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The Justice Gap and the 2025 Immigration Crackdown: Through the Lens of an Intern

For my first college summer break, after completing my freshman year at Claremont McKenna College, I embarked on a legal internship and an independent investigative research project in Chicago, Illinois. As a Pro Bono Legal Intern under Dentons US LLP, I was under the supervision of the firm's pro bono partner Benjamin Weinberg. Working under the firm's and Mr. Weinberg's objectives, my assignments focused on increasing pro bono activity across Dentons and supporting the complementary implementation of pro bono practices within the lawyers' practice areas. Pro bono activity consisted of various themes such as domestic violence, false incarceration, racial equity, and immigration. However, the intense execution of President Donald Trump's immigration agenda spurred additional attention to immigration-based cases amongst my office, other influential legal entities, social organizations, and Chicago communities. Recognizing immigration as both an urgent legal issue and a living community struggle, I decided to explore it more deeply through an investigative project that paralleled my internship work.

My internship began with an assignment to analyze the Legal Services Corporation's (LSC) Justice Gap Report, a task that provided a general understanding of the significance of pro bono legal services. With an insight into pro bono legal services, I also became intrigued by additional support methods people seek in legal-related hardships. LSC defines the "justice gap" as the civil

legal needs of impoverished U.S. inhabitants subtracted by the existing means to fulfill those needs. After immersing myself in the report, I concluded that free legal aid can be deemed as a resolution to fill the justice gap. The financial burden of paying for expensive fees is eliminated, which attracts low-income individuals to legal resources and therefore narrows the justice gap. Although free legal aid is a straightforward response, I wondered what other components – whether related or non-related to law – contribute to acquiring justice.

The justice gap theory was identifiable and proven through Dentons' collaboration with the National Immigration Justice Center (NIJC). NIJC, a nonprofit organization offering low-cost and free immigration legal services, was facing high demand from low-income migrants. The firm's extensive talent pool and affluence permitted quality investment from attorneys, case assistants, and paralegals. My contributions as an intern involved Spanish–English translations and support with case research. Through direct involvement, I realized another way to bridge the justice gap: partnerships between influential legal entities and social organizations that pinpoint social problems and connect them with appropriate legal remedies. At the same time, the social problem of immigration appeared too multifaceted to be addressed by legal representation alone.

The Trump administration's summer 2025 immigration crackdown embraced a series of unprecedented actions that triggered nationwide controversy and further complicated immigration. The expansion of enforcement authority to USCIS, the introduction of travel bans under Proclamation 10946, the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" allocating funds for mass deportation, and large-scale ICE raids collectively provoked prominent protests in Los Angeles and throughout the nation. In response, the federal government heightened enforcement by federalizing the California National Guard and deploying Marines in Los Angeles. Unlike the

government's expectations, their dramatic approach instigated greater protests – instead of compliance – across the nation.

Major U.S. cities, including Chicago, organized protests in solidarity with the Los Angeles demonstrations for immigration protections and against deportations. On June 10th, 2025, I was walking to my studio when I encountered a protest. I followed my instinct to join the protest, and over three hours of walking through downtown Chicago, I captured the similarities between Chicago and Los Angeles. Two sanctuary cities, strong pro-immigrant advocacy networks, rich multicultural neighborhoods, democratic powerhouses, deep histories of grassroots movements, and tensions with federal enforcement. Chicago's progressive ecosystem was being threatened by ICE urban raids aiming to detain and deport undocumented migrants, so naturally, resistance took over.



Protestor holding a sign that states “From LA to Chi we can melt ICE” at Chicago’s City Hall-County Building on June 10, 2025.

The protests didn't just start and stop on June 10th; Chicago's opposition to Trump's immigration crackdown manifested in the "No Kings" protests on June 14, 2025, and multiple other, yet smaller gatherings. One demonstration was a two-minute walk straight from my studio and outside the Chicago Immigration Court. I watched from my window as a handful of peaceful protestors were met with unmarked white enforcement vans and police officers. Meanwhile, around the street corner, smiley tourists were taking photos with the iconic Chicago Theater sign. The image felt dystopian, highlighting a stark contrast between oppression and freedom, and this juxtaposition followed me to my workplace.



"No Kings" protest on June 14, 2025, in Chicago, Illinois.

