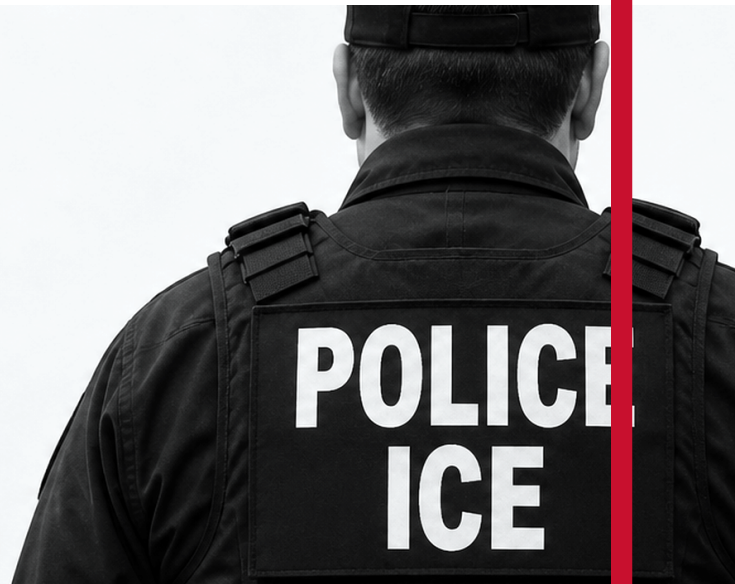


NUMBER 10-2026

CPP REPORT

April 2026



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Public Sentiment Toward Immigration and Customs Enforcement

The Greater Houston area is one of the most diverse metropolitan areas in the United States, with nearly one in four residents foreign-born, and sits at the center of national debates over immigration and local governance. Immigrant communities are central to the region's economic and cultural vitality and neighborhood life. Yet, the Greater Houston area also experiences some of the highest levels of immigration and enforcement activity in the country, leading the nation in ICE arrests. As policymakers weigh whether and how local agencies should cooperate with federal immigration authorities, key questions remain about how residents themselves view immigration enforcement and its effects on their communities. This report examines those perceptions across several dimensions: exposure to ICE activity, attitudes toward local cooperation with federal authorities, and views on the agencies carrying out enforcement actions.



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Key Takeaways

1. **More than one in five residents have exposure to ICE:** 22.1% of Greater Houston area residents say they or someone in their household have seen ICE activity in their neighborhood; 23.5% reported that they or someone close to them encountered ICE in their neighborhood.
2. **Residents see ICE as harming their communities:** Large shares of area residents say ICE enforcement actions are eroding neighborhood safety, undermining community trust in law enforcement, and damaging the local economy, with negative assessments holding both nationally and locally.
3. **Disapproval of ICE is widespread:** 69.9% of Greater Houston area residents either somewhat or strongly disapprove of the way ICE is handling its job. Disapproval is highest among Black and Hispanic residents and those of other races and ethnicities, and concentrated in Houston and Fort Bend County.
4. **Sharp partisan differences:** Democrats overwhelmingly disapprove of ICE operations (90.2%) and oppose local cooperation with ICE, while Republicans are far less likely to do so and only 29.8% support eliminating ICE. Independents fall between the two groups, though their views are closer to Democrats on most measures.
5. **Most residents oppose local cooperation with ICE:** 63.6% oppose their county sheriff working with ICE, and 59.3% oppose cooperation between local law enforcement and federal immigration authorities. Opposition follows the same demographic and regional patterns as overall disapproval.
6. **Over half of respondents support eliminating ICE:** 53.9% of respondents support eliminating ICE as a federal agency, with sharp differences across race and ethnicity and party ID.

Introduction

As one of the most diverse metropolitan areas in the United States, Houston sits at the center of the national conversation on immigration and local governance. Nearly one in four Houston-area residents is foreign-born—more than 1.6 million people—reflecting decades of immigration-driven growth. Immigrant communities play a critical role in the region’s economic vitality, labor force, and neighborhood life, contributing to Houston’s status as one of the most dynamic and diverse cities in the country.

At the same time, recent data show that the region led the nation in arrests conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2025.¹ Federal enforcement operations, as well as increased coordination between local law enforcement and federal authorities, have made immigration enforcement more visible in everyday settings.

