

ICE Detention of Migrant Firefighters

October 15, 2025

This report contains a narrative landscape analysis completed as part of Narrative Initiative's Timely and Responsive Research offering. The analysis was conducted for the *National Partnership for New Americans* and other climate migration table partners (e.g., Welcoming America, Just Solutions) with the goal of understanding narrative organizing and storytelling opportunities pertaining to the detention of migrant first responders by United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

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Introduction

On Wednesday, August 27, 2025, two firefighters—Rigoberto Hernandez Hernandez, “Hernandez”, and Jose Cruz Estrada, “Estrada”—were detained by federal law enforcement for allegedly living in the United States without proper legal documentation (Seattle Times 2025). Both men currently reside in Oregon, but were deployed to Washington state by private contracting companies to provide frontline firefighting support for the Bear Gulch fire. The fire started in the Olympic Peninsula on July 6, 2025. As of October 15, 2025, when we completed the report, the fire remained at only 5% containment, but is currently fully contained.

In the days and weeks following federal agents’ detention of Hernandez and Estrada, conflicting accounts of their arrests, the nature of their work in Washington, and their backgrounds spread across mainstream and social media. After a careful review of more than 100 pieces of media related to this story, we have determined the following to be true, according to multiple sources spanning different media types, voices, and perspectives:

Hernandez and Estrada were both born in Mexico. Both men immigrated to the United States nearly 20 years ago and have spent considerable time in the US.

Both Hernandez and Estrada have a criminal record. Hernandez has a 2021 misdemeanor conviction related to speed racing (Innovation Law Lab 2025). Estrada’s legal record reflects charges of falsely claiming to be a U.S. citizen and a 2013 conviction for delivery of methamphetamine (KGW-8 2025).

In 2018, Hernandez and his family were the victims of a federal crime and cooperated with law enforcement as an investigation was conducted (Oregon Public Broadcasting 2025). Later that year, Hernandez’s family applied for U visas, a specific visa granted to victims who suffer significant harm as a result of crime and who assist law enforcement with the prosecution of said crime. Seven years later, Hernandez and his family are still waiting on their visa applications to be adjudicated (KATU 2025).

The arrests of Hernandez and Estrada breaks with longstanding Department of Homeland Security (DHS) policy prohibiting immigration enforcement at disaster response sites (CNN 2025). In a September 8, 2025 ‘fact-checking’ press release, DHS argued that Hernandez and Estrada were merely serving in a support role during the fires, as opposed to directly providing disaster relief (DHS.gov 2025).

Despite claims made by several DHS officials and echoed by social media, Hernandez and Estrada—both trained and experienced first responders—were actively engaged in firefighting efforts for two weeks prior to their detention (Salem Reporter 2025). At the time of their arrest, both men were cutting down trees in a remote staging area per their supervisors’ direction.

A variety of sources familiar with the August 27th arrests claim the detention of Hernandez and Estrada was the product of a coordinated effort between the private contracting companies they worked for, DHS, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and California Interagency Incident Management Team 7 (Cascade PBS 2025). We found no evidence disproving these claims. To the contrary, evidence suggests the private contractors that Hernandez and Estrada worked for sought out the involvement of ICE and other agencies.

According to multiple people present during the arrests, federal agents whistled at relief crew members “like they were dogs,” trapped them by blocking egress, and laughed at them. Hernandez reportedly sat handcuffed on a log for an hour while agents attempted to guess where he was from and likened him to “a stray cat” (Oregonian 2025). After verifying the identities of all crew members, agents removed Hernandez and Estrada from their worksite, denied them the opportunity to say goodbye to their teams, and told them, “You need to get the f*ck out of [this country]. I’m going to make you leave” (Seattle Times 2025).

As of September 25, 2025, Hernandez was released from ICE custody. As of October 15, 2025, Estrada remains in ICE custody in Tacoma, Washington.

On its face, this story seems simple: two men—each of whom have a criminal record, are not legal residents of the United States, and were actively providing firefighting assistance in the Pacific Northwest—were arrested on account of their status as alleged undocumented immigrants. A close read of the story reveals a complex web of related themes we generally categorize as *deep narratives* of identity, worth, disempowerment, and oppression. In the [Findings](#) section, we discuss specific narratives within those general categories and share quotations from the data we analyzed to demonstrate how those narratives show up in media. See [Appendix 1](#) for a full list of sources included in this analysis.

Executive Summary

This report investigates online narratives surrounding two firefighters who were detained on August 27, 2025 while on their worksite fighting the Bear Gulch fire in Washington state. Our research illuminates narratives in two thematic buckets: (1) narratives of *identity and worth*, and (2) narratives of *disempowerment and oppression*. These narrative themes are the foundations of storytelling about the character, role, and impact of migrant first responders, immigration enforcement, and abuse of government.