During the week when these anti-deportation and anti-Trump protests were unfolding, the Willis Tower administration notified its offices, including mine, of safety measures implemented

to protect employees from the demonstrations outside. Considering the recent arrests of peaceful protestors outside the Chicago Immigration Court, I perceived the safety measures as misaligned with the broader socio-political context developing in the city. There wasn't any threat or tendency of violence imposed by the protestors; if anything, they were facing the threat of unjust detainment. Coincidentally, this was the day I met one of the first NIJC clients whose case I had been contributing to. I volunteered to welcome the migrant client and his four-year-old daughter from the tower entrance and to navigate them through security. The client was anxious about arriving at Willis with police activity nearby. Yet they still arrived. Their presence revealed a distinct contrast between civilians' harmless intentions and the law enforcement's forceful suppression: a family simply trying to do everything in their power to achieve legal status, prosperity, and security.

It was exactly this kind of authentic reality I wanted to investigate, before on-the-ground realities would be manipulated by violent portrayals and become tangled in the messiness of politics. This policy escalation has never been witnessed in modern U.S. immigration history. And the mixture of authoritarian-style implementations and differing viewpoints amongst government and civilians introduces extra complications to the already multifaceted concept of immigration. Drawing on the first theory I learned this summer, I applied the logic of the justice gap to the immigration crackdown. Beneath all the contrasts and conflicts lies a gap between migrants in need and the help available for them. The central question for my research was right in front of me and awaiting me: What are the legal communities, social organizations, and immigrants doing in response to the immigration crackdown? What guidance are they seeking? What guidance is being provided?

I decided to apply my knowledge and experience to unveil that gap and explore it through an independent investigative research project. I was in an advantageous position interning under a well-known law firm and supervisor with expert connections. I'm also a first-generation Mexican American daughter to immigrants with cultural understandings and Spanish fluency. These identities equipped me with the credentials and trust to record voices from those directly affected by the immigration crackdown.



Anti-deportation demonstration in Chicago, Illinois, on June 10, 2025.

My strategy for analyzing responses to heightened immigration enforcement was to conduct in-person interviews with people that categorized as legal professionals, social advocates, or migrants to ensure genuine findings. I found these individuals through references from my internship supervisor, Claremont McKenna College's alumni database, social media platforms, and cold outreaches. Considering my objective to derive honest reflections from

subjects, I kept these conversations open-ended by only asking one structured question about their actions, approaches, and methods. Follow-up questions were tailored to match their initial answers but still followed the general research matter. Although I conducted approximately 20 recorded and non-recorded interviews throughout July 2025, I selected three for deeper analysis. These interviews, representing community leaders, legal experts, and lived experiences as immigrants, captured the main themes that consistently surfaced across my conversations.

Before I embarked on this investigative project, my perspective was heavily influenced by the fear-inducing portrayals of the Los Angeles demonstrations. My social media feeds, news sources, and even attorneys in my workplace were all fixated on Californian protestors damaging property, law enforcement dispersing tear gas, laborers running from ICE, and unidentifiable vehicles surrounding community spaces. I feared that this image would be replicated by other areas in the U.S., including the communities where my undocumented friends and relatives resided. Since I grew worried, I assumed others felt the same, given the magnitude of the situation. I assumed that migrants in need of support avoided seeking assistance out of fear that appearing in public could place them at risk of detention. I originally believed that if protests were to continue, it would instigate more aggressive federal measures and further scare people away from advocating for themselves. And with fewer people advocating for themselves, the justice gap in the legal immigration sector would widen.

As I conducted interviews for the project, I was surprised that my worries for the migrant and advocacy realm did not increase. I had prepared to hear the worst: a lack of civic education, legal indifference, and widespread compliance with ICE authority. Instead, I encountered the opposite – and it directly answered my research question. Social organizations, government and legal professionals, and people affected by shifting immigration policies responded with civic

engagement, nonprofit partnerships, and legal campaigns. These responses reinforced one another.

Diego Morales, a community and political organizer in Pilsen, offered a grassroots perspective on immigration advocacy. As the chair of the 25th Ward for the Independent Political Organization (IPO), Mr. Morales is actively involved in his community by overseeing projects that support equity, accessible housing, gentrification resistance, sustainable environments, and economic opportunity. Chicago's 25th ward consists of diverse neighborhoods, including Pilsen, which is characterized by its predominantly Latin/Hispanic culture, migrant foundation, and ethnic diversity. Mr. Morales immigrated from Latin America as a child, grew up in Pilsen, and has dedicated his career to sustaining the essence of Pilsen while advancing its residents. He represented the kind of social organizer I most wanted to speak with – playing a direct role in shaping community efforts.

