Annenberg Institute
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EdWorkingPaper No. 25-1202

Recent Immigration Raids Increased Student Absences

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Local immigration raids expanded dramatically across the U.S. during the first two months of 2025. Anecdotal accounts suggest that these raids increased student absences from schools because parents fear being separated from their children. This study evaluates this claim using a daily times series of school absences spanning the current and two prior school years from five school districts serving communities subject to recent and unexpected raids in California's Central Valley. The results indicate that recent raids coincided with a 22 percent increase in daily student absences with particularly large increases among the youngest students. These increased absences underscore the broader policy relevance of this immigration enforcement in terms of their impact on schools, childhood stress, and opportunities to learn.

VERSION: June 2025

Suggested citation: Dee, Thomas S.. (2025). Recent Immigration Raids Increased Student Absences. (EdWorkingPaper: 25-1202). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/a62e-h526

Main Text: Current estimates indicate that nearly 80 percent of the foreign-born individuals in the United States are legal residents. The remaining group of unauthorized immigrants—an estimated 11 million individuals—constitute 3.3 percent of the total U.S. population (*1*). The design and enforcement of laws and regulations targeting these unauthorized immigrants are an active and highly contested domain of public policy in the U.S. Research relevant to this debate has focused on how different forms of interior immigration enforcement influence outcomes such as population mobility, crime, and economic activity (*2–5*).

A substantial amount of research has also focused on how interior immigration enforcement impacts different dimensions of child development (*6*). Over 5 million children under age 18 live with a parent who is an unauthorized immigrant, and the vast majority of these children are U.S. citizens (*1*). The persistent threat that a parent may be jailed and deported can attenuate the learning opportunities available to these children through, for example, its pejorative effects on childhood stress and economic opportunity. The developmental implications of a social climate of fear and mistrust may also extend to other children such as those connected to legal immigrants, those who have demographic identities associated with immigrant status (e.g., Hispanic ethnicity), and their peers (*7*). Multiple studies conclude that prior instances of interior immigration enforcement have had negative effects on a diverse array of child outcomes such as grade retention, high-school completion, test scores, and anxiety disorders (*8–12*).

Several studies have also focused on student absences as both a highly relevant educational outcome and as a leading indicator of the potential downstream effects of immigration enforcement for youth development. Some of this evidence indicates that different measures of increased immigration enforcement (e.g., raids and arrests) increase student absences (*11–13*). Increased absenteeism can also have broader consequences as schools seek to serve affected students and teachers confront challenges to their instructional pacing. However, other evidence suggests that immigration enforcement does not clearly influence student absences because the serious threats implied by raids and arrests are a constant factor in the decisions made families with undocumented members (*14*).

This study presents new and current evidence on this question by examining the prominent increase in interior immigration enforcement coinciding with the new Presidential administration. An unusually broad and sharp increase in immigration raids and arrests characterized the beginning of the second Trump administration (*15*, *16*). The Administration's decision to rescind a 2011 directive that prohibited immigration enforcement in "sensitive areas" such as schools and houses of worship amplified the threats implied by this increased enforcement (*17*).

The specific context for this study is California's Central Valley, a prominent agricultural region with a substantial resident population of immigrants. An unanticipated enforcement effort by US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), named "Operation Return to Sender," began in this area on January 7, 2025 (i.e., before the Presidential inauguration but the day after the 2024 Presidential election was certified by the U.S. Congress). Officials from the Biden Administration claimed that a CBP agent who "went rogue" directed the operation without informing other officials (*18*). The CBP subsequently claimed it conducted a 4-day "targeted enforcement" focused on unauthorized immigrants with criminal records that resulted in 78 arrests. However, other observers characterized the effort as a broad dragnet targeted in locations frequented by immigrant workers and resulting in roughly 1,000 detentions (*19*).

Subsequent accounts noted these raids "sent shock waves across the Central Valley, where a largely immigrant workforce helps harvest a quarter of the food grown in the U.S." (*18*). The

public schools in this southern region of California's Central Valley (i.e., Kern, Kings, Tulare, and Fresno counties) serve over half a million students, more than 70 percent of whom were Hispanic. Anecdotal accounts suggested that student absences increased in the region as families expressed fear over sending their children to school (*20*). This study provides evidence on this question by examining three years of daily data on student absences in five Central Valley school districts.