Our findings reflect recurring narrative themes we surfaced in our analysis of media sourced from multiple political and ideological points of view. These themes include things like **identity building**, **public service**, **dehumanization** of people across the political spectrum regardless of legal status, manufactured **distrust**, **criminality**, and **abuse of power**. Throughout this report, we've incorporated observational context regarding embedded values and cultural nuances where they strengthen our analytical insights.

Our focus for this rapid response research project was on the narrative landscape pertaining to ICE’s detention of migrant workers providing frontline disaster relief, specifically firefighters Rigoberto Hernandez and Jose Estrada. Given the details of their stories, this report does not address questions about disaster relief for immigrants or the alleged theft or misappropriation of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds by ICE.

Following a thorough review of our findings, we offer points of consideration for navigating the narrative landscape of migrant first responders, attitudes toward immigrants and federal agents, criminalization of migrants, and extreme immigration enforcement efforts.

Data & Methods

Below is a description of the data and methods we used to complete this narrative analysis.

Data overview

Data for this rapid response project comes from **104 pieces of relevant media** we identified through **12 unique keyword searches** on Google, Facebook, TikTok, Threads, Reddit, and X (Twitter). Our keyword searches queried content produced between August 25, 2025 and October 10, 2025. The content we analyzed includes **various types of media**—i.e., mainstream news, blog posts, op-eds, press releases, independent media, and social media—and **a range of voices, audiences, and ideological perspectives**. News media we analyzed comes from international, national, regional, state, and local sources as well as public broadcasting.

Given time and resource constraints (e.g., lack of access to a media monitoring platform like Meltwater), our analysis does not include audience sentiment using a traditional -1/0/+1 sentiment score, insights about how this story performed in different markets, or numerical data indicating the full reach of this story.

According to what we observed in our sample, sentiment is both **strongly positive** and **strongly negative, in favor of** and **against**, firefighters, undocumented immigrants, first responders, the federal government, and individual government officials. It had **fairly low reach across social media** sites, with Reddit providing the greatest depth of engagement, but was **covered by many news organizations** ranging from Al Jazeera to local news affiliates.

Our primary methods of analysis for this project are described below.

Content analysis

Content analysis involves reading a group of documents with the specific goal of identifying recurring themes. Using a qualitative data analysis software called [ATLAS.ti](#), we analyzed **104 pieces of content** we previously selected as the body of data for this project, resulting in the identification of **39 unique themes** across the dataset (see [Appendix 4](#)).

To capture those themes and track them across documents, we selected specific quotations representative of a given theme and assigned each quotation one or more codes—i.e., name tags—to reflect the presence of those themes. See [Appendix 2](#) for a visual example.

From the total dataset of 104 pieces of content, a subset of **460 quotations** (or excerpts) were gathered as evidence of the 39 themes we surfaced. Some of those 460 quotations appear in this report as examples of deep narratives discussed in the [Findings](#) section.

Sensemaking

After identifying sources for our analysis, we split the data equally such that **each of us analyzed 52 pieces of content** representative of the dataset. When our content analysis was complete, we met for an extensive session to **make sense of what we read** and the themes we identified. In that session, we **distilled deep narratives** from the quotations we selected and the themes captured within them. We elaborate on our findings in the section below.

Findings

This section contains descriptions of the deep narratives relevant to this story and quotations that demonstrate how those narratives appear in media we analyzed.

Narratives of Identity & Worth

Identity Building

Media about the ICE detention of Hernandez and Estrada depicts the character, motivation, roles, and worth of firefighters and federal agents in different ways depending on the media type, audience, and voice. Both positive and negative identity building play a key role in this story of immigration enforcement.

Who is ICE?

In the case of media that is positive or neutral about immigration and customs agents, ICE is described as an arm of government that keeps communities safe by upholding the rule of law.

- *“The cooperative effort [to arrest Hernandez and Estrada] highlights the coordination between federal agencies in ensuring the integrity of government operations and maintaining public trust” - Rosario P. Vasquez, Chief Border Patrol, Washington (The Oregonian 2025)*

Media that includes negative portrayals of ICE and government actors characterizes them as inhumane and unlawful members of organized crime.

- *“Trump's goons are now literally arresting firefighters.” - X user (X 2025)*
- *“[Stopping] operations to play Gestapo...spineless clowns.” - Reddit user (r/Wildfire 2025)*

Who are the firefighters?

In the case of media that is positive or neutral about migrant first responders, Hernandez and Estrada are described as public servants that risk their lives for the safety of their communities.

