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‘Worse Than the Pandemic’: Restaurants Say ICE Presence

Imperils Business

In several cities where immigrants are being detained, owners say they’re struggling to stay open as fear keeps customers and workers from leaving home.

Even as the Covid pandemic shut down every dining room across the country in April 2020, Americans were still ordering takeout, and millions of restaurant employees were getting paychecks funded by government assistance.

Now, as that same government is rounding up immigrants it believes to be in the country illegally — [about 70,000](#) are currently in detention — Cecelia Lizotte, the owner of two Nigerian restaurants called [Suya Joint](#), in Boston and Providence, R.I., says many of her customers are afraid to come in. She can’t even get people in her neighborhood to pick up free meals.

Several of her employees are nervous about coming to work, though Ms. Lizotte says they are in the country lawfully. Her brother, Paul Dama, a Nigerian immigrant who is the restaurant’s manager and was in the process of applying for asylum, [was detained](#) on the way to church by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in June and held for three months at a detention center in New Hampshire.



Image

Cecelia Lizotte, who runs Suya Joint locations in Boston and Providence, R.I., nearly closed them after her brother, Paul Dama, was detained by ICE last June. Credit...Tony Luong for The New York Times

He has since been granted asylum and returned to work, but the job has changed drastically. Sales are down more than 20 percent at the restaurant’s Boston location since the raids began, and 50 percent in Providence, Ms Lizotte said. The streets of her Boston neighborhood, Roxbury, [which has a sizable foreign-born population](#), are often deserted.

“I wake up every day thinking, ‘Should I just close and wait to see if everything settles down?’” Ms. Lizotte said.

In interviews over the past few weeks, restaurant owners in several cities where ICE agents are out on the streets echoed that sentiment: Their businesses are not only teetering on insolvency, they said, but feel even more vulnerable than during the pandemic.

Some of that plight is the result of other forces that have hit restaurants hard, like [rising ingredient prices](#), the growing cost of [food delivery](#) and this winter’s [brutal weather](#). None of these businesses

have been raided by ICE agents, who need a judicial warrant to enter private areas of a business, like a kitchen or office.

Image



Ms. Lizotte received an outpouring of support from customers, who wore T-shirts in solidarity with her brother. Credit... Tony Luong for The New York Times

Image

Mr. Dama was detained while in the process of seeking asylum, which has since been granted. He recently returned to work. Credit... Tony Luong for The New York Times

But most of the owners said that ICE has become a constant and alarming presence in their neighborhoods. The fear of detention among customers and employees — in an industry in which [more than one-fifth of the work force](#) nationwide was born abroad — has taken a toll.



That fallout is felt especially in immigrant neighborhoods that have been [targeted for ICE enforcement](#). In the Little Village area of Chicago, known as the “Mexico of the Midwest,” a spokeswoman for the neighborhood Chamber of Commerce estimated that local business sales have fallen 50 to 70 percent since 2024.

“No one is coming out in the daytime because of the continued visuals of seeing the arrests and protesters,” said Christina Gonzalez, who runs [Los Comales](#), a taqueria with 19 locations in the Chicago area, including Little Village, where her business is hardest hit. “We have always had 30 to 40 percent of our sales from foot traffic. We don’t have any foot traffic.”

Editors’ Picks



In Chicago, sales have plummeted at the Los Comales, a taqueria in Little Village, a predominantly Latino neighborhood where ICE agents have become a regular presence. Credit... Carlos Javier Ortiz for The New York Times

Asked about the economic effects of ICE’s actions, a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson responded in an email: “Our brave law enforcement officers are delivering on President Trump’s and the

American people’s mandate to arrest and deport criminal illegal aliens to make America safe. Removing dangerous criminals from our streets makes it safer for everyone — including business

owners and their customers.” A [White House spokeswoman said this week](#) that while ICE is focused on deporting violent criminals, anyone in the country illegally is eligible for removal.

The restaurant industry continues to rebound from the pandemic; the report released this week by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that full-service restaurants gained about 130,000 jobs in January.

The reverse is happening at Los Comales, whose Little Village location employed 120 people last summer. Now there are just 28, as opening hours have been cut back. The neighborhood’s restaurants depend on outside visitors for business, Ms. Gonzalez said, but the tense atmosphere “may revert our community back to 25 or 30 years ago, when not one English-speaking person would come out of fear of gang violence, or not being attended to by someone who speaks English.”

With so many of her workers afraid to even leave home, she said, “it’s worse than the pandemic.”

Image



Christina Gonzalez in Little Village, where her family started Los Comales in the 1970s. These days, she says, the streets are often deserted. Credit...Carlos Javier Ortiz for The New York Times

Threats and Slurs

Much of the attention paid to the Trump administration’s mass deportation campaign has centered on [Minneapolis](#), where more than [4,000 people have been arrested](#) by immigration officials since Operation Metro Surge began in December. Tom Homan, the White House border czar, said Thursday that [the operation would end](#), but city officials have estimated the cost to the local economy at [\\$20 million a week](#).

Manny González, who co-owns [Manny’s Tortas](#) in Minneapolis, said his sales have dropped 40 percent since before the surge began, and four of his seven employees have stopped coming to work. “We are just surviving,” he said, adding, “It’s very scary even for me, and I’m a citizen. I carry my passport.”

Image



Annie Bennett, a co-owner of Annie's Cafe outside Salt Lake City, said business is so slow that she may have to close in a few months if things don't improve. Credit...Kim Raff for The New York Times

But restaurant owners far from the Twin Cities said they're also grappling with customers' and workers' anxieties about leaving home.

