego Montanez, 39, a resident of the Little Village neighborhood, said that, despite being a U.S. citizen, “I’m scared, too.” He has limited how much he leaves home, and has been keeping his passport in his car and carrying his Social Security card in his wallet. He also wears a whistle, which he obtained at his church, to alert others of ICE activity. He said he believed that the crackdown was intentionally designed to cause an economic collapse in immigrant communities.

Local officials share that sentiment. “There’s a war that’s been declared against immigrants,” said Representative Jesús G. García, known as Chuy. He represents a largely Hispanic district that covers the western and southwestern areas of Chicago and includes the largest concentration of Mexican Americans in the Midwest.

He added that the closing of local businesses could accelerate gentrification in his district and “drive us into the shadows of society and make us an exploitable labor force without rights. That’s the end goal here.”

Image



Whistles and printed instruction sheets sit on the front desk of a business in the Rogers Park neighborhood. Credit...Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

Tricia McLaughlin, the assistant secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, said the administration was focused on people who were in the United States illegally. “Any allegation that D.H.S. is targeting Latino-owned businesses is a disgusting smear,” she said, adding that anyone who is in the country legally and not breaking

other laws has nothing to fear.

Business owners have pleaded with residents to help make up the gap for others who have dialed back their outings prompted by the fear of federal agents. A protest in Rogers Park last weekend attracted thousands of people who ate tacos and bought Mexican groceries. One tamale vendor — who normally sells to customers including day laborers and construction workers and had struggled for weeks — sold out his supply.

“They’re in need of our dollars right now,” said Chad Curry, a 51-year-old resident of the Andersonville neighborhood, who bought at least eight dozen chocolate chip cookies from a Mexican bakery down the block and then gave them away for free. “It shouldn’t be a one-day thing.”

Still, business owners were struggling to get a boost even from large events known to draw tourists, like the Chicago Marathon last weekend. In Pilsen, where part of the marathon route ran through, many residents said there were fewer spectators cheering on runners.

Christina Gonzalez expected to make at least \$1,200 an hour selling Mexican food at her family’s restaurant, Los Comales, to residents and onlookers. But her sales were down to about \$700 an hour, she said.

Some of her staff, who are documented and have worked for her family for decades, have had their hours reduced by half, as the restaurant suffers from a 50 percent decline in sales, she said.

“This is changing an entire landscape of the city,” Ms. Gonzalez said. “It’s decimating the community.”

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