- “[ICE] is targeting people on the front lines working to keep our community safe.” - Matt Adams, Legal Director, Northwest Immigration Rights Project (Lake Oswego Review 2025)
- “This was never about public safety, because if it was, then why would our federal government arrest someone who was sacrificing so much to protect our country?” - Arianna Avena, SEIU Local 503 (The Oregonian 2025)

Media that includes negative portrayals of migrant first responders describes them as illegal aliens, criminals, drug traffickers, and law breakers.

- “[Democrats] are falsely claiming that ICE agents arrested a pair of “firefighters” in the sanctuary state of Washington. In actuality, [they are] illegal aliens with past criminal records.” - John Binder (Breitbart 2025)

Public Service

Service appeared as a clear narrative thread pertaining to firefighters and their relationship to the public and a more subtle thread regarding federal agents and their relationship to the law.

Firefighters are in service to communities and public safety

In the case of firefighters—immigrants and otherwise—service narratives appeared in statements about how firefighters put their lives on the line to protect communities from disaster and provide relief. Firefighters themselves conceptualize *service* as a point of pride, purpose, and devotion. With it comes a sense of honor and an acknowledgment of the inherent risk. Social media users and Democratic lawmakers expressed appreciation for sacrifices made by firefighters, noting their commitment to public service.

- “These folks have done more [to serve] this country than any of the keyboard warriors sitting on their asses supporting this bullshit.” - Reddit user (r/Oregon 2025)
- “For me, firefighting is much more than a job...it is a calling to me. I consider it my duty. It has given me clarity in how I think and how I want to act and be in the world. I want to be able to continue to protect the land, the wildlife, and the people of this country.” - Rigoberto Hernandez, court declaration (KGW-8 2025)

Government officials are in the service of law and order

In the more subtle case of service narratives related to federal agents and government officials, our media sample references government actors' posture toward the law, who holds the power to exercise it, and why enforcement of the law matters. In public statements regarding the detention of Hernandez and Estrada, government officials weaponized the supposed efficiency, effectiveness, and cooperation of government agencies to justify their extreme interventions, cruelty, and rights violations in the name of the law.

- *“U.S. Border Patrol steadfastly enforces the laws of the United States and unapologetically addresses violations of immigration law wherever they are encountered.” - Rosario P. Vasquez, Chief Border Patrol Agent, Washington (CNN 2025)*
- *“[ICE and BLM] professionals contribute to broader federal enforcement efforts by maintaining public safety, protecting natural resources, and collaborating with agencies such as Border Patrol.” - Alyse Sharpe, Department of Interior (The Independent 2025)*

Safety

Narrative threads related to safety were present throughout our dataset, specifically concerning who provides safety, to whom, and in what ways they provide it. Safety appears in positive media depictions of firefighters and in both positive and negative media depictions of ICE.

Firefighters are protectors

Across media types, firefighters are described as ‘brave protectors’ and ‘defenders of safety.’ Safety, as it relates to firefighters, typically refers to safety of lands, people, and communities, inclusive of standard emergency response and large-scale disaster response.

- *“Here in the Pacific north-west, wildfires can [burn] and have burned entire towns to the ground. We count on our brave firefighters, who put their lives on the line, to keep our communities safe.” - U.S. Senator Patty Murray, D-Washington (KLCC 2025)*

ICE defends America against criminals and lawbreakers

When depicted favorably in the media, ICE is described as fulfilling a clear need to arrest, detain, and deport criminal and lawbreaking immigrants. To the extent that ICE has a dedicated and aggressive agenda focused on doing exactly that, ICE positions itself as America’s defender.

- *“Washingtonians are safer today after U.S. Border Patrol arrested Jose Bertin Cruz Estrada, a Mexican national, who has a final order of removal from 10 years ago. He has a conviction for delivery of methamphetamine and charges of falsely claiming to be a U.S. citizen.” - ICE Spokesperson (KGW-8 2025)*

ICE disrupts safety and elevates risks

When criticized in the media, immigration enforcement amidst ongoing disaster management undermines firefighters’ contributions and disrupts—rather than promotes—safety. Community and personal safety is further threatened by ICE tactics of abuse, coercion, and intimidation.