Specifically, these data (Table S1) identify the daily count of student absences in each district during the 2022-23 and 2023-24 schools as well as the current 2024-25 school year through February (n=2,234 district-by-day observations). These data make it possible to evaluate whether student absences during the recent increase in immigration enforcement differed from what would be expected based on the seasonal patterns observed within prior school years. Specifically, I examine regression specifications where the dependent variable, the natural logarithm of student absences, is a function of fixed effects unique to each district, to each academic year, and to each month as well as other covariates. This research design effectively identifies whether the amount of student absences during the recent immigration raids (i.e., January and February of 2025) are distinctly different from the within-year, seasonal patterns observed previously. The Supplementary Materials provides further details on the sample construction and the corresponding approaches to estimation and inference.

Results

Fig.1 presents event-study results, which illustrate how student absences varied month by month during the 2024-25 school year relative to the within-year patterns established in the two prior school years. An event study provides an initial and unrestrictive approach to assessing the impact of the recent immigration raids on student absences. Specifically, these estimates condition on fixed effects unique to each school district, each day of the week, each month, and each school and indicators for other attendance-relevant events (Table S2). These results indicate a sharp increase of over 20 percent in student absences during the immigration-raid period. An F-test rejects the null hypothesis that the increased absences observed in January and February of 2025 jointly equal zero ($p = 0.0030$).

Two other aspects of the event-study evidence in Fig. 1 merit emphasis. First, the evidence that the increased absences are similarly high in February (i.e., weeks after the initial raid) indicates that these effects were not transitory over this period. Second, the monthly patterns of student absences in the fall of 2024 (i.e., just before the immigration raids) provides evidence consistent with the internal validity of the research design. That is, the absence counts in the months just prior to the immigration raids resemble the monthly patterns observed within prior school years. Specifically, an F-test fails to reject the null hypothesis that the monthly effects unique to the fall of 2024 are jointly equal to zero ($p = 0.0070$). This lack of distinctive pretrends is consistent with the maintained assumption that there are not empirically relevant and unobserved confounds in the 2024-25 school year when the recent immigration raids occurred.

Table 1 presents direct estimates of the impact of the immigration raids on student absences across three different specifications. The first specification conditions on fixed effects unique to each district, each day of the week, each month, and each school year. The second specification adds three binary indicators identifying attendance-relevant events. The third specification introduces fixed effects unique to each district-year interaction and each district-month interaction as well as district-specific fixed effects unique to each day of the week. These results consistently indicate that the immigration raids implied a large and statistically significant increase in the

natural log of student absences ($\hat{\beta}$=0.195, $p < 0.0001$). This estimate implies that the recent immigration raids increased the count of daily student absences by 22 percent (i.e., $e^{0.195} - 1$).

Both the robustness of this estimated effect across the different specifications in Table 1 and the event-study evidence (Fig. 1, Table S2) suggest the reliability of this result. Additionally, Table S3 also shows these results are similar across alternative approaches to estimation and inference that include bootstrapping and Poisson and negative-binomial regressions that explicitly accommodate the count nature of the dependent variable. Table S4 presents additional evidence by reporting the estimated effects of the immigration raids separately for each of the 5 districts in the sample. Though the magnitudes of the estimated effects vary somewhat by district, they are also consistently large, positive, and statistically significant.

Table 1 also reports the estimated effects of the immigration raids on the daily count of student absences defined separately for students in four different grade spans (i.e., Pre-kindergarten, grades K-5, grades 6-8, and grades 9-12). An informed expectation is that immigration raids will have larger effects on absences among younger children for at least two reasons. One is that, relative to other U.S. children, children living with undocumented immigrants are more concentrated at younger ages (*21*). Second, undocumented immigrants may be especially concerned about being separated in response to an immigration raid when their family includes younger children. The results in Table 1 are consistent with this expectation. The estimated effects of immigration raids on the daily counts of student absences are positive and statistically significant in each grade span as well as consistent across specifications. However, the estimated effect among students in grades K-5 ($\hat{\beta}$=0.269, $p < 0.0001$) is over three times larger than the estimated effect among students in high school ($\hat{\beta}$=0.078, $p = 0.032$).

Discussion

Using unique data from school districts in California's Central Valley, this study presents leading evidence that the recent surge in interior immigration enforcement significantly increased student absences from school. Specifically, these results indicate that these raids increased daily counts of student absences from school by 22 percent, an increase consistent with prior evidence on the impact of immigration raids (*12*). These increases were particularly sharp among younger students and have endured over the two-month period for which post-raid data are currently available. Another way to frame this impact is to note that, in the 2023-24 school year, the public schools in this four-county region served roughly 537,000 students. On average, these students were absent from school on 12.4 days that year. A 22-percent increase in such absences implies 1.4 additional absences per student over half a school year. In the aggregate, this increase implies over 725,000 student days lost in the four-county region due to the raids.