Annie Bennett runs [Annie's Cafe](#), a counter-service restaurant just outside Salt Lake City. Last summer, she said, she received repeated calls from someone claiming to be an ICE agent, threatening to arrest her Latino employees and smash her windows.

Since then, customer traffic has been so slow as [ICE enforcement](#) in the area has grown — revenues are down 40 percent since this time last year — that Ms. Bennett worries she may have to close if things don't turn around in the next few months.

"They put a monitor in my heart because I am so stressed," she said.

During the pandemic, locals united to help one another. "We are divided now," she said. "Because I am Latina, I am being targeted as a criminal."

Image



After someone kept calling Annie's Cafe claiming to be an ICE agent and issuing threats, Ms. Bennett installed cameras. Credit...Kim Raff for The New York Times
Image

The windows at Annie's Cafe have been covered to prevent ICE agents from peering inside. Credit...Kim Raff for The New York Times



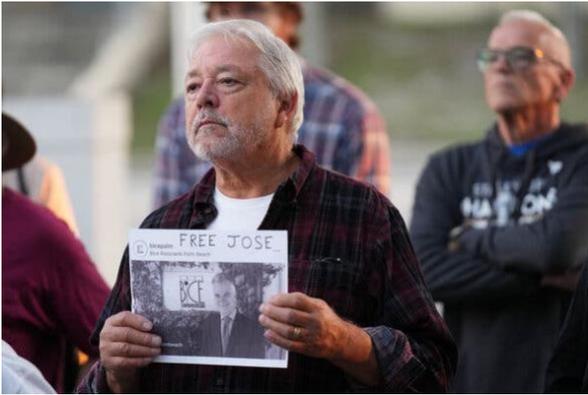
A Salt Lake City restaurant worker named Montse, who asked that her surname not be published, said her employers now lock all the doors except the main entrance, so they can screen out anyone they suspect might be an ICE agent. Customers, she said, have accosted her with racial slurs and threatened to call ICE on her.

Along Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles's Koreatown, several restaurants have closed for lack of business since ICE began a series of enforcement sweeps in June, said Maria Morales, an organizer at the [Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance](#). Their former employees were already hurting because of the wildfires, she said. Now, "these people cannot afford rent."

Even more affluent, predominantly white communities have been swept up in the tumult.

In December, residents of Palm Beach, Fla., [held vigils and signed petitions](#) to protest the detention of José Gonzalez, a beloved manager at the upscale [Bice Ristorante](#). He was detained at the state-run immigration center in the Everglades known as [Alligator Alcatraz](#) before his release just before Christmas.

Image



When José Gonzalez, the manager of the Italian restaurant Bice in Palm Beach, Fla., was detained by ICE in December, his customers turned out in droves to demand his release. Credit...Lynne Sladky/Associated Press

On a recent Friday evening, though, there was no sign of the trouble. The dining room was full, and Mr. Gonzalez was back at his post, rushing around to greet regulars at the host stand and shake hands at the bar.

Down the street at [Pizza Al Fresco](#), employees are bicycling rather than driving to work because they don't want to be pulled over and asked for identification, said Javier Gonzalez, a manager and José's brother.

But they also believe that their regulars are on their side — and possess powerful government connections in the town that President Trump has made his Florida base.

“Everyone is trying to be extremely nice to customers,” Javier Gonzalez said. “They are like, ‘If they can help José, they can help anyone.’”

Restaurants as Refuge

Even some restaurant owners facing rough times feel they are in a position to help. Many restaurants have become refuges, at a time when ICE agents have [broad authority](#) to detain people elsewhere — at [traffic stops](#), [parks](#) and [school parking lots](#).

“ICE Not Welcome Here” signs hang outside many restaurants. Immigrant-rights training sessions are common at preshift meetings. Whistles are now part of some staff uniforms.

Image



Restaurants, like this one in Little Village, Chicago, have begun hanging signs that warn ICE agents they are not welcome. Credit...Carlos Javier Ortiz for The New York Times

Santos, a restaurant worker in Austin, Texas, who asked that his surname not be published, was detained at a traffic stop on the way to work last March and sent to a detention center near the border.

His boss wrote letters of support and served as an obligor, offering to pay his bail if needed.

Santos, who was released last summer, said he planned to go back to the restaurant soon. “I feel most comfortable with these people that I know,” he said in Spanish.

As community hubs, restaurants have the power to mobilize locals in a way few other businesses can, said Diana Dávila, the chef and owner of [Mi Tocaya](#), a Mexican restaurant in Chicago. She helped organize a fund-raiser last month that collected \$115,000 to buy groceries for families facing food insecurity because of ICE actions.

“Restaurants put a face to what is happening,” she said.

Just as they rushed to [buy gift cards](#) during pandemic lockdowns, many diners are now visiting their favorite restaurants more frequently, out of a worry that they will close.

Image



A colorful mural depicts life in Roxbury, a Boston neighborhood with many immigrants. Credit...Tony Luong for The New York Times

“It’s the smallest thing we can do,” said Hahn Chang, who was dining with his wife at Manny’s Tortas in Minneapolis. He added, “It’s devastating for Lake Street,” long lined with immigrant-run businesses. “I think this is the best street in the state.”

When Ms. Lizotte, of the Suya Joint restaurants in New England, was struggling to keep business afloat after her brother’s detention, customers volunteered to work free as servers. Hundreds more attended her brother’s court hearing over Zoom to show their support.

“People cried with me, they called me to pray with me,” she said. “They told me to not give up.”