- *“The Trump Administration’s thoughtless and cruel immigration enforcement at any cost undermines coordinated emergency response efforts.” - Letter to Kristi Noem, DHS Secretary, signed by 50 US lawmakers (The Oregonian 2025)*
- *“This should turn all our stomachs!! It is gross, indecent, inhumane & does NOTHING to solve the immigration problem or keep us safe! We [are] a police state!” - X user (X 2025)*
- *“The Trump administration’s crude and inhumane approach to immigration enforcement has intentionally and unnecessarily stoked fear and mistrust among members of the public — including firefighters putting their lives on the line to protect our state.” - Dave Upthegrove, Commissioner of Public Lands (CBS News 2025)*

The ‘Good Immigrant’ Trope

The ‘good immigrant’ trope upholds exclusionary ideas about who deserves to immigrate to the US and under what conditions immigrants deserve to remain in the US regardless of their legal status. Underpinning the ‘good immigrant’ trope is a deep narrative of deservingness, which appears throughout our media sample in both direct and indirect ways.

You are welcome here (under these conditions)

Threads of the ‘good immigrant’ trope appear in statements that support migrant firefighters on the basis of them being everyday heroes who just want to make communities safer.

- *“If Donald Trump truly wanted to protect Americans, he should be going after the real criminals—not unsung heroes like Mr. Hernandez. I’m going to keep using every tool at my disposal to uphold the due process rights of our immigrant communities.” - U.S. Senator Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, press release (Wyden.Senate.gov 2025)*

While migrant first responders should be respected and appreciated for their work, narrative frames of deservingness risk conditioning migrants’ acceptance and support on the magnitude of their contributions and what heroics they are willing to perform to ‘earn’ their place here.

Whose stories get told and to what ends?

Coverage of Hernandez’s detention differs substantially from that of Estrada, despite their stories having key similarities—i.e., both men live in Oregon, were detained in the same place at the same time, have criminal records, and are undocumented immigrants from Mexico to the US. The ‘good immigrant’ trope helps explain differences in coverage of their stories.

Compared to Jose Estrada—who moved in and out of the US multiple times, has been convicted of serious crimes, and has been deported 2 times prior to his current detention—Rigoberto Hernandez is a prime example of the ‘good immigrant.’

- *“[Hernandez] entered the US in 2006 when he was just four years old. He’s been here for nearly 20 years. He graduated high school, Oregon is his home. He’s bravely been fighting fires for nearly three years now...protecting homes, communities, and resources”...“He has only one low-level criminal conviction on his record.” - Rodrigo Fernandez, Hernandez’s attorney (KATU, ABC7, The Oregonian 2025)*

Hernandez has a team of lawyers, has filed a lawsuit against US Border Patrol, and was voluntarily released from ICE detention 4 weeks after his arrest. A group of 50 lawmakers wrote a letter to DHS condemning his detention. In contrast, Estrada’s family is [crowdsourcing funds](#)

to pay an immigration lawyer in Washington where Estrada remains in ICE custody nearly 2 months after his arrest.

- *“Jose Cruz Estrada wasn’t [a] brave firefighter..he wasn’t a victim of a cruel immigration system. He was an illegal immigrant with a decade-old order of removal, a drug trafficking conviction, and charges of lying about being a U.S. citizen. [He] is not the poster child for sympathy. He’s exactly the kind of dangerous criminal alien ICE is supposed to remove.” - Jason Rantz (Seattle Red 2025)*

While Hernandez is portrayed as the victim of hostile actions by ICE, Estrada’s story is almost absent from news and social media entirely. A Google Search returns 10 pages of results on Hernandez’s arrest compared to 3 pages of results on Estrada. What media attention Estrada has received largely contains claims about his criminal record and prior deportations.

Narratives of Dehumanization & Oppression

Dehumanization

Descriptive language about immigrant firefighters and immigration enforcement agents reflects a pattern of dehumanization across political and ideological spectrums. Dehumanizing language comes from a variety of voices, including members of the Trump administration, social media users, and independent media personalities.

Immigrants are “illegal aliens” and animals

Officials in the Trump administration, contributors to conservative news media (e.g., Breitbart), and far right ideologues on social media use dehumanizing language about immigrants as a justification for the cruelty, unlawful arrests, and rights violations they face.

- *“Two illegal immigrants were arrested after Washington State hired them as firefighters and turned down qualified American firefighters. Get the f*ck out.” - X user (X 2025)*
- *“[Hernandez] sat on a log, handcuffed, as surrounding agents started guessing where he was from and one likened him to a “stray cat.”” - The Oregonian (2025)*

- “[Firefighters] stated federal agents blocked [their] egress from the staging area, divided them up, and were “whistling at them like they were dogs.”” - FireEngineering.com (2025)

Immigration enforcement pigs are out of control

Inflammatory and dehumanizing language is used, primarily on social media, in critiques about immigration enforcement agents, Trump administration officials, and federal agencies.