This visibility has coincided with growing policy debates at the local and state levels. In recent months, Houston policymakers have faced intense pressure over the extent to which local law enforcement should cooperate with federal immigration authorities, reflecting broader tensions between constitutional protections, public safety priorities, and community trust.

On April 8, 2026, the Houston City Council approved an ordinance intended to limit cooperation between the Houston Police Department (HPD) and ICE, particularly in cases involving administrative immigration warrants. The measure quickly became the focus of political and legal debate, with Texas officials arguing that it conflicted with the state’s anti-sanctuary city policies and threatening to withhold public safety funding. Following mounting pressure, the City Council revisited the ordinance on April 22 and approved

amendments in a 13–4 vote that weakened several of the original restrictions on HPD–ICE cooperation.²

Although immigration enforcement has become increasingly prominent in public and policy debates, important questions remain about how residents themselves experience and interpret its effects on their communities. Do enforcement actions enhance neighborhood safety, or do they undermine trust and civic engagement? How do these perceptions differ between national narratives and local lived experiences? And how do area residents view the agencies carrying out enforcement actions and local law enforcement cooperation with ICE? This report addresses these questions by examining Greater Houston area residents’ perceptions of immigration enforcement across multiple dimensions of neighborhood life, including safety, economic activity, access to services, and community cohesion.

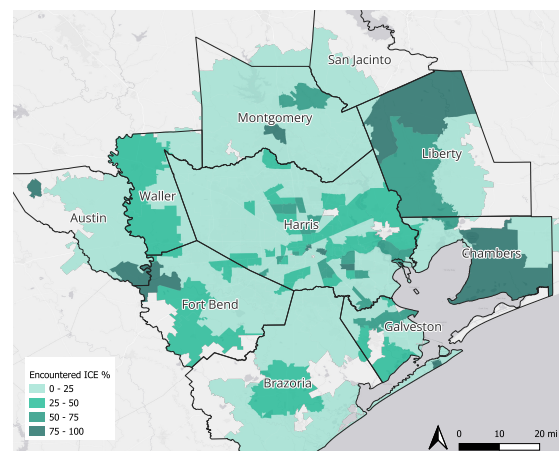


Figure 1 Reported encounters with ICE

ICE in the Community

The Houston area led the nation in ICE arrests in 2025; yet, most residents report little direct exposure to immigration enforcement activity in their communities. Still, more than one in five respondents (22.1%) said they or someone in their household have seen ICE activity in their neighborhood, while a slightly larger share (23.5%) reported that they or someone close to them had encountered ICE in their community. Although these experiences are not widespread, they indicate that immigration enforcement remains visible to a substantial minority of residents.

The areas with the highest percentage of respondents reporting that they or someone close to them encountered ICE in their neighborhood are concentrated in Liberty and Chambers Counties, as well as parts of Galveston County (Figure 1). Large percentages of residents in the eastern part of Harris County, in majority-minority neighborhoods, also reported such encounters.

Respondents largely view ICE as harming American communities, though they judge the agency’s impact on their own city somewhat less harshly than its impact on the country as a whole. Nearly half (49.1%) say ICE enforcement actions have negatively affected neighborhood safety nationally, compared to 39.5% who say the same about their own city. The gap is even more pronounced on community trust in law enforcement: 64.8% believe ICE is eroding that trust nationally, while 59.1% see the same erosion locally.

