



The Impact of ICE Surveillance Technology on the Well-being of the Children of Immigrants

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February 2024

INTRODUCTION

As of March 2023, there are nearly [300,000 immigrants](#) under Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) surveillance through various technologies, including the smartphone app SmartLINK, telephone reporting, and electronic monitors (EMs). [The Impact of ICE Surveillance Technology on the Well-being of the Children of Immigrants](#) by Dr. Mirian Martinez-Aranda investigates how electronic monitors negatively impact immigrant parent-child relationships and have significant unintended consequences for the well-being of children.

Approximately 6 million children, including US citizens and legal permanent residents, live with an undocumented parent; these children live in continuous fear that their parents might be deported. Further, the impacts of parental immigration criminalization manifest through changes in children's academic performance, declines in mental health and well-being, and shocks to community ties.

Through a qualitative study that used semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations of 40 immigrant parents living under the surveillance of EMs in Los Angeles, California between 2015 and 2018, this study finds that both parents and children face stigma and shame from EMs that can be detrimental to parent-child relationships. Further, parents are pushed away from social networks, leaving them and their children with a weak safety net and lack of community support that deprives children of social connections and puts them at risk of developmental delays.

BACKGROUND

Undocumented immigrants making the difficult journey to the United States can be immediately criminalized when crossing the border or picked up in the interior by ICE deportation agents. The vast majority of those under ICE custody are placed in detention, while a smaller portion enter a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) program that subjects immigrants to constant surveillance called [Alternatives to Detention](#) (ATDs). These types of programs grant immigrants a "fragile freedom," where release is conditionally granted so long as they submit to constant surveillance. Though touted as "humane" alternatives, ATDs like EMs can traumatize children and fracture parent-child relationships.

In 2022, there were approximately 15,000 people that were tethered to these bulky and often malfunctioning EMs. Electronic monitors serve as a continuous, omnipresent, and visually stigmatizing reminder for immigrants and their families of the looming threat of deportation. Routine malfunctions and the visual stigma of EMs signaling "criminality" serve as aggravating factors that negatively affect interpersonal relationships, job security, housing, and community support and in turn punish those around the wearer, including US citizens.

"This type of immigration enforcement creates fragile freedom for the shackled person and damages their relationships with their children."

FINDINGS

- **Intrusive and Unreliable Nature of EMs Negatively Impact Children's Wellbeing**
 - EMs are a reminder of potential deportability and signal criminality which produces feelings of fear, shame, and anger among children.
 - Children experience intensified fear that their parents might be deported which negatively affects their mental health and behavior.
- **EMs Deteriorate the Quality of Parent-Child and Community Relationships**
 - Constant monitoring produces fear and stress for parents that harms their relationships and contracts their access to their communities and resources.
 - EMs prevent parents from full participation in everyday activities with their children.
- **Visual Stigma of EMs Signals Criminality and Extends Punishment to Co-ethnic Community Members**
 - Children's access to support networks contract as they are viewed as a liability by community members who might have tenuous immigration statuses.
 - Children experienced isolating effects as a result of their parent's EM.
- **EMs Produced Feelings of Fear Among Younger Children and Shame Among Older Children**
 - Although not completely comprehending the significance of an EM, younger children exhibit a visceral response toward monitors.
 - Older children understand the criminal symbolism and implications of EMs, which produce feelings of shame when interacting with their community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **DHS should implement alternatives to detention that are non-carceral and non-invasive. Instead of EMs and invasive surveillance technologies, DHS should invest in community-led and -based programs such as evidence-based case-management systems.** There is precedence and evidence of success for these programs, which respect civil liberties and privacy rights, and resulted in compliance with court appearance at high rates. DHS should:
 - Implement clear guidelines and transparency on the use of EM technology to avoid potential abuses and protect immigrants' civil liberties.
 - Reinvest in partners with case management and support programs led by community organizations: Immigrants exhibit high court appearance rates and consistently appear at ICE check-ins when provided case management and other support like legal aid, access to medical services, housing, translation, and transportation.
- **The US government should abolish EM technology and avoid the adoption of more invasive and less humane surveillance technologies,** such as smartphone-based tracking applications.
 - Smartphone-based tracking applications such as SmartLINK are not a viable alternative solution as they may lead to the violation of privacy rights and restrictions to personal freedom through surveillance of contacts and communications, social media use, facial recognition, and consumer data.
- As an alternative to EMs and other ICE surveillance programs, **Congress should fund community-led support programs that provide guidance for immigrants trying to make a new life in the US** through services such as legal aid, medical services, housing, translation, and transportation.