- “You can say they're c*nts. I'll call them c*nts for both of us: ICE, the whole of DHS, and the entire Trump cabinet are c*nts.” - Reddit user (r/Oregon 2025)
- “[Hernandez] is a hero, fighting fires, protecting our communities. Unlike these gestapo pigs, who provide nothing but hatred and terror.” - Reddit user (r/Oregon 2025)

Criminality

Criminal records are frequently invoked in our media sample, amounting to a narrative of criminality as it pertains to immigrants. This narrative is driven by a worldview that values the ‘rule of law’ as a means of maintaining order without exceptions. It appears in statements that vehemently oppose depictions of immigrants as victims or martyrs and depictions of ICE as the enemy - even in cases where [ICE arrests immigrants with no criminal record](#). Xenophobia is at the core of this narrative and is weaponized in messaging that stigmatizes immigrants and perpetuates false ideas about immigrants ‘invading’ the US.

Criminal illegal aliens must be expelled

Immigrants’ criminal records are used as justification for ICE’s reckless actions, disruption of disaster relief efforts, and use of force against immigrants with the argument that the “ends justify the means.” This shifts the responsibility for extreme immigration enforcement efforts off of ICE and onto immigrants who ‘deserve it’ based on their criminal-legal histories.

- “We have focused overwhelmingly day after day after day on bringing in the worst of the worst and getting them off of our streets.” - Kristi Noem, Secretary of U.S. Homeland Security (Salem Reporter 2025)

- *“The two illegal aliens apprehended were not ‘firefighters’ as the media claimed...they were CRIMINAL illegal aliens. Both had prior arrests. One for drug trafficking, one for illegally carrying a firearm.” - Tricia McLaughlin, DHS Public Affairs (Malcontent News 2025)*

Standing with non-citizens is anti-American

Social media content in our sample revealed a strong sentiment that non-citizenship is a threat to the fundamental structure of our country. Essentially, ‘real Americans’ should not support “criminal illegal aliens” because it is fundamentally anti-American.

- *“Stand with our federal government whom the majority of our beloved country voted for! Get the non-citizens out and make them come the legal way!”- Facebook user (Facebook 2025)*
- *“[JD Vance] constantly pushes the line that “You either care about Americans or you care about immigrants, not both.”” - TikTok user (TikTok 2025)*

Betrayal, Fear, and Grief

We identified narrative threads of betrayal, fear, and grief expressed by immigrants, social media users, lawmakers, and others who denounced the detention of Hernandez and Estrada.

“This is how they treat us”

Hernandez, Estrada’s brother, Oscar, and other immigrants who provided commentary on the firefighters’ detention expressed a sense of betrayal that—in response to their good will, service, and sacrifice—they’d been met with an extreme intervention by ICE. They also expressed concerns that they’d essentially been set up, lured into a trap where ICE was waiting.

- *“What they did was messed up. [Management] had been talking in their briefings about building relationships and trust. For them to say that and then go do this is mind-boggling. It boiled my blood.” - Anonymous Firefighter 1, present during arrests (Cascade PBS 2025)*
- *“You risked your life out here to save the community, [and] this is how they treat us.” - Anonymous Firefighter 2, present during arrests (Seattle Times 2025)*

The cost of existing “illegally” in public spaces

In the context of a larger pattern of ICE raids in American workplaces (e.g., [farms in California](#), [Home Depot](#)), the detention of Hernandez and Estrada has stoked fear among various audiences that there is a real cost to immigrants simply existing in public spaces. The fear is both of future immigration enforcement efforts in workplaces and of the downstream effects of losing contributing members of the workforce to fear of ICE interventions.

- *“Despite President Trump’s claims that he would only target dangerous criminals and gang members, it’s clear that he is going after the people who work to keep our communities safe.” - U.S. Congresswoman Andrea Salinas, OR-06 (Salinas.House.gov 2025)*
- *“Wildfire veterans say the arrests have stoked fear and distrust among firefighters on the ground. They worry that crews may be scared to deploy if they may become a target for immigration raids.” - Alex Brown (Cascade PBS 2025)*

“This does not make us ‘great’ again”

Threads of grief appeared in social media commentary and statements from public officials strongly condemning the Trump administration and its cruel immigration enforcement agenda.

- *“So, these are the people the regime believes are the problem in our communities and put massive efforts into disrupting lives, stopping important work, and smashing trust and cooperation in the country?” - Reddit user (r/Oregon 2025)*
- *“This doesn’t “MAKE AMERICA GREAT” in any way, shape, or form!” - X user (X 2025)*
- *“[They] are going to burn the country to the ground, if that’s what it takes, so they can rule over the ashes.” - TikTok user (TikTok 2025)*

Distrust

Distrust emerged as a narrative theme in 2 primary ways: (1) in discussions of the erosion of public trust as a tool and consequence of the Trump regime, and (2) as a deep narrative underpinning conservative backlash to so-called ‘fake news liberal media.’

