

How Individuals and Families Can Prepare for Encounters with U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement (ICE)

By Simran Sethi



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This guide is for informational purposes only and is not legal advice. It has been adapted from the Immigrant Legal Resource Center Family Preparedness Plan, Immigrant Defense Know Your Rights with ICE guide, plus information from organizations listed under Additional Resources and conversations with those directly impacted. This guide does not cover every aspect of preparedness but is intended to be a comprehensive starting point.

Information is accurate as of December 23, 2025.

Explore Immigration Options

When exploring immigration options and confronting immigration challenges, it is important to work with experienced legal counsel. Nolo's guides to [vetting immigration lawyers](#) and [seeking pro bono counsel](#) may be useful.

- If you have a green card, find out if you can become a U.S. citizen.
- If you are here on a visa, find out if you can get a green card.
- If you do not have immigration status, find out if you may be eligible to get a green card, visa, or work permit.
- If you have a criminal arrest or conviction, find out how it might affect your situation, or if there is a way to erase it from your record.
- If you are detained, contact an attorney and request a hearing in front of a judge to try to get out of detention and fight deportation.

Here is a list of legal assistance organizations that may be helpful:

- [Immigrant Defense Project](#) offers a free legal email and helpline and a [useful list](#) of information to have on hand when contacting legal counsel.
- Asian Americans Advancing Justice Southern California offers phone support in English and multiple Asian languages.
- [Project Corazon](#), part of Lawyers for Good Government, offers free legal help to asylum-seekers.
- The [Immigration Advocates Network](#) lists nonprofit organizations that can provide free or low-cost immigration legal services.
- The [Acacia Center for Justice](#) offers a range of support services ranging from legal support for unaccompanied immigrant children to legal education for people in immigration proceedings who are not in detention.
- The [Muslim Legal Fund of America](#) also offers legal assistance and [Muslims for Just Futures](#) has prepared an update in light of December 2025 policy changes.

Know Your Rights

In the United States, all people are intended to have a range of legal rights, regardless of whether they are U.S. citizens, holders of visas or other types of legal status, or not. Make sure you, your family members (including children), housemates, neighbors, and co-workers—regardless of their immigration status—know their rights. This includes the right to remain silent if ICE or the police come to your home or workplace or stop you in public.

- [Review information](#) on who may be investigated by ICE and how to respond. Videos of the same information can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- Carry a Know Your Rights [red card](#) or [mini card](#) (translated into multiple languages) that explains your right to remain silent in case you are stopped or interrogated by ICE or police officers. You may also wish to share this [youth version](#) of Know Your Rights with kids.

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✓ Know Your Rights (continued)

- Download the Know Your Rights app [here](#). The app will allow you to announce your rights in English and send a text to a preselected list of contacts. You may also want to download the [ReadyNow! app](#) that can alert legal counsel, loved ones, and your employer and share pertinent information if you are detained.

📄 Carry Your Documents

- U.S. citizens are not required to carry identification or documentation. If you are a citizen and wish to carry proof of citizenship, carry a color photocopy of the passport page or a [passport card](#) (not valid for international travel) rather than a digital copy that would require you to give ICE access to your phone. You may also want to let a trusted person know where your passport or citizenship papers are located, in the event they have to be retrieved.
- Under [federal law](#), a lawful permanent resident “eighteen years of age and over, shall at all times carry with him and have in his personal possession any certificate of alien registration or alien registration receipt card issued to him.” Make sure to carry a valid work permit or green card, if you have one. If you do not have one, it is advisable to carry a municipal ID, state ID, or driver’s license if the ID was issued in the United States and does not contain information about your immigration status or country of origin.
- If you have applied for an employment authorization document or have a pending immigration case, carry a copy of your receipt from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).
- If you have undocumented status and have lived in the United States for two or more years, proof of time spent in the country may help ensure you receive due process. Recommended documents include tax filings, rental agreements, utility bills, and other documents that demonstrate residency. Additional information on documentation can be found on [The Legal Aid Society](#) website.
- Carry—or, ideally, memorize—the telephone number of someone who can contact your immigration attorney, access your important documents, and enact your preparedness plan, if needed.

