



An ICE raid gutted a town in Trump's first term. Now, fear of a repeat.

Like many Hispanic residents in O'Neill, Nebraska, Leydi Flores worries about how her community is being affected by federal immigration raids. The tiny town went through a shattering raid in 2018.

Tiny O'Neill, Nebraska, is still recovering from the 2018 raid. It forced some businesses to close and left many residents, especially immigrants, reeling.

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By Annie Gowen and Sarah L. Voisin

Gowen, a reporter who covers the Midwest, and Voisin, a photojournalist based in Washington, traveled to O'Neill to understand the long-term impact of... [more](#)

O'NEILL, Neb. — The Flores family invited almost everybody they knew to baby Elian's first birthday party, but Leydi Flores wasn't sure whether anyone would show up.

Her family's Mexican restaurant has had a ghostly feel in recent days, as many Latino families in this rural farming town lie low, scared that they might become targets of [President Donald Trump's sweeping immigration crackdown](#). Across the country, raids have ensnared thousands and crowded immigration detention centers.

"I'm worried," Flores said, cuddling her grandson in a banquet room at the restaurant as her daughter put together an enormous cardboard Winnie-the-Pooh for the celebration. "We invited all these people. Will they come? Do they have visas or not? Will the police be outside watching?"

The close-knit community in O'Neill is still recovering from a [2018 raid](#) by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents at several agricultural facilities, which gutted the town, forced some businesses to close and left many residents reeling.

"I feel like we've bounced back to a certain extent, but I feel like there's a heaviness you can't truly recover from," said Kasey Hoffman, a part-time English teacher who helped care for children at the local elementary school after their parents were detained seven years ago. "Even now, it just feels so heavy."



Kasey Hoffman, center, hugs her 8-year-old son after teaching a family literacy class at the elementary school in O'Neill.

The town took a big hit to its workforce in the aftermath of the raid. At least 100 families moved away. The impact still gives people pause, even in an overwhelmingly White county of ranches and cornfields that went for Trump by a huge margin in November. A flag flying in one yard these days urges "Take America Back."

"Whatever you believe about immigration," said Bill Price, who was mayor at the time, "the realities are, they fulfill a lot of jobs no one else will do."

In Hoffman's family literacy class, she counted only nine of 25 adult students on a Thursday night last month. Their anxiety was palpable.

All had seen the images on social media of immigrants, their hands and ankles shackled, being led onto U.S. military planes bound for Guatemala. That week, the nearby meatpacking town of Schuyler was so awash with fear over false media reports of a large-scale ICE raid that the police chief put out a statement debunking it.

The students peppered Hoffman with questions: Could ICE come and question their children at school? Could they be stopped while driving?

"I heard on the news that they are going to be targeting people with visas next, and it's not just happening here but all over the country," said Armando Pantoja, sitting in the front row with his wife.



Marlén Díaz, Karina Martínez, Gabriela Pérez and Crisimo Tudon play an English vocabulary game during the literacy class, which divided the women and men into teams.



Armando Pantoja high-fives his wife, Karina Martinez, after a round of the game.

He and the other students relaxed a bit when they split up into teams to play a Family Feud-style vocabulary game.

"How do you say 'donkey'?" asked Denice Frausto, a volunteer serving as quizmaster.

"Burro!" the class responded.

"How do you say 'carpet'?" Frausto asked.

And then, "How do you say 'wound'?"



O'Neill is just over three hours northwest of Omaha.

Tiny O'Neill — population 3,500 — sits among corn and soybean farms and cattle ranches in a remote part of northeastern Nebraska not far from the South Dakota border. It's a quiet, three-stoplight town, founded by Irish settlers, with shamrocks dotting its landscape and blooming on sidewalks, dumpsters and a large green-and-white mural on the south side of town. Another, even bigger shamrock decorates the middle of the main intersection that is a frequent meeting spot.

The surrounding county's Latino population increased to 5 percent between 2012 and 2022, with both documented and undocumented migrants arriving to pick tomatoes, plant potatoes and feed hogs. The newcomers have been "a small but consistent part of growth in a state that doesn't have a lot of growth," said Josie Schafer, director of the University of Nebraska's Center for Public Affairs Research. More than half the state's foreign-born residents are from Latin American countries. About 13,000 settled in Nebraska last year.

For more than a decade, those who came here after illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border knew whom they had to see for a job — Juan Pablo Sanchez Delgado, who was undocumented himself but owned a Mexican restaurant and ethnic grocery in town. He scammed these new arrivals for years, federal prosecutors charged, amassing a fortune and luxury homes in Las Vegas by cashing the workers' paychecks and skimming money that should have gone to taxes.

On a hot day in August 2018, ICE and Department of Homeland Security forces swarmed O'Neill to arrest Sanchez Delgado and his associates — also snagging more than 100 undocumented workers in the process.

Angelica Riz was spraying down trucks at Christensen Farms, one of the country's biggest pork producers, when federal agents burst through the door of the garage and trained "big guns" on her and other workers.

“They yelled, ‘Stay where you are. Put your hands up!’” she said. “It was scary.”

She had a legal work permit, but her papers were at home, so she was herded on to a bus with the others — including two pregnant women — for a harrowing, two-hour drive to a detainment facility in Grand Island, Nebraska. The detainees were given little water or food, according to an American Civil Liberties Union [report](#).

In a recent statement, an ICE spokesperson said the agency acted to protect the men and women who were being exploited. Sanchez Delgado was eventually [sentenced](#) to 120 months in prison, with the judge calling it “one of the most egregious financial crimes” he had seen.

The workers of O’Neill were the collateral damage.



Terry Miles, who runs the Frontier and Holt County Independent with his brother, looks through copies of the newspaper for its coverage of the 2018 raid.