The interview highlights how alliances across ethnic groups and local rapid response teams mobilized neighbors against ICE raids. Mr. Morales reflected on the town's rich history of immigration – welcoming migrants from Eastern European countries in the early 1900s to Venezuelans in the early 2020s – and how multiple ethnic groups formed into a united community. Pilsen residents have a normalized association with one another, and this association has been tailored to protect its community from outsider threats like ICE. Mr. Morales utilized this quality to create the “Migra Watch Network” and rapid response teams that operate to distinguish and document ICE activity in the 25th Ward. By hosting educational workshops on civic rights and governmental structures in relation to ICE activity, Morales documented instances where neighbors played a crucial role in preventing or challenging detentions. This

grassroots mobilization constructed solidarity, empowered residents, and arranged practical safety nets.

At the same time, Diego Morales draws attention to the effect that outside forces, such as federal funding cuts and gentrification, threaten the ability to maintain resources rooted in the predominantly migrant community. He perceives “dual capacities of power and people themselves are resources – knowledge, skill, time, and when organized well, and pointed in the right direction, can be very effective. But at times, civic engagement is not sufficient.” Forbes Magazine’s distinction of Pilsen as ‘one of the top 10 coolest towns in the country’ ironically accelerated gentrification, bringing rising rents and displacement pressures to the neighborhood. To protect the well-being of Pilsen’s long-standing residents, the 25th Ward IPO partnered with the Resurrection Project – a nonprofit promoting community-level change – to build affordable housing programs. Yet, since much of the organization’s finances depends on federal funding, cuts to federal housing assistance created uncertainty about the sustainability of this collaboration. Many of the individuals who depend on this affordable housing program are low-income immigrants. To an extent, civic engagement cannot dictate federal funding.

Building on Morales’s emphasis on the limits of civic engagement, I switched to the legal sphere through an interview with Mishan Wroe, Directing Attorney for immigration at the National Center for Youth Law (NCYL), who discussed legal approaches to countering federal threats to immigrant communities. NYCL practices impact litigation and policy advocacy to transform education, health, immigration, foster care, and youth justice. Ms. Wroe has substantial experience in protecting immigrant children’s rights through class action, litigating under NCYL for more than five years, initially as a Senior Attorney in Immigration and Legal Advocacy before being promoted. I was curious about the news regarding immigrant children, stories about

children as young as two years old, being deported to their native countries. Knowing that some children were born in the U.S. or had no choice in their migration, I questioned what further complications their situations added to immigration law and the administration's policy agenda. Ms. Wroe was an expert and leader in her field, with viewpoints on legal processes that regular people like me would not typically know. I wanted to acknowledge these perspectives to form a well-r to obtain an all-around conclusion.

Ms. Wroe's specific focus is on impact litigation to protect and expand the rights of immigrant children in custody. She works on cases aiming to limit the amount of time kids spend in government detention centers, with the hope of releasing them into livable communities as soon as possible. Since January 2025, Ms. Wroe and her colleagues have filed multiple cases arguing First Amendment rights and other civil rights violations against individuals unlawfully arrested, including cases involving toddler-aged children abruptly detained. She emphasized that, amid unprecedented changes, their priority is on the most severe issue: immigrant children, a vulnerable subgroup within an already vulnerable population, held in detention centers with poor conditions.

The Trump administration's expansion of sponsor vetting requirements has prolonged Ms. Wroe and her team's efforts. When unaccompanied immigrant children are detained, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) seeks to release them to a sponsor. Sponsors usually include U.S.-based family friends, parents, or relatives. The executive administration tightened requirements by mandating that all sponsors have legal status. Because most potential caretakers of immigrant children are undocumented relatives, the new requirements disqualified them. Consequently, the litigator noted, average custody durations increased by 49 days in March to 112 days in April, surpassing 200 days in the months that followed.

To strengthen litigation, Ms. Wroe highlighted the importance of collaboration with organizations such as the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law, UC Davis Law School Immigration Clinic, and Cooley LLP. Much like the community coalitions Diego Morales described, or the partnership between Dentons and NIJC, these alliances demonstrate how broad collaboration – rather than the efforts of a single firm or layer – amplifies impact. At the civic level, coalitions mobilize people; at the legal level, they combine expertise, resources, and authority to pursue systemic change through litigation, establish precedent, and expand protections.

