youth law center

Important Immigration Protections for System Involved Young People in California

What Legal Aid, Youth Attorneys, and Other Advocates Should Know About CDSS ACIN I-25-25

Summary:

In May 2025, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) issued an All County Information Notice (ACIN) in response to the growing intersection between immigration enforcement and child welfare involvement. The ACIN provides guidance regarding the rights of children, youth, and parents who are separated due to immigration enforcement actions. The ACIN also provides guidance on best practices for county child welfare agencies and juvenile probation departments.

This document outlines the ACIN guidance provided by CDSS to child welfare and probation agencies to ensure that they can: effectively protect the rights of children and youth who come to the attention of child welfare agencies due to immigration enforcement actions; ensure meaningful parent, kin, or alternative caregiver participation; and effectively screen and mitigate the consequences of sudden family separation due to immigration enforcement.

Why this matters:

Immigration enforcement actions[1] (e.g., ICE arrests, detention, deportation) can:

- Suddenly separate children from parents/caregivers
- Trigger child welfare or probation involvement
- Create barriers to reunification and/or permanency

Immigration enforcement actions have markedly increased since 2024.

Deportations from California roughly doubled from 2024 to 2025 and in some regions, arrests increased more than ten-fold over the prior year.[2] Individual locations in

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[1] Immigration enforcement actions may include: (1) an ICE arrest, when a federal immigration officer takes an individual into immigration custody for alleged immigration violations; (2) detention, when an individual is held in immigration custody, often in an immigration detention facility, while their immigration case is pending; and (3) deportation (also called removal), when an individual is formally ordered to leave the United States and is forcibly removed to another country.

[2] Ari Plachta, ICE Deportations and Arrests Surge Across California in 2025, SACRAMENTO BEE (Jan. 11, 2026), https://www.sacbee.com/news/california/article314213552.html. For immigration enforcement data more generally,

California have seen huge increases in immigration related enforcement activity. For example, in September and October of 2025, San Diego saw twice as many arrests by federal immigration officials than it did during the entirety of 2024, and in the greater Los Angeles area, arrests jumped from approximately 4,500 to more than 14,000 in 2025.[3] This increase in immigration arrests and removals have had catastrophic impacts on families throughout California with parents and primary caregivers suddenly unavailable. ACIN I-25-25 provides important guidance on statutorily required confidentiality and related protections for system-impacted children and youth.

What does the ACIN cover?[4]

1) The requirement that social workers and juvenile probation officers maintain strict confidentiality when working with families who have been in contact with or served by child welfare agencies and juvenile probation departments pursuant to federal and state confidentiality laws. Specifically, "A social worker or juvenile probation officer may not disclose any details to immigration officials and should maintain confidentiality for children, youth, and families served by the agency" absent a signed judicial order or specific advice from their legal counsel.[5]
2) Social worker and juvenile probation officer responsibilities if they are contacted by immigration enforcement agencies, based on strict confidentiality laws and the duty to safeguard children and youth from unnecessary harm or system involvement. This includes protecting the confidentiality of information contained in juvenile court records pursuant to Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) § 827, and ensuring that lists or records of individuals receiving social services — including child welfare-related services — are not disclosed, pursuant to WIC § 10850.
3) Screening procedures for child welfare agency hotline workers who receive information about immigration enforcement actions, including a reminder that parental detention or deportation alone is not a basis for child welfare intervention.
4) Policies and procedures for establishing alternative caregiving arrangements for children of parents who are arrested. The ACIN encourages state agencies