Erosion of trust is a tool of the regime

Sowing general distrust in public systems is one tool the Trump administration uses to advance its xenophobic, anti-immigrant agenda. Actions by the Trump administration—i.e., breaking with DHS policy to conduct immigration enforcement at disaster recovery sites, stoking fear among migrant workers that results in lost labor in critical industries, violating the rights of ICE detainees, decimating the US forest service, slashing federal agency budgets, etc.—has accelerated the [60-year downward trend](#) in public trust for the government (PEW 2024).

- *“The Trump administration's crude and inhumane approach to immigration enforcement has intentionally and unnecessarily stoked fear and mistrust among members of the public — including firefighters putting their lives on the line to protect our state.” - Dave Upthegrove, Washington State Department of Resources Commissioner (Reuters 2025)*
- *“Pulling firefighters off active lines isn't about safety. These reckless arrests are designed to frighten people and keep us from coming together in support of our neighbors, family, friends and coworkers.” - Isa Peña, Innovation Law Lab (Oregon Public Broadcasting 2025)*

“Says the fake news liberal media nutjobs”

Narrative threads of distrust exist in statements accusing Democrats and liberal media outlets of trying to spread ‘false narratives’ or paint ‘incomplete pictures’ of the details surrounding the detention of Hernandez and Estrada. Statements made by the Trump administration are taken at face value, while a default posture of distrust and ridicule is taken toward ideologically liberal voices and left-leaning media. That same distrust is exhibited even when commentary about Hernandez and Estrada is not partisan but is in direct conflict with statements made by the Trump administration and conservative media outlets.

- *“Remember the “firefighters” ICE arrested at the WA wildfire? They were illegal aliens on a logging crew. One was a meth-dealer. Yet the media and Democrats like Gov Bob Ferguson & Sen Patty Murray continue to push the false narrative.” - X user (X 2025)*
- *“It took less than 24 hours for Democrats and their media allies to turn a convicted meth dealer into a sympathetic folk hero. The truth came out days later — though you'd never know it if you relied on these outlets. It's a playbook we've seen before: rush to frame ICE as*

the villain, count on the media to amplify the sob stories, and never correct the record when the truth comes out.” - Jason Rantz (Seattle Red 2025)

Abuse of Power

Our media analysis surfaced examples of abuse of power and resources carried out by the Trump administration in its targeted and terroristic assault of immigrants. Abuse of power and resources appears in many forms including cruel and inhumane treatment of immigrants, disruption of public safety, fundamental rights violations, and exploitation of immigrants.

The government is cruel

The existence of deportation quotas, xenophobic immigration policies, formerly prohibited enforcement actions, and denial of due process are cited as examples of the cruelty and lack of humanity shown toward immigrants by the Trump administration and federal agents.

- *“Under Trump’s regime, cruelty takes precedence over [all] else.” - Robert Reich (X 2025)*
- *“This is the reality of Trump’s cruel immigration machine—targeting brave first responders and leaving our communities vulnerable.” - U.S Rep. Maxine Dexter (KATU 2025)*
- *“[They’re] using federal resources to take people away from their homes - people that were already leaving their homes to do something good. Now ICE is going to [deport them] for doing something good.” - TikTok user (TikTok 2025)*

ICE agents are violating the rights of immigrants

In their detention of Hernandez and Estrada, immigration agents allegedly trampled on rights that should extend to all regardless of legal status. Some voices in our media sample caution that the violation of immigrants’ rights is a signal that the Trump administration may grant itself permission to violate anyone’s rights, including natural-born US citizens.

- *“They stopped him without reasonable suspicion, arrested him without probable cause, ignored the laws governing warrantless arrests, arrested him in the midst of a natural disaster despite his pending U Visa application, denied him calls to counsel, and detained*

him for two weeks without considering him for release or even indicating what law authorized his detention.” - Hernandez’s legal team (The Oregonian 2025)

- *“What’s at stake? If CBP can unlawfully detain someone in secret, without notice or access to counsel, then no one’s due process rights are safe.” - Hernandez v. CBP (2025)*

Immigrants are exploited for the advancement of an agenda

Because immigration is a highly polarized issue concerning an underprotected class of people in the US, immigrants are vulnerable to being taken advantage of. This includes not only the exploitation of [migrants’ labor and underpayment of wages](#), but also the use of immigrants’ stories to lift up political talking points, promote the agenda of the current administration, and demonstrate the power and force of the federal government.

- *“They’re out there in the middle of a disaster zone randomly targeting firefighters. It’s just this message of [a] war on immigrants.” - Matt Adams, Legal Director, Northwest Immigration Rights Project (The Kentucky Lantern 2025)*
- *“Smells like scamming to get private prison companies more money. 4 weeks of incarceration for 1 person is a cost of 4k - 10k paid to the prison operator.” - Reddit user (r/Oregon 2025)*
- *“Congress doesn’t want to cure this problem. They benefit from having a certain level of scared, exploitable workers who don’t have legal permission to be in the country. They are both cheap workers who can be treated like crap and underpaid, and they also are a good boogeyman to rile up conservative and centrist voters.” - Reddit user (r/Oregon 2025)*

Conclusion

In examining the stories told about Hernandez and Estrada, undocumented immigrants, immigration enforcement agents, and the federal government, we identified a shared set of narratives operating in parallel. Findings in this report highlight how each group is perceived and portrayed in media—i.e., positively, negatively, and/or neutrally—particularly in relation to things like safety, worth, and service.

Stories told about Hernandez, Estrada, and undocumented immigrants invoke many of the same narrative themes and story elements (e.g., symbols, metaphors, and words) as those told about ICE, immigration enforcement, and the federal government. Critically, these stories attract and are shared with vastly different audiences. While these stories share a basic set of underlying narratives, they evoke different mental images, ascribe different values, motivate different beliefs, and ultimately result in oppositional perspectives for their audiences.

Our analysis makes clear that the role of immigration enforcement and the government's current agenda of defending 'law and order' in the name of safety is highly polarizing. While this story pertains to 2 firefighters who were arrested while providing privately-contracted disaster relief in the Pacific Northwest, our findings are relevant to broader questions about the rule of law, militarization of federal emergency management, 'othering' of immigrants, larger instances of ICE raids, politicization of disaster relief, community-wide punishment, and more.

Dominant themes from our analysis offer several narrative challenges and opportunities. Here are a few points to consider:

Narrative challenge 1: News, social, and other media discourse surrounding this highly politicized detention of migrant emergency responders is fueled by storytelling.

Stories in defense of ICE or the immigrant firefighters called on values of safety, service, and trust; however, audiences interpret those shared story elements differently and arrive at conflicting conclusions about what is appropriate, just, and humane.

Narrative challenge 2: Legal status is deeply tied to deservingness.

Legal status and criminal history are cited as core justifications of support for deportation and other immigration enforcement measures. Publicly expressed disdain for undocumented immigrants is about more than a basic concern that they abide by the immigration laws of the United States. Negative sentiments toward immigrants rely on narratives of scarcity, threats of 'invasion' and 'contamination,' and an underlying belief that immigrants are *inherently illegal* beyond the terms of their legal status.

Dehumanizing language concerning immigrants helps reinforce harmful ideas about what immigrants deserve, such as safety, due process, and a clear path to citizenship.

Narrative challenge 3: At a meta level, the federal government is using ICE detentions and deportations as tools of national identity building.

DHS commentary on ICE’s detention of 2 migrant firefighters centers the efficiency of federal agencies in ‘cleaning up our streets’ and getting rid of “criminal illegal aliens” to make America safer (Tricia McLaughlin). Despite assurances that detention and deportation efforts are being made against only the “worst of the worst of the worst” (Kristi Noem), this and other stories indicate otherwise. The Trump administration’s “America First” stance on immigration reinforces long-standing ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dynamics and perpetuates unjust notions of what makes someone a *real American*.

In addition to these narrative challenges, our analysis reveals specific narrative opportunities. Here are a few points to consider:

Narrative opportunity 1: Tell stories that frame immigrants as fellow community members and neighbors.

Avoid reinforcing harmful narratives that stigmatize immigrants, rely on the ‘good immigrant’ trope or model minority myth, or frame immigrants as threats. Humanize immigrants by highlighting aspects of their stories that speak to the humanity in all of us (e.g., Hernandez and Estrada being taken away from their work crews—described as their “brothers” and “family”—without a chance to say goodbye).

Narrative opportunity 2: Amplify immigrants’ stories to name abuses of power and shift negative perceptions.

Immigrants who speak out against violations of their rights are perceived by many as brave and justice-seeking. Stories like that of Hernandez’s pending lawsuit against CBP can help shift public focus away from the (real or perceived) criminality of immigrants and toward an understanding of immigrants’ rights, worth, and resilience.

Narrative opportunity 3: Brand community safety as something that comes from within rather than without.


Despite DHS officials' efforts to brand immigration enforcement as a public safety measure and ICE agents as defenders and protectors of America, a powerful argument can be made that the opposite is true. Extreme immigration enforcement efforts threaten and disrupt communities' abilities to ensure public safety.

In addition to the narrative opportunities discussed above, there is a need to locate this story in a broader context of federal emergency management. The Trump administration's immigration enforcement agenda includes framing immigration as a national emergency and instructing funds formerly designated for environmental disaster relief to instead be spent on state-wide management of extreme immigration enforcement (see [FEMA's \\$608M payment to the state of Florida](#) for "Alligator Alcatraz" and other facilities). Rather than dedicating US taxpayer dollars to community wellbeing, relief, and recovery in the wake of disaster, the Trump administration has reallocated taxpayers' money to fund punishment, detention, and deportation schemes at any cost. Research on the militarization of federal emergency management is recommended.

Appendices

Appendix 1. References

To conduct this analysis, we identified 104 relevant sources spanning social media platforms, news, public broadcasting, blogs, and other types of media. The content included in the [spreadsheet of references](#) linked here represents a wide range of voices, audiences, political frames, storytelling elements, and ideological perspectives.

 References - ICE/Firefighters Rapid Response (Shared)

Appendix 2. Content Analysis

Content analysis is commonly used by social scientists across disciplines and industries as a key method of identifying themes across a body of textual data. Using a program called [ATLAS.ti](#), we analyzed the 104 pieces of content we identified.

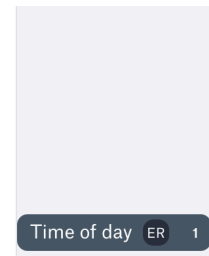
The fictional example provided in the image below demonstrates how we use ATLAS.ti to conduct content analysis. The image contains a portion of a document as it appears in the ATLAS.ti user interface. In the image, the sentence “Good morning, Charlotte” is highlighted. To the right of the highlighted sentence is a green box labeled “Time of day.”

SPEAKERS

Zakyree W, Francesca Koe, charlotte noss (she/her) NELP

Francesca Koe 00:02

Good morning, Charlotte.



“Time of day” is the code—i.e., name tag—assigned to the highlighted sentence. In this example, the code indicates the sentence refers to a specific time period (e.g., morning). Using this process, we coded documents and identified narrative themes relevant to this project.

Appendix 3. Keyword Searches

To identify relevant news, broadcast, blog, and other media content, the following keyword searches were performed in Google Search for the date range August 25-October 10, 2025:

- ICE detention firefighters
- ICE firefighters Oregon
- ICE firefighters Washington wildfire
- ICE detention firefighters Oregon
- ICE detention firefighter Rigoberto Hernandez Hernandez
- ICE detention firefighter Jose Bertin Cruz Estrada

To identify relevant social media content across Facebook, TikTok, X (Twitter), Threads, and Reddit, the following keyword searches were performed within individual social media platforms and/or using Google Search for the date range August 25-October 10, 2025:

- ICE detention firefighters
- ICE firefighters Oregon
- ICE firefighters Washington wildfire
- Border patrol arrest washington arrest firefighters
- Border patrol arrest washington arrest Washington
- Federal agents arrest firefighters
- Immigration raid Washington wildfire
- Firefighters ICE agents Washington state
- ICE arrests firefighters

Appendix 4. Narrative Themes

In analyzing the 104 pieces of content we identified for this project, we surfaced 39 distinct narrative themes. Those themes—also referred to as ‘codes’—are listed below. Themes not addressed in this report were either (1) collapsed into a similar, overlapping theme, (2) not part of a deep narrative in the text, and/or (3) not present enough in the text to merit inclusion.

"Fake News"	Invasion/scarcity ("taking over," "taking jobs")
"Good Immigrant"	Legal Status
Abuse (of power, resources)	Negative Portrayal (ICE, Border Patrol)
Accountability (for government)	Negative Portrayal (of firefighters, migrants)
Backpedaling	Othering
Community	Polarization ("the left," "the right," libs, etc.)
Criminality (of immigrants)	Positive/Neutral Words (ICE, CBP, gov't, etc.)
Criticism (of ICE, gov't, Trump admin)	Positive/Neutral Words (firefighters, migrants)
Cruelty	Privatization of Disaster Relief
Dehumanization	Punishment
Dictatorship/Authoritarianism	Reciprocity
Disruption (of safety/relief efforts)	Rule of Law (also: law and order)
Division	Sacrifice
Domination	Safety
Fear (of gov't, retaliation, Trump admin)	Service (re: military, first responders, veterans)
Grief (re: policies, actions, Trump's impact)	Surveillance
Honor (service in military, disaster relief)	Theft (as in disappearing, kidnapping)
Injustice	Violation of Rights
Interdependence	Xenophobia
Intimidation	