Although civic and legal strategies share the practice of broad collaboration, the two strategies differ in the time needed to execute impact. While litigation builds precedent and long-term protections, community organizers and local advocates respond in real time to raids, detentions, and family separations. Together, these different levels of action, fast civic engagement and slower legal change, illustrate how the justice gap is addressed from multiple directions, though never fully closed.

An interview with an attendant of one of the 25th Ward's ICE watch trainings is an example of what combining civic association, empowerment, and community legal resources looks like. I was intrigued by this attendant after hearing him explain his motive for attending the training. His best friend, a migrant from Mexico, was a single mother who was suddenly detained by ICE. To prevent her children from being deported back to their impoverished and isolated ranch, the Irish-American citizen accepted the solution of adopting her children to be their official legal guardians. With him being an official legal guardian, the children were not in extreme danger of deportation or extreme legal complications. Like the 25th Ward chair explained, there is protection when neighborhoods gather to protect other neighbors. The individual sought the Irish

American Community, like the Irish American Heritage, to receive referrals to legal aid. His form of legal from was another Irish form from the community itself. This atypical response to the immigration crackdown proves how consideration, community, and legal aid come together to formulate the most optimal solution for specific situations.

This individual offers a comparison between an actual Latin migrant, who is the demographic that the Trump administration profiled the most. I assumed that U.S. citizens, given their constitutional right of citizenship, would not be drastically affected by the immigration crackdown. If they were affected by the crackdown, their status as citizens would grant them prioritized or high-quality legal attention compared to an actual foreign migrant, who typically faces language, socio-economic, and educational barriers. Yet, both individuals – or any individual, no matter their backgrounds – are prone to the everyday struggles of navigating paperwork, fear of uncertainty, and ultimately seek reliance on what they are accustomed to and approximate to: community networks and heritage organizations.

One of the first NIJC clients I interviewed was a father who arrived at the Willis Tower with his four-year-old daughter, despite the surrounding protests and police presence. His story reflected many of the common themes I heard across other interviews and within the broader Latinx immigrant population in the U.S.: low socioeconomic standing, demanding labor jobs, migration to escape poor conditions, and the search for opportunity. In his case, he had immigrated from Ecuador to flee drug-related gang violence and the poverty of his isolated agricultural town. After resettling with relatives in a shared Illinois home, he sought stability by working as a cook in a local restaurant. This made him especially vulnerable to ICE raids, which often targeted Latino workers at their places of employment, and positioned him to offer an

authentic, first-hand perspective. He ultimately connected with NIJC through his community network and its resources.

Group	Strengths / Contributions	Limitations / Challenges	Key Themes
Social Leader (Diego Morales / Pilsen organizer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong grassroots mobilization (rapid response teams, civic engagement) - Builds coalitions across diverse communities - Emphasizes hope + knowledge as tools against fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited resources + funding - Vulnerable to gentrification and political shifts. 	Community resilience, solidarity, organizing as empowerment
Litigator (Impact litigation attorney)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uses class action lawsuits for systemic change - Coalition with law schools + NGOs for broader impact - Protects detained children, challenges unlawful enforcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legal processes are slow - Can't represent every individual (focus on systemic issues) 	Law as structural intervention, addressing justice gap at institutional level
Community Members (Irish-American / Ecuadorian)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong cultural + community networks - Resilience in facing paperwork and uncertainty - Heritage organizations connect people to lawyers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fear and confusion navigating complex systems - Daily vulnerability to raids + enforcement 	Lived experience, survival strategies, reliance on networks

Taken together, the three interviews revealed how different groups respond to the same immigration crisis in complementary but distinct ways. Community leaders like Diego Morales

mobilize neighbors and build resilience through civic engagement; litigators such as Ms. Wroe pursue systemic change through impact litigation and coalition-building; and immigrant community members themselves navigate daily vulnerability with courage, drawing on local networks for support. My comparison chart underscored that while each approach has strengths and limitations. Civic mobilization is fast but resource-limited, legal strategies are powerful but slow, and lived resilience is essential yet fragile. Their combined efforts collectively contribute to closing the justice gap as much as possible. What I know now, which I did not know before, is that no single sector can lead the response alone. It is in the intersection of grassroots organizing, legal advocacy, and lived immigrant experiences that the most meaningful strategies emerge.