Miles shows the front-page articles about the raid and community support for the immigrants who were detained at several locations in O’Neill.



The raid targeted several locations, including this now-shuttered tomato farm. The site was forced to close after it could not get enough workers following the raid.

Once in Grand Island, Riz saw nearly all of O’Neill’s Latino residents in a tented holding facility. Her husband was among them, still in his dirty ranch clothes, which meant their two young daughters were still with a babysitter back home. Authorities had confiscated cellphones, so she had no way to check on them.

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Yet unbeknownst to her, the babysitter had fled herself after dropping the children at O’Neill Elementary School — which opened to take in about a dozen students who had been separated from their parents. Employees cared for Riz’s 7-year-old and 4-month-old until she was released several hours later.

Many residents supported the workers after the raid, helping stock a food pantry and volunteering to give them rides to their hearing dates. On social media, however, others backed the federal operation. Such divisions strained fence-post conversation between neighbors.

“For months and months, there was a lot of worry in our community,” former schools superintendent Amy Shane recounted. “You didn’t know when you were visiting people in the community how they felt about what had happened.”

Riz is now a custodian at the elementary school, along with Mayra Felix, another Guatemalan immigrant who was caught up in the raid at a tomato plant. The women said the trauma of that summer has never left them. Despite both having legal documentation to work, they’ve basically been sheltering in place since Trump’s inauguration. Their husbands are still undocumented.

“For the time being, it’s better to spend the majority of time in the house,” said Riz, who is 39. She keeps her green card and driver’s license in her sparkly pink phone case, though she no longer will drive the hour and a half to Walmart.



Custodian Angelica Riz, who was detained during the 2018 ICE raid, sweeps the floors of O'Neill Elementary School.



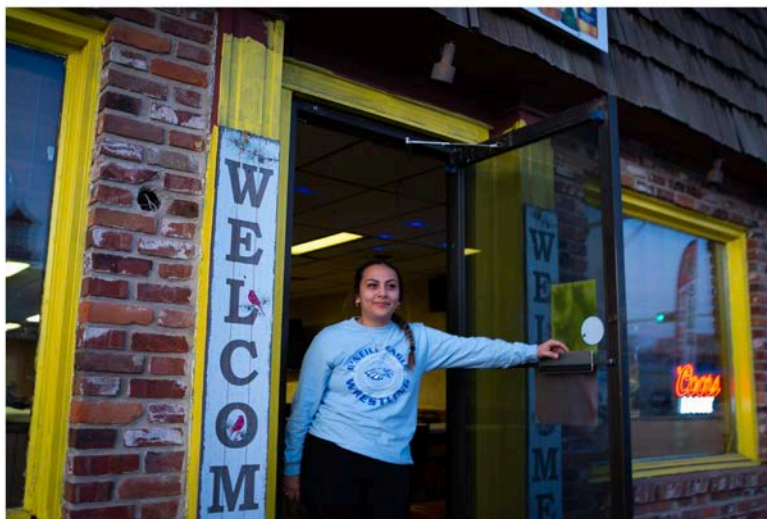
Mayra Felix, also among those swept up in the raid seven years ago, takes out the trash during a shift at the elementary school.

The town's trauma remains, too. The 24-acre hydroponic tomato farm — which had been one of O'Neill's biggest employers, with about 80 people — struggled to find replacement workers and finally shut for good in 2020. The potato-processing plant also scaled back operations. Even today, Holt County has more than 150 open jobs, according to its economic development department.

William Lopez, a professor of public health at the University of Michigan, is writing a book about the first Trump administration's immigration raids. Such enforcement actions can damage communities for years, he said, fracturing social networks, worsening food insecurity and endangering physical and mental health.

After a 2008 raid on a meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa, Lopez noted, researchers found the following year that Latino babies had lower birth weights than White babies.

"There's no clear end to the impact. The potential removal just lingers on for years like a war wound that won't heal," he said.



Anais Flores at La Costerita, her family's Mexican restaurant in O'Neill.

In the years since the raid in O'Neill, Flores has built two thriving businesses that started with making tortillas in her garage. She and her current husband now run a grocery store and a restaurant, La Costeñita. At 48, she is at last a legal resident.

Her sunny daughter, 20-year-old Anais Flores, is an American citizen who works three jobs — as a paraprofessional at the elementary school, a waitress at the restaurant and a party planner. She founded that business herself, teaching herself to arrange flowers by watching TikTok videos.



Flores waits tables at the family's restaurant, one of her three jobs.



Leydi Flores cooks in La Costeñita's kitchen. She got her start, before the restaurant, making tortillas in her garage.



A sunset turns the sky over O'Neill a vivid pink.

The latest Trump immigration crackdown has brought back painful memories for Anais. She was 7 when her father left the country with little fanfare to avoid deportation.

"I've blurred a lot of it out, but I remember thinking, 'What did we do? Why?'" she recalled. "It was really hard on me."

She resolved to put the current tension out of her mind for her son Elian's birthday party. As it turned out, people whom they hadn't seen in weeks showed up. The restaurant was packed. The kids attacked a piñata. The adults danced into the evening as red, green and yellow disco lights flickered overhead.



Family and friends celebrate with Anais Flores, right, as her son turns 1.



Leydi Flores, left, and her daughter share a laugh during the party.



The birthday boy is surrounded by other children at the party.



A little boy's birthday turned out to be a good cause for dancing amid many immigrants' fears about the future.

It was good to put worry at bay for a night, but it was only one night.

"It's always something. We can't lift ourself up," Leydi Flores said. "First it was covid, now the immigration system. We are still waiting for the good times to arrive."



Anais Flores tucks a partied-out Eilan into his crib.