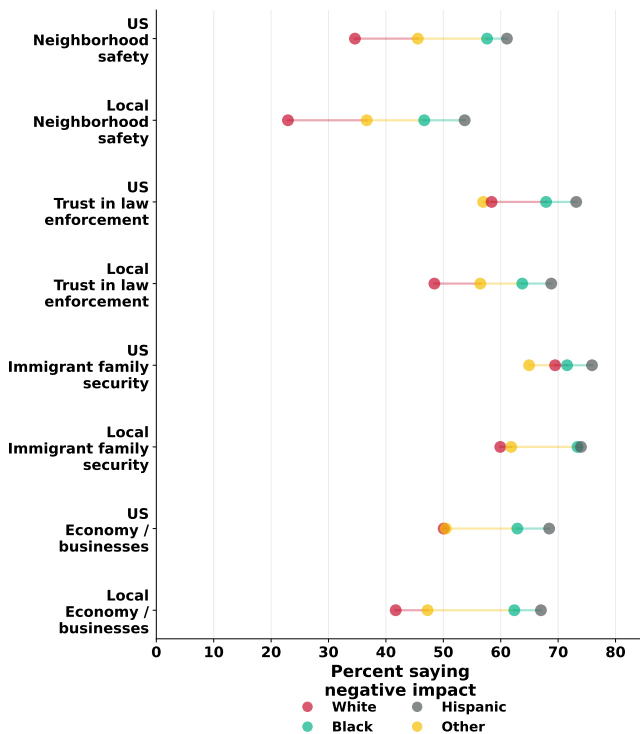


Figure 2 Impact of ICE actions at the national and local levels by race and ethnicity

Large shares of Greater Houston Area residents also see more negative than positive impacts when it comes to immigrant families’ security: 70.7% see ICE’s actions has having a negative impact (either very or somewhat) in the US as a whole and 67.0% see such negative impacts in their own city.

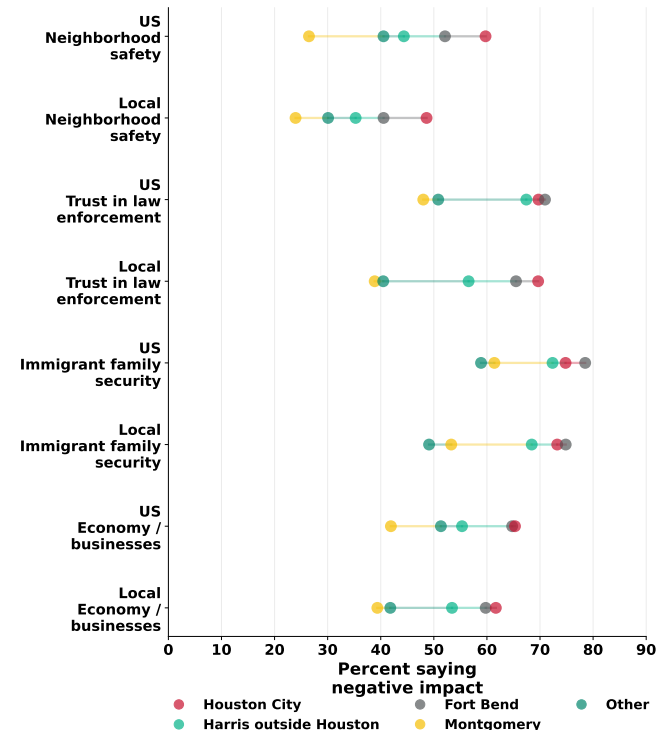


Figure 3 Impact of ICE actions at the national and local levels by Houston MSA region

Perspectives on the impact of ICE’s enforcement actions vary across race and ethnicity. White respondents are markedly less likely than Black, Hispanic, and other respondents to view ICE as harming community safety or eroding trust in law enforcement. Majorities across racial and ethnic groups view ICE immigration enforcement actions as having particularly negative impacts on immigrant families at the national and local levels. Nearly three-quarters of Black (73.4%) and Hispanic (74.0%) residents view ICE activity as negatively affecting immigrant families in their cities, compared to three-fifths of white residents (59.9%) and 61.8% residents of other races and ethnicities (Figure 2).

When it comes to ICE activity and its impact on the local economies and businesses, 36.9% of respondents think ICE has a very negative impact, with another 21.0% saying it somewhat negatively affects business in the US as a whole, and 30.7% think ICE actions are very negatively affecting the economy and businesses in their cities (23.6% somewhat negative impact). Clear differences emerge along geographic and demographic lines. As shown in Figure 3), residents in Houston (65.3% and 61.7%) and Fort Bend County

(64.7% and 59.9%) are much more likely to see ICE activity damaging local economy and businesses when thinking about the US and about their own cities, compared to Harris County outside of Houston (55.3% and 53.4%), Montgomery County (41.9% and 39.4%), and the remaining Houston MSA counties (51.3% and 41.8%).

