



Q&A: How Scholars Can Engage to Inform Immigration Policy

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On August 21, 2025 we featured two SSN members—Elizabeth Aranda and Ernesto Castañeda—alongside Aaron Reichlin-Melnick from the American Immigration Council, to provide a broad overview of the Trump administration's immigration policies as well as to discuss the different ways that scholars can engage effectively on unfolding immigration issues.

Here are some highlights from their conversation:

Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, on ICE, mass deportations, and what immigration scholars can do:

"In 2014 to 2024, internal ICE arrests never broke 100,000. Now we come to Trump. That is no longer true. According to reporting, ICE just for this year since Trump took office hit 150,000 arrests, as of early August and is on track potentially to break records for the highest number of internal ICE arrests ever in history. So how has this happened? What have they been doing? First, policies have explicitly changed. Executive orders that President Trump signed on day one direct ICE to prioritize arresting and detaining all undocumented immigrants regardless of their criminal histories or pasts. We have also seen a dramatic increase in who is carrying out arrests. We have seen an estimated 6,700 federal agents brought in from other parts of the federal government to carry out immigration enforcement. That includes nearly 4,000 people from the Department of Justice, including the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the ATF, the FBI, the DEA, the Drug Enforcement Agency, as well as the US. Marshall Services. We've even seen the IRS and the US Postal Inspection Service, and even the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service, which normally protects diplomats, all being taken away from their normal jobs and sent down on the streets to act as ICE's arms."

"More than a third of the people that ICE sent to detention from an arrest in the Interior had no criminal record whatsoever. When Trump took office, 4% of people sent to detention from the Interior by ICE had no criminal record. As of the most recent data through August 12th, it's 34%. So we've gone from 4% to 34%, and as of today, there are more people in ICE detention who have no criminal record than people who are pending criminal charges."

“As scholars, this does open many opportunities to analyze an enforcement operation and blitz that really don't look like anything that's happened in the modern era. Unfortunately, the data is not easily available, but [through] some projects, some people have made some data available, [such as] the [Deportation Data Project](#). This is a really phenomenal resource that David Hausman and others put together, that allows people to look at the individual data on ICE arrests and detentions and really be able to analyze [that], see the trends, what is happening here. This is phenomenal data and has been put into the public. I have talked to multiple reporters who are producing features on the basis of this. So this is a really useful tool that I suggest people who want to do data analysis look into, going forward.”

“The Trump administration isn't just going after the enforcement of the people who are in the country. They are also aiming to restrict who gets to come here.

The actual numbers of people coming to the country may not drop, despite the fact that tens of thousands of people are going to be denied visas. Because for every fifty people or one hundred people or one thousand people that are denied a visa under these new restrictions, there are more than that waiting in the backlogs who can take their place. And that means that actual numbers of immigration may not drop, but the composition of who gets to immigrate will drop. And that data is available to some extent through the State Department, but there is a lot of lag time. So we will not be quickly seeing changes in the data, but I do encourage projects going forward looking at how the composition of immigrants to the United States changes.”

“With all the new restrictions the Trump administration is putting in place—visa bans, ideological screenings, and a few other bits of red tape— it's going to be very hard to disentangle that from the general lack of desire of people to come to the country as they feel no longer welcome. So we may see both a change in the composition of the immigrant flow because of its specific policies and a change because of the desirability of immigration of the United States. This is a research opportunity like none other [for scholars]. We are seeing this play out, but of course, it is real people's lives being affected and the need for this data and the need for the analysis is higher than it has really ever been as we are in this moment of major change in transition.”

Dr. Ernesto Castañeda, on the value of scholars engaging in the public debate:

“What I'm going to invite you all to do is to engage the public debate about immigration, because I think part of the problem in the last number of years is that we, collectively, including the experts, have seeded the ground to people like Stephen Miller, to frame the narrative about the dangers of immigration, and control the policymaking. We are seeing things immigration scholars were worried about for a long time, becoming a reality. And we have to fight back with data, with the numbers, but also the stories and the narrative.”

“Unfortunately, journalists these days are less and less willing to talk to immigrants on the ground, which is the best source, but if they don't do it, then it's better they do it talking to people like you, who have done surveys, interviews, studies when you talk to immigrants on the ground. We know very well what they are going through, so we're able to communicate that to the media when we talk to them. Also it's very important that we think collectively, right? So it's not only me talking about my work, but if they ask me about something that I know one of you has worked on and I know it, then I share the findings, and that you do the same thing. You can also feel free to pull my work, whenever you're talking to the media. Because if we don't establish a better reality to what's happening with immigration, it's going to be people like Stephen Miller setting up the stage.”

“I think now the American public, and the world, understand what it means to do a mass deportation. There's been a pushback. So now is the time to really inform the public about what immigration is. And some of you may be afraid, and I understand it. Maybe you are saying that we shouldn't be political, we should stay in the scientific lane. But unfortunately immigration, immigration policy, immigrant integration, etc.--these topics have been politicized, from both right and the left, so we cannot avoid that. So we might as well be aware of that and enter that field with our open eyes.”

Elizabeth Aranda, on weighing the risks of doing immigration research and strategies to protect interview participants:

“I don't claim to be an expert on doing research in these really dystopian times...but my approach has been to document and record what's happening and how it's affecting immigrants, and also how it's leading to new forms of inequality and social harm. And this time when more and more data is disappearing and we have political appointees becoming gatekeepers of what was once reliable data, I believe it's really on social scientists to record and document the current moment to create a record for future generations. [But] everybody has to think about their comfort level with risk.”

“I assembled a research team last summer to study the effect of the Florida anti-immigration law on immigrant well being. It was SB 1718, which passed in 2023. and at that time, it was probably the most draconian state immigration law on the books. And so we did a survey and [it was during the] presidential campaign. People were afraid, but nothing like now. And we applied for funding to do interviews this [past] summer and I think at that point in time, none of us thought that Trump would be elected. So this was really like a state level project. And we didn't know how interviewing immigrants would go because so many people are so afraid. And why would they want to talk to a social scientist? But we actually found the opposite. Once they trusted us (and it was key to work with community partner organizations to gain that trust) they wanted to tell their story. And we have people who said, I'm not comfortable doing this...but if you're going to get my story out there, then I'm going to talk to you. And so we're holding ourselves to that expectation.”

"It started out as a project on a state level policy. But when immigrants talked about the effects on their daily lives, they conflated executive orders and national policy effects with the effects of state law. So it really required adapting our interview guide, making sure the questions we were asking were clear, doing careful monitoring of the data collection."

"We found really high levels of distress in the population and extreme levels of social isolation. We conducted about 52 interviews over the summer. And the interviews were very emotional. There were some interviews that began with the first question, a simple question of, tell me about how you came to this country, when did you come, a little about your life history. And people would start crying. And we would stop the interview. We would give them the option to not proceed, to end the interview altogether, but nobody took us on that. They were determined to tell those stories, even if those stories were interspersed with legitimate breakdowns, because they're living in an awful time."

"And this is the process of doing research in a political climate like this: it's pretty tricky, so everything has to be triple thought out. And this is where I would say that your positionality is—it really matters, because you have to assess the risk of doing this kind of work, but also, when you come to publish it and if you're going to talk to the media, you need to determine what level of risk in life you're comfortable with."