🗂️ Plan for Medical and Well-Being Needs

- Write down and carry important medical information, including contact information for your doctors and the name and dosages of any medications you take.
- Consider allowing someone you trust to have access to your medical information in case you are detained. They need the information to support your legal case and to try to ensure you have proper medical care. You may wish to sign a [HIPAA form](#) that gives your trusted contact access to your medical records and allows your doctors to communicate with them about your medical needs.
- Explore options that can support your emotional and mental well-being. The [Informed Immigrant guide](#) on mental health is a great starting point. [Asians Do Therapy](#) gives an overview on what therapy is and how to find a therapist. Therapists who support Asian community members and free therapy options can be sourced through the [Asian Mental Health Collective](#). Additional therapy options can be found through the [South Asian Mental Health Initiative & Network](#) and National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network.
- The DACA Mental Health Coping Guide can be found [here](#) and a directory of free or low-cost mental health services for undocumented people can be found [here](#).
- You can also learn of changes to public benefits [here](#) and SNAP benefits (food stamps) [here](#) in guides from the National Immigration Law Center.

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Organize Important Documents and Information in a Preparedness Plan

Keep a file of the documents below in a safe place and backup digital copies on a secure, password-protected device or cloud storage. Tell your children, family members, and emergency caregiver where to find this information in case of an emergency. You can find a template [here](#).

- Passports
- Birth certificates
- Marriage license (if applicable)
- Caregiver's Authorization Affidavit (if applicable)
- Any Restraining Orders you may have against anyone (if applicable)
- A-Number (Alien Registration Number), date and place of birth, and any immigration documentation (work permit, green card, visa, etc.)
- Documents demonstrating your residence in the United States and the amount of time you have been physically present in the United States
- Driver's license and/or other identification cards
- Social Security card or Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) number
- Registry of birth for U.S. born children registered in parent's home country (if applicable)
- Important children's information, including school information, medical history, health insurance, medication list, and doctor's contact information
- Emergency numbers and important contacts

Connect with Your Home Country's Consulate

Have the contact information for the nearest consulate for your country of origin. They are responsible for organizing travel documents for anyone who is deported. Determine if they have a department that assists nationals in distress. (The Philippine Embassy and its consulates, for example, offer an [Assistance to Nationals hotline](#), conduct welfare checks on detainees, and releases funds to Philippine nationals to support legal and related fees.)

Review Financial Information

The [Families for Freedom's Financial Handbook for Families Facing Detention & Deportation](#) is dated but offers a useful starting point for thinking about how to protect assets and benefits if facing detention and deportation.

Make a Child Care Plan

If a child has been out of a parent's custody for 15 of the past 22 months, federal law mandates parental rights be terminated. Therefore, it is best make plans if deportation is a possibility. . Decide whether you want your child to accompany you to your home country or wish for your child to stay in the United States in the care of another trusted adult. Begin by compiling a list of emergency numbers and important contacts and a file with important documents.

Register Your Child's Birth

If your child was born in the United States, register your child's birth with your country's government (for example, with your country's consulate). In some cases, this may grant your child benefits, including citizenship in your country of origin.

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🍁 **Decide Who Can Care for Your Children If You are Unable To**

If possible, designate a U.S. citizen or someone with immigration status who does not face the threat of detention or deportation as the person who can care for your children in case of emergencies. Make sure the person knows they will be listed as an emergency contact. Memorize this person's phone number and have your children memorize the number, too.

Make sure your children know who can - and cannot - pick them up from school and care for them. Make sure the people who can pick up and care for your children are up to date on your child's location and school.

Your child's school may only release your child to adults you designate. Therefore, make sure to regularly update all school, afterschool, day care, summer camp, and other programs' emergency contact sheets and release forms to include the names of those who can, and cannot, pick up your children.

Make sure your emergency contact knows how to access your important documents and information. This includes your A-Number and date and place of birth-information that can be used to access the [ICE Detainee Locator](#) in the event you are detained. The National Immigration Law Center has a [detailed guide](#) on how to find loved ones who have been detained by ICE.

They may also need to search the [Bureau of Prisons](#) website. On the dropdown menu, they should choose "INS number" for the A-number. It can take time for the system to update and there may be gaps in information when people are transferred to or between facilities. Minors under the age of 18 will not appear in the ICE Locator. To locate a minor in immigration custody, go [here](#). Locators search names exactly as they were entered into the system. Try different versions of their name (spellings and order of first and last name), if the correct name does not work.

🌱 **Decide on Caregiving**

If you plan for your children to remain in the United States with another caretaker in the event you are detained or deported, decide whether to prepare a formal or informal childcare plan.

These include:

- Verbal Agreements: The most informal arrangement is to let another adult know of your wishes for your children and to verbally agree with that adult that they will carry out your wishes and care for your children if you cannot. The downside of an verbal arrangement is that the other adult who you choose to care for your children will not have legal authority to make medical or school-related decisions on behalf of your children, which would be problematic if you were deported and unable to care for your child for an extended period.
- Caregiver's Authorization Affidavit (CAA): The better arrangement is to have your designated caregiver complete a [CAA](#). A CAA will allow your contact to make certain school and medical decisions on behalf of your children.
- Guardianship: The most formal arrangement you can make for your children if you are not available to care for them is to have a court appoint a guardian for them. Nominating someone else to have legal custody of your children is a serious decision. Talk to an attorney before taking this step.

Although geared toward child refugees, it may be helpful for a potential caregiver and other sources of support to also review the [traumatic separation guidelines](#) from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

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List Any Medical Conditions and/or Medications

- Make sure to write down any medical conditions or allergies your children have and any medications that your children take, as well as doctor and health insurance information.
- Keep a copy of this information in your important documents file. Give a copy to your children's school and the adult you designate to care for your children. Let your children know where to find this information if you are not available.

Talk to Your Children About Your Plan

This [zine](#) from MoCo IRC can be a good starting point for talking to children about ICE. Be honest about what you don't know, but remind children that you and others care about them. Not having every answer is acceptable. When children express fear, validate those feelings. This builds trust and helps them feel secure enough to share deeper worries, which you can then address with compassion.

Welcome questions. Share your own emotions and the fact that adults feel scared too. Acknowledge the difficulty of the conversation while emphasizing why it matters. Assure your children they will be taken care of if for some reason you are unable to care for them, even for a short period of time. Let them know who will care for them until you can. Consider consulting with them about the person they feel most comfortable staying with.

Make Sure Your Children Have Their Passports

If your children were born in the United States, visit [Travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov) for more information on obtaining U.S. passports.

Protect All Children

ICE has detained minors who are both U.S. citizens and noncitizens. Under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Office of Refugee Resettlement has established the ORR National Call Center Helpline to help locate unaccompanied migrant children who entered the country without documentation. Find all details [here](#). [This guide](#) from the Children's Immigration Law Academy is intended for legal counsel but also contains useful information on how to support children who may encounter immigration officials. [This guide](#) and [educators toolkit](#) from United We Dream and [this FAQ](#) from Fair Immigration Reform Movement are helpful for both educators and school support staff.

Additional Resources

Resources that can teach you about you and your children's rights include:

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| • Acacia Center for Justice | • Informed Immigrant | • SEARAC Community Resources |
| • ACLU | • Legal Aid Society | • South Asian Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) |
| • Asian Americans Advancing Justice SoCal (AJSOCAL) | • Montgomery County Immigrant Rights Collective | • Stop AAPI Hate |
| • Asian Law Caucus | • Muslim Civic Coalition | • United We Dream |
| • Asian Mental Health Collective | • Muslims for Just Futures | |
| • CASA | • Muslim Legal Fund | |
| • Children's Immigration Law Academy (CILA) | • National Immigration Law Center (NILC) | |
| • Collective Freedom | • National Korean American Service and Education Consortium | |
| • Immigrant Defense Project (IDP) | | |
| • Immigrant Legal Resource Center | | |

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