Echoing previous patterns, white respondents are markedly less likely than other race and ethnicity groups to perceive negative consequences of ICE activity on local economies and businesses. When thinking about their own city, 41.7% of white respondents view ICE actions as somewhat or very negatively affecting the local economy and businesses compared to 62.9% of Black, 68.4% of Hispanic, and 47.2% of those belonging to other races and ethnicities.

Disapproval of ICE

More than two-thirds (69.9%) of Greater Houston area residents disapprove of how ICE is handling its job, with three in five strongly disapproving (Figure 4). Geographically, disapproval is especially high within the City of Houston (78.8%) and Fort Bend County (80.1%), while residents in Montgomery County report the lowest levels of disapproval (Figure 5).

Attitudes also vary substantially across racial and ethnic groups. Black (78.3%) and Hispanic (77.0%) respondents express the highest levels of disapproval toward ICE, while white respondents report comparatively lower levels of disapproval. Even so, a majority of white residents (58.0%) still disapprove of how ICE is handling its job (Figure 6).

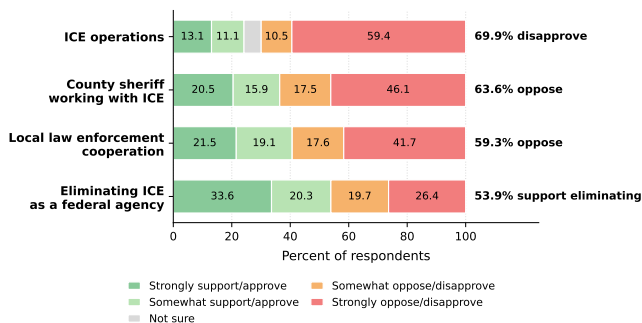


Figure 4 Overall attitudes toward local immigration enforcement, ICE operations, and eliminating ICE

Yet, this widespread disapproval does not translate directly into support for curbing ICE’s reach. While 59.3% and 63.6% of area residents oppose collaboration between ICE and local law enforcement and sheriffs, respectively, the share who strongly oppose such collaboration drops sharply. Strong disapproval of the way ICE is handling its job likewise falls short of a robust majority in favor of eliminating ICE, with only 53.9% supporting eliminating the agency.

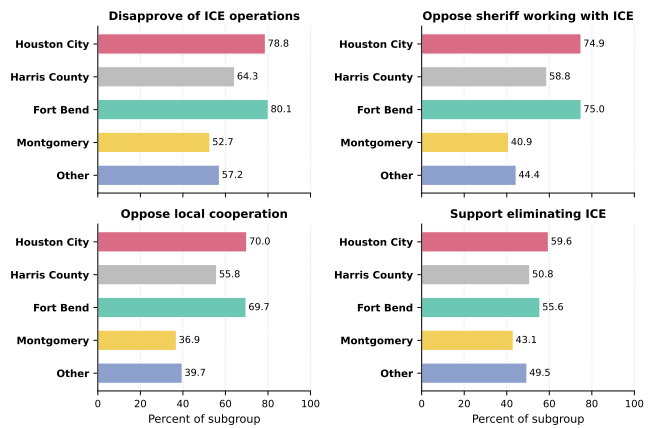


Figure 5 Regional differences in opposition to local ICE cooperation, disapproval of ICE operations, and support for eliminating ICE

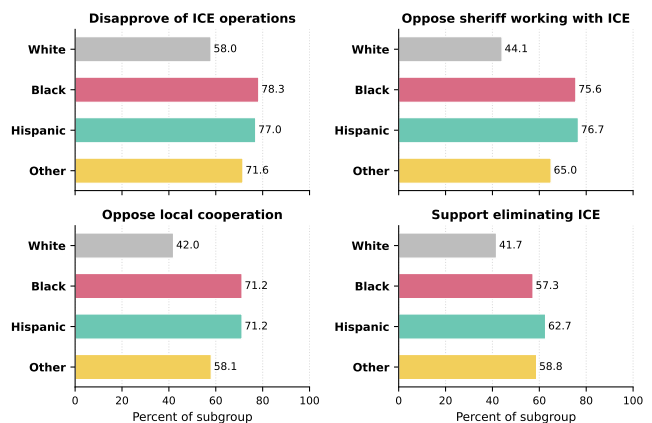


Figure 6 Opposition to local ICE cooperation, disapproval of ICE operations, and support for eliminating ICE, by race and ethnicity