However, the impact of immigration raids on student absences has policy relevance beyond its implications for opportunities to learn among directly affected students. For example, there may be educational implications for all students as the pacing and character of classroom instruction respond to the pedagogical challenges created by increased absenteeism and stress among students. Increased absenteeism also adds to the academic-recovery challenges faced by schools and districts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those pre-existing challenges include the sharp and largely enduring increases in chronic absenteeism as schools returned to traditional in-person instruction (*22*). The increased absenteeism due to immigration raids may also presage enrollment losses that add to the fiscal challenges faced by school districts after the pandemic flight from public schools (*23*). Critically, the substantive implications of these increased absences are also likely to extend well beyond educational settings. The increased absences can also be understood

as a leading indicator of broad and developmentally harmful stress these raids create for students and their families. These issues underscore the need for continued attention to and awareness of the broad and evolving effects of immigration-related policy choices.

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Acknowledgments: The data-collection support provided by Big Local News at Stanford University is gratefully acknowledged.

Funding: This research was not directly supported by any funder.

Author contributions: Not applicable.

Competing interests: Author declares that he has have no competing interests.

Data and materials availability: Upon publication, the data and code used in the analysis will be made publicly available at the Stanford Digital Repository (https://sdr.stanford.edu).

Supplementary Materials

Materials and Methods

Tables S1 to S4

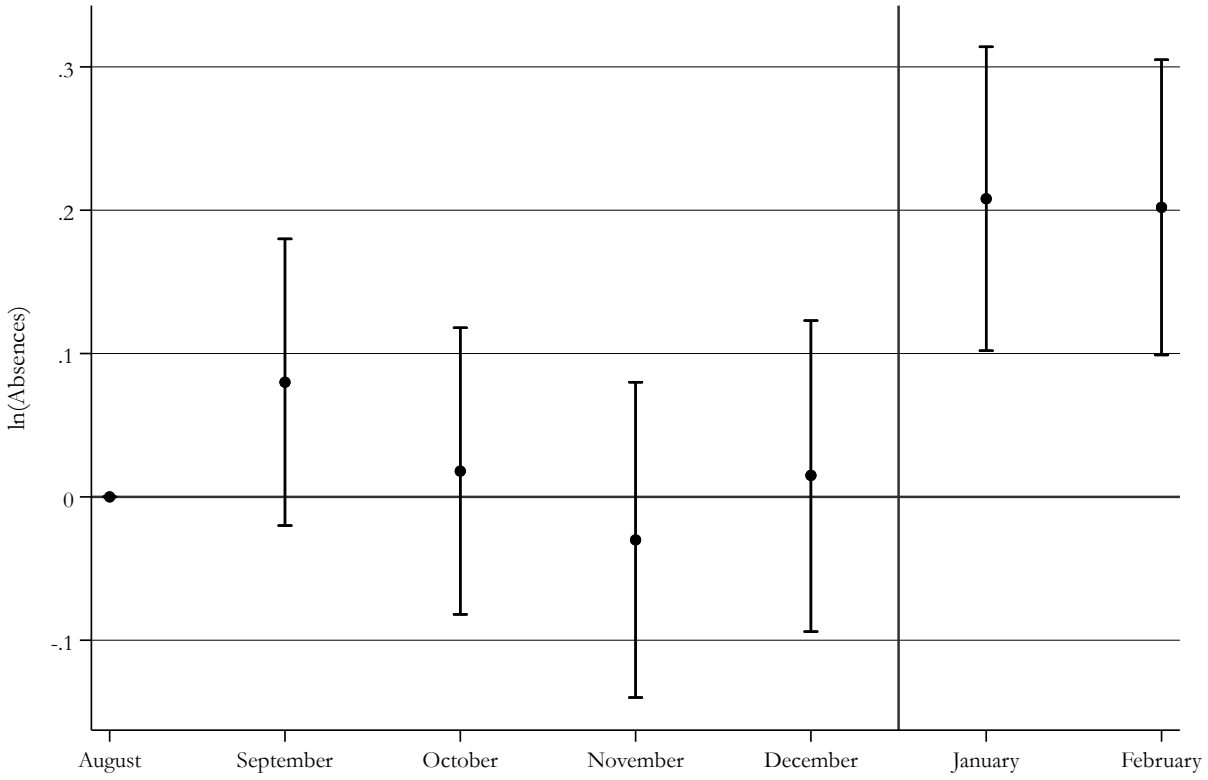

Fig 1. Event-Study Estimates, Student Absences by Month during the 2024-25 School Year

