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**OPINION // OUTLOOK**

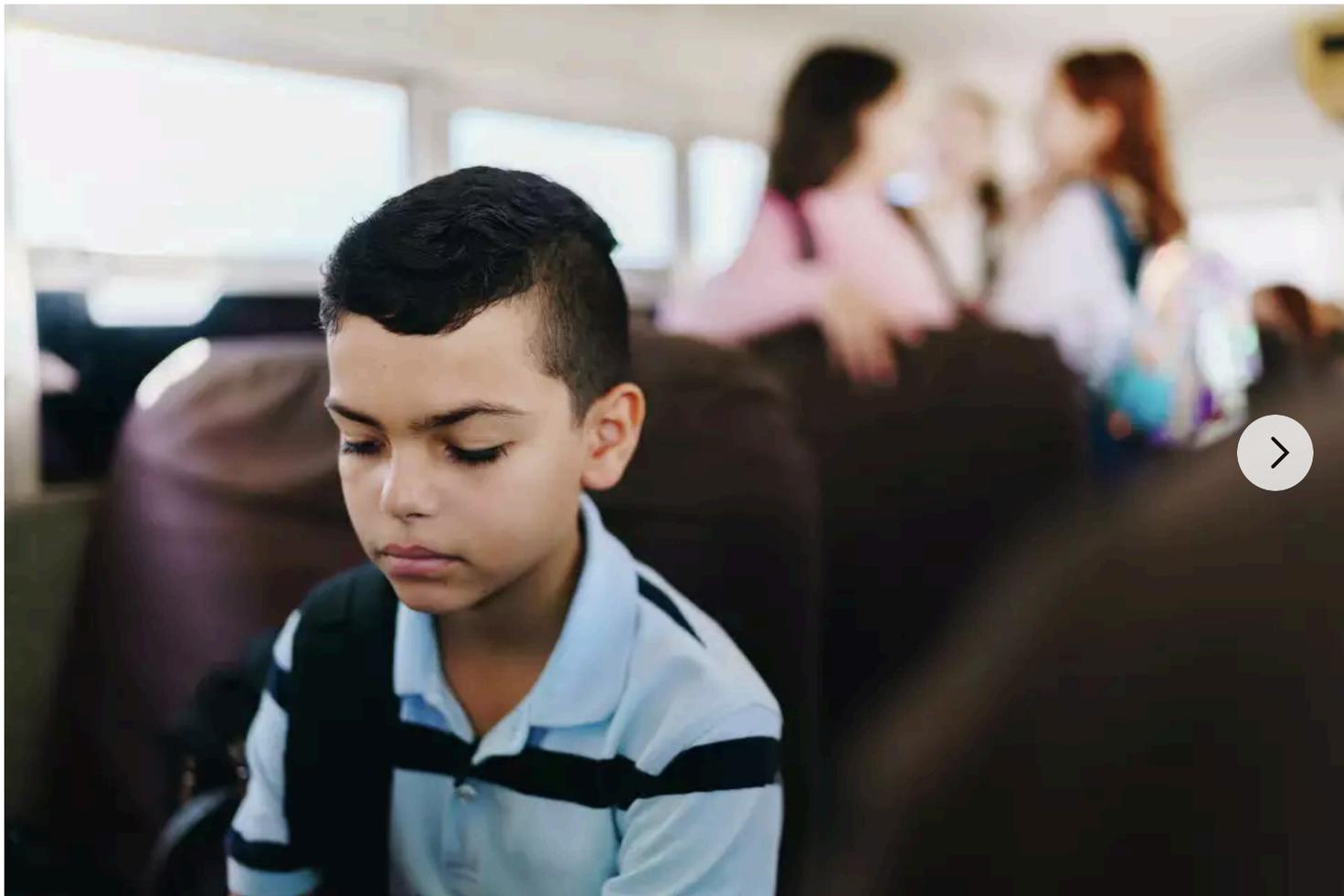
# I'm an immigration lawyer. The children I serve are terrified. | Opinion

17% of Houston kids live with at least one parent who's an unauthorized immigrant

By **Chiqui Sanchez Kennedy**

July 6, 2025

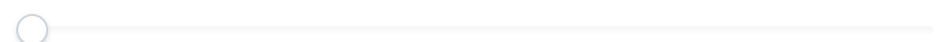
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"Children and families are suffering unbearable anxiety that their family could be next," writes immigration lawyer Chiqui Sanchez Kennedy.

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 Listen Now: I'm an immigration lawyer. The children I serve ar 1x

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By 6:00 a.m., people are already lined up outside our office, their fear and anxiety palpable. That's what it's like to work these days for a nonprofit that provides legal services to low-income immigrants.

In one of my cases, an adult client's U.S. citizen wife is slipping into depression. He's the family breadwinner, the father of their four U.S. citizen children, all under age 10.

His wife is terrified that he will be arrested and deported.

In other cases, I've seen young clients experiencing mental health crises. On top of unresolved trauma they suffered in the countries they fled, they now face fast-tracked immigration hearings here in the U.S.

For nearly 17 years, I have represented immigrant children fleeing unimaginable harms. But now the children we represent no longer believe that the U.S. government is looking out for them: We're working with an unprecedented number of children apprehended from within the U.S., taken from their families and caretakers, and re-detained in government custody.

As a lawyer, I have learned that when a child is thrust into a complex, adversarial immigration system, what they need is straight-forward: trauma-informed lawyers, holistic social services and loving caregivers. These aren't luxuries; they are lifelines. But under the Trump administration, these pillars have been relentlessly attacked.

Through persistent, targeted measures, the Trump administration has stripped immigrant children of their core sense of security that comes with family unity. Armed Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers are taking to the streets, camping out in store parking lots and knocking on doors to inspect families' homes. Arbitrary arrests are a daily occurrence.

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Children and families are suffering unbearable anxiety that their family could be next. And when the threat of an arrest becomes a reality, the psychological damage is profound. My team of lawyers has seen children exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, night terrors, depression and developmental delays.

Both immigrant and U.S.-born children are affected. According to the Migration Policy Institute, 17% of Houston children live with at least one parent who's an unauthorized immigrant. That number doesn't include children whose parents are authorized but don't yet have full citizenship and fear that they might suddenly face deportation. And it doesn't include immigrant children who are here with no parents at all.

Immigration-system rules now change with amazing speed. In March, the Trump administration initiated a comprehensive attack on immigrant children by moving to eliminate legal lifelines. In a single week, the government abruptly shut down funding for lawyers who represent unaccompanied children, and it placed children

on "rocket docket" where toddlers to pre-teens were forced to appear alone in court on an unprecedented, expedited timeline.

Simultaneously, federal detention facilities for minors elevated release requirements, making it nearly impossible for parents to sponsor their own children out of custody.

That same week, groups of plain-clothes ICE agents started visiting the homes of unaccompanied children registered in the immigration system. These agents came unannounced, asked for the children by name, demanded access to the children's rooms and to speak to the adults in the house, and threatened caretakers who exercised their legal right to refuse entry.

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Families now fear the very institutions meant to protect them. In Texas, hospitals are required to ask about and report patients' immigration status. It appears ICE enforcement tactics have not yet spread to hospitals, but fear of the unknown has forced parents to weigh a sick child's wellbeing against the risk of deportation.

Perhaps most concerning are the developments in immigration court — the last line of defense for an immigrant to be fairly heard under the law. ICE has begun

arresting individuals after they appear for their scheduled hearings.

Contrary to the Trump administration's vilifying rhetoric, ICE is arresting individuals with no criminal history who are complying with immigration requirements. They are parents, primary-income earners and caretakers. Many have been allowed into the country to seek protection through our immigration courts. With no explanation, the government is closing their cases prematurely. And once the case is closed, ICE agents are waiting on the other side of the courtroom door to detain the immigrants.

We have seen wives, sisters and children praying outside of the courtroom — not for a favorable ruling, but for the opportunity to leave the building together. People trying to follow the law and obtain legal status in the U.S. face an impossible decision: They can appear at their hearing and risk family separation, detention and speedy deportation if the government dismisses their case; or they can miss their hearing and be issued a removal order.

These tactics are designed to silence, intimidate and confuse immigrants. By abruptly stripping immigrants of their right to be heard in court, the government has eviscerated the immigration justice system. This sledgehammer approach eliminates due process. It makes our immigration system less efficient, fair and effective. We are witnessing the systematic destabilization of families, the weaponization of fear and the militarization of our community.

Despite all this, I find incredible hope in the rising resistance. Lawyers, teachers, doctors, social workers, elected leaders and community members are standing up for immigrant children and families. Our collective voice has reversed some of the damage, such as restoring funding for kids' representation and revising sponsorship release requirements so that children fighting their cases can remain with family and not in detention.

These victories demonstrate the undeniable power of community. But many more fights remain.

We must advocate for immigrant rights and a fair and just system. We must reject policies that terrorize children, separate families and dehumanize immigrants. Above all, we must recognize that protecting immigrant children is not a partisan issue. It's a human one.

We cannot let fear become policy.

*Elizabeth (Chiqui) Sanchez Kennedy is co-founder and executive director of the Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project, where she leads a team of lawyers serving low-income immigrants. She has represented immigrant children and families for nearly 17 years at organizations across Texas, Florida and New York.*

July 6, 2025

# Chiqui Sanchez Kennedy

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