Perspectives on restricting or eliminating ICE vary across race and ethnicity in ways that echo the patterns of approval discussed earlier. While 71.2% of Black and Hispanic respondents oppose local law enforcement cooperation with ICE, only 42.0% of white respondents do, a nearly 30 percentage point gap. Three-fourths of Black and Hispanic respondents oppose their sheriffs working with ICE, as do 65.0% of respondents of other races and ethnicities, compared to 44.1% of white respondents. Mirroring the overall pattern, support for eliminating ICE is lower than opposition to local cooperation within every racial and ethnic group, though majorities of Black, Hispanic, and other respondents still favor elimination. White respondents remain the group most opposed to restricting or eliminating ICE.

Regional differences are similarly pronounced (Figure 5): In Houston and Fort Bend County, clear majorities of residents

oppose local cooperation with ICE: 74.9% and 75.0%, respectively, oppose their sheriff working with ICE and 70.0% and 69.7% oppose local law enforcement cooperation with ICE. Opposition to collaboration between federal immigration agents and local enforcement drops considerably in the other counties of the Greater Houston area.

Partisanship, Representation, and Local Political Conflict

The sharp partisan divisions shown in Figure 7 help place Houston-area debates over immigration enforcement within a broader political conflict involving the City of Houston, the State of Texas, and the federal government.

Democrats overwhelmingly disapprove of ICE operations (90.2%) and oppose cooperation between local law enforcement and ICE, while Republicans are far less likely to do so. Independents generally fall between the two groups, though their views remain substantially closer to Democrats than Republicans on most measures. These differences suggest that attitudes toward immigration enforcement are closely tied not only to views about public safety and border enforcement, but also to broader disagreements over local autonomy, state preemption, and the role of federal immigration authorities in local communities. Given Republicans' much higher approval of ICE, it follows that few support eliminating the agency (29.8%). Seven in ten Democratic respondents support eliminating ICE as do 53.3% of Independents.

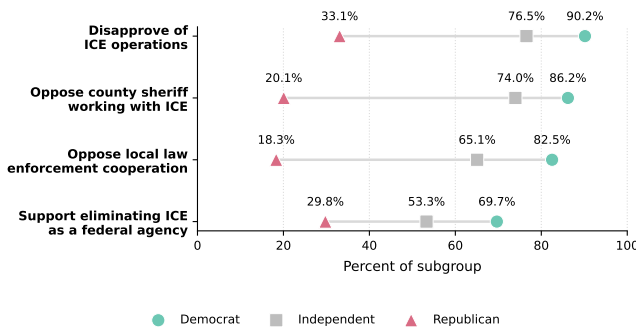


Figure 7 Opposition to local ICE cooperation, disapproval of ICE operations, and support for eliminating ICE, by party identification

The geographic and demographic patterns discussed earlier mirror these political divides. Residents in the City of Houston and Fort Bend County—areas that are more racially diverse and politically Democratic-leaning—express substantially higher levels of opposition to ICE and local cooperation with federal immigration authorities than residents in Montgomery County and other more Republican-leaning suburban and exurban areas. Similar differences appear across racial and ethnic groups, with Black and Hispanic residents consistently more likely than white residents to

view ICE operations negatively and to oppose collaboration between local law enforcement and ICE. These patterns are consistent with the political tensions surrounding the recent dispute between Houston officials and the State of Texas over efforts to limit the Houston Police Department's cooperation with ICE.