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Student Group	(1)	(2)	(3)
All	0.220***	0.194***	0.195***
	(0.0238)	(0.0196)	(0.0179)
Pre-Kindergarten	0.319***	0.299***	0.303***
	(0.0460)	(0.0449)	(0.0436)
Grades K-5	0.290***	0.268***	0.269***
	(0.0298)	(0.0262)	(0.0242)
Grades 6-8	0.199***	0.268***	0.169***
	(0.0314)	(0.0262)	(0.0245)
Grades 9-12	0.0997**	0.0771*	0.0777**
	(0.0428)	(0.0393)	(0.0363)
Event FE	No	Yes	Yes
District-Year FE	No	No	Yes
District-Month FE	No	No	Yes
District-Day of Week FE	No	No	Yes

Table 1. Estimated Effects of Immigration Raids on Student Absences. The data consist of daily observations of student absences in 5 school districts over the 2022-23 and 2023-24 schools and the 2024-25 school year through February (n=2,234). The dependent variable is the natural log of absences and all specifications condition on fixed effects unique to each district, each school year, each month, and each day of the week. A binary indicator identifies the period of immigration raids. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. See the Supplementary Materials for further details. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Supplementary Materials for

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The PDF file includes:

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Tables S1 to S4

Materials and Methods

Materials

The data for this study consist of a daily time series of all student absences (i.e., both excused and unexcused) for 5 school districts in the southern portion of California's Central Valley over the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years as well as during the 2024-25 school year through February 2025. Big Local News at Stanford University and I collected these data directly through outreach and public-records requests to these school districts. To avoid any unintended consequences for these districts of providing these data, they are not identified here.

I received these data from the districts in varied formats. After organizing them into daily counts of student absences, I examined these data for outliers and cross-validated these data with respect to the corresponding academic calendars that identified valid attendance days for each district and school year. I resolved a small number of inconsistencies, with the support of Big Local News, through follow-up communication with school districts (e.g., shifts in valid attendance days due to weather-related closures and make-up days). I also note that one district only provided data through February for each of the three school years (i.e., excluding March-June). I also excluded days in June from this analysis as it consists of just a few school days, which tend to have idiosyncratically high counts of absenteeism.

The all-student analytical sample consists of 2,234 district-by-day daily counts of student absences over these five school districts and three school years (Table S1). In 4 districts, the data also allowed the identification of absence counts by the grades served within the district: Pre-K, Elementary (grades K-5), Middle (grades 6-8), and High (grades 9-12). This implies an analytical sample of 1,770 district-by-day data observations. However, the sample of high-school absences consists of 1,290 district-by-day observations from three school districts as one of these school districts does not serve grades 9 through 12. Table S1 reports descriptive statistics for these absence counts (i.e., both total and by grade).

The independent variable of interest is a binary indicator equal to one for school attendance days on January 8, 2025 (i.e., the day after Operation Return to Sender began) and later. Over 7 percent of the data are observed in this treatment period. The covariates used in the research design below include binary indicators unique to each school district, to each academic year, to each month, and to each day of the week. Binary indicators unique to district-year interaction, each district-month interaction, and each interaction between a district and a day of the week are also included in saturated regression specifications described below.

The covariate set also includes three binary indicators that identify events relevant to school attendance. One is an indicator that identifies the last school day before one of the three major school breaks (i.e., Thanksgiving, winter holidays, and spring holidays). This indicator is defined uniquely for each school district and year based on published calendars. The covariate set also includes a binary indicator for several community-relevant holidays that sometimes overlap with valid school-attendance days. These consist of September 16 (Mexican Independence Day), November 1 and 2 (Day of the Dead), December 12 (Feast Day for Our Lady of Guadalupe), and the first Monday in February (Constitution Day in Mexico). A final covariate is a binary indicator for February 3, 2025. On this day, a "Day without Immigrants" protest occurred and student absences were unusually high. While these protests (and corresponding absences) can be attributed

to Operation Return to Sender, it can also be understood as a possible confound when identifying how school absenteeism responded to the threat of arrest.