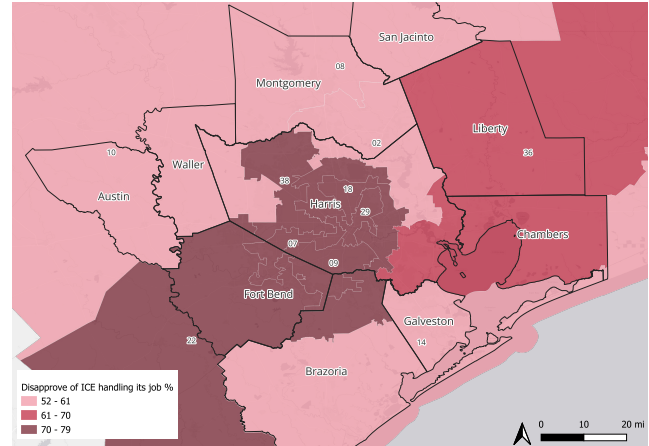


Figure 8 Disapproval of ICE by Congressional District

Viewing the results by congressional district echoes the divide by party identification, though the contrasts soften because congressional districts contain politically and demographically mixed constituencies rather than electorates fully sorted by party. Moreover, these results reflect the views of residents rather than likely voters, an important distinction in a region where electoral turnout tends to be higher among older and white residents. Districts represented by Democrats, including TX-07, TX-09, TX-18, and TX-29, report some of the highest levels of disapproval toward ICE and some of the strongest support for restricting cooperation with federal immigration enforcement (Figures 8 and 9). By contrast, Republican-held districts such as TX-10, TX-14, and TX-36 show substantially lower levels of support for eliminating ICE and lower levels of disapproval overall.

An important exception is Troy Nehls' district (TX-22), which shows the highest level of support for abolishing ICE (63.5%) and high levels of disapproval toward ICE (77.0%). While represented by a Republican, TX-22 includes much of Fort Bend County, one of the most racially and ethnically diverse counties in the country and a district with a large immigrant and foreign-born population.³ At the same time, even many Republican-leaning districts contain majority opposition to ICE operations, suggesting that dissatisfaction with immigration enforcement extends beyond traditionally Democratic constituencies.

Taken together, these findings suggest that public opinion on immigration enforcement in Greater Houston reflects broader political conflict over governance and political authority in rapidly diversifying metropolitan regions. Debates

over ICE cooperation are not simply disputes about enforcement policy; they also involve competing views about the relationship between local governments, state authority, immigrant communities, and public institutions. In Houston, where demographic change, partisan polarization, and immigration enforcement intersect directly, these tensions have become especially visible.

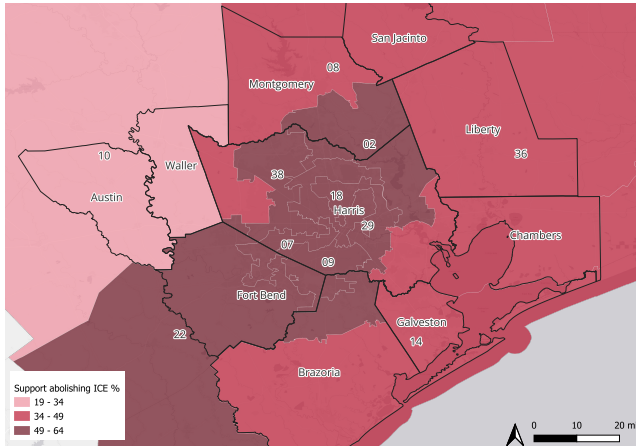


Figure 9 Support for abolishing ICE by Congressional District

Conclusion

Public opinion on ICE in the Greater Houston area is marked by broad disapproval. Nearly seven in ten area residents disapprove of how ICE is handling its job, majorities oppose local cooperation between sheriffs or police and federal immigration authorities, and a slim majority support eliminating the agency altogether. These attitudes are structured by race and ethnicity, region, and party identification: disapproval runs highest among Black and Hispanic residents, in Houston and Fort Bend County, and among Democrats, while white residents, Montgomery County residents, and Republicans express lower levels of opposition. Even so, majority opposition to ICE extends into many Republican-leaning districts.

Chicago and Houston are the third- and fourth-largest U.S. cities, each home to large and diverse immigrant populations, yet their demographic, economic, and spatial profiles differ in important ways, as detailed in a previous CPP policy brief.⁴ Comparing our results with those of the ChicagoSpeaks Immigration Research Brief reveals that ICE activity in Houston has lacked the sustained, public-facing intensity of “Operation Midway Blitz,” the high-profile enforcement campaign conducted by the Department of Homeland Security in Chicago, starting in September 2025.⁵ The ChicagoSpeaks poll was fielded in November and December 2025, while our most recent survey was fielded in April 2026. These distinctions help explain why pessimism about ICE runs deeper in Chicago than in Houston.

While Greater Houston area respondents were asked about both local and national impacts, while Chicagoans were asked only about local impacts. Respondents in the SPACE City Panel consistently judge ICE as causing more harm nationally than locally, but Chicagoans report stronger negative local impacts than residents in the Houston region. Houston respondents say ICE has negatively affected neighborhood safety nationally (49.1%) and locally (39.5%), compared to 58% of Chicago respondents reporting negative local impacts on neighborhood safety.

On community trust in law enforcement, 64.8% of Houston respondents see negative national effects and 59.1% see negative local effects, while 68% of Chicago respondents report a decline in community trust in law enforcement in their city. The economic gap is wider still: 57.9% of Houston respondents view ICE as harming the national economy and 54.3% see local harm, while 69% of Chicago respondents report negative local economic effects. Notably, residents of Houston City and Fort Bend County (65.3% and 64.7%, respectively) align more closely with Chicago’s economic concerns than the Greater Houston area as a whole. However, despite less negative perceptions of ICE’s local impact,

Houston-area residents register slightly higher overall disapproval of the agency: 69.9% disapprove of ICE operations, compared to 62% of Chicago respondents who oppose Operation Midway Blitz. The ChicagoSpeaks poll, however, was fielded before several high-profile ICE actions elsewhere in the country, and before the murders of U.S. citizens by immigration enforcement sustained national attention; events that may have shifted opinion further since.

Taken together, the Houston and Chicago findings point to a broader pattern: residents of major immigrant-receiving cities overwhelmingly disapprove of ICE, but the depth of that skepticism is shaped by the visibility and intensity of enforcement on the ground. As Houston-area policymakers continue to navigate the tensions among local autonomy, state preemption, and federal immigration authority, public sentiment offers a clear signal: residents broadly disapprove of how ICE operates, want limits on local cooperation, and are open to eliminating the agency.

Notes

1. Michael Wilson. “Federal Data Shows Houston Leads Nation in ICE Arrests.” *Texas Scorecard*. December 30, 2025.
2. Alex Nguyen. “Houston City Council Approves Gutting Policy Limiting ICE Cooperation, Civil Rights Groups Say.” *The Texas Tribune*. April 22, 2026.
3. Approximately 23.8% of residents in TX-22 are foreign-born and more than one-third of households primarily speak a language other than English at home. *DataUSA: Congressional District 22, TX*.
4. Buttorff, G., Danilola, S., Granato, J., Miers, C. M., Mo-

htadi, S., Perez Argüelles, M. P., Pinto, P. M., Sipole, S. L., Upchurch, G. P., Vallejo, A., & Wong, M. C. S. (2026). "On the Right Track? Public Perceptions in Houston and Chicago." *CPP Brief 8-2026*, Center for Public Policy, Hobby School of Public Affairs

5. NORC at the University of Chicago. "Most Chicago residents oppose Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations in the city, with a majority saying these actions have harmed community safety and weakened the local economy." *ChicagoSpeaks Research Brief | December 2025*.

Methodology

Sample & data collection. *SPACE City Panel, Wave 4, April 2026; N = 1,525; mode: online. MOE: ±3.53% for whole sample.*

Weights. *Post-stratified to age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, county. Missing demographics imputed.*

Exclusions. Unless explicit, *Don't knows* and *Skipped* responses excluded from figures or analyses.

Percentages. Unless explicit in text or figure, percentages are calculated over valid responses. Percentages shown in figures are rounded to the nearest whole percentage point unless decimals are displayed; because categories are rounded independently, totals may not sum exactly to 100%.



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How to cite: Buttorff, G., Danilola, S., Granato, J., Miers C. M., Mohtadi S., Perez Argüelles, M. P., Pinto, P. M., Sipole, S. L., Upchurch, G. P., Vallejo, A., & Wong, M. C. S. (2026).

Public Sentiment Toward Immigration and Customs Enforcement
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