Methods

The general regression specification used to identify the effects of the recent immigration raids takes the following general form:

$$Y_{iswmt} = \beta R_{iswmt} + \eta_s + \lambda_w + \gamma_m + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{ismt}$$

where the dependent variable is the natural logarithm of the count of student absences on day *i* in school district *s* on day of the week *w*, in month *m* and in school-year *t*. The terms, $\eta_s, \lambda_w, \gamma_m,$ and δ_t, represent fixed effects unique to each school district, each day of the week, each month, and each school year, respectively, while ε_{ismt} is a mean-zero error term. The independent variable of interest, R_{ismt}, identifies days after Operation Return to Sender began (i.e., January 8, 2025 and later). The event-study estimates (Fig. 1, Table S2) generalize this specification by allowing for fixed effects unique to each month of the 2024-25 school year in lieu of R_{ismt}.

The second specification in Table 1 also conditions on the three binary indicators described above that identify days associated with attendance-relevant events (e.g., the day before a major holiday break). The third specification in Table 1 saturates this specification with unrestricted interactions between these fixed effects. Specifically, this specification conditions on fixed effects unique to each district-year interaction, each district-month interaction, and each district interaction with the day of the week.

The baseline results (Table 1) are based on ordinary least-squares estimation and heteroscedastic-consistent standard errors. Table S3 examines the robustness of the baseline method across different approaches to estimation and inference. This includes bootstrapping the estimated coefficient on R_{ismt} as well as four different maximum-likelihood approaches that explicitly recognize the count-data nature of the daily absence counts. These consist of Poisson and negative-binomial regressions that condition on the full covariate set directly as well as conditional maximum-likelihood versions of these count-data regressions that condition on district fixed effects indirectly. Because the link function in these count-data specifications is the natural log, the reported coefficients can also be understood as approximate percent change. Table S4 probes the robustness and consistency of the main finding by reporting the estimated impact of the immigration raids for each of the five school districts separately. I also note that these district-specific estimates are larger in districts geographically closer to the raid activity.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Sample Size
Absence Counts					
All Students	1839.3	2278.5	26	18961	2,234
Pre-Kindergarten	40.7	47.2	0	342	1,770
Grades K-5	447.6	549.5	12	4612	1,770
Grades 6-8	239.5	309.1	7	2747	1,770
Grades 9-12	91.6	37.3	4	582	1290
Immigration Raid	0.073	0.261	0	1	2,234

Table S1. Descriptive Statistics. The data consist of daily observations of student absences in 5 school districts over the 2022-23 and 2023-24 schools and the 2024-25 school year through February. See text for details.

Month	Estimates
September2024	0.0803 (0.0509)
October2024	0.0178 (0.0509)
November2024	-0.0302 (0.0562)
December2024	0.0146 (0.0554)
January 2025	0.208*** (0.0539)
February 2025	0.202*** (0.0524)

Table S2. Event-Study Estimates. The data consist of daily observations of student absences in 5 school districts over the 2022-23 and 2023-24 schools and the 2024-25 school year through February (n=2,234). The dependent variable is the natural log of absences. All specifications condition on fixed effects unique to each school district, month, school year, and day of the week, and binary indicators for event-relevant school days. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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Method	Estimate
Baseline Result	0.194***
	(0.0196)
Bootstrapped Estimate	0.194***
	(0.0200)
ML—Poisson	0.186***
	(0.0207)
ML—Negative Binomial	0.200***
	(0.0200)
CML—Poisson	0.186***
	(0.0027)
CML—Negative Binomial	0.191***
	(0.0208)

Table S3. Estimated Effects of Immigration Raids on Student Absences by Method. The data consist of daily observations of student absences in 5 school districts over the 2022-23 and 2023-24 schools and the 2024-25 school year through February (n=2,234). The dependent variable is the natural log (or count) of absences. All specifications condition on fixed effects unique to each school district, month, school year, and day of the week and binary indicators for event-relevant school days. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

School District	Estimate
All Districts	0.194***
	(0.0196)
District 1	0.236***
	(0.0318)
District 2	0.163***
	(0.0266)
District 3	0.192***
	(0.0443)
District 4	0.125***
	(0.0473)
District 5	0.256***
	(0.0456)

Table S4. Estimated Effects of Immigration Raids on Student Absences by School District. The data consist of daily observations of student absences in 5 school districts over the 2022-23 and 2023-24 schools and the 2024-25 school year through February (n=2,234). The dependent variable is the natural log of absences. The dependent variable is the natural log of absences and all specifications condition on fixed effects unique to each district, each school year, each month, and each day of the week. A binary indicator identifies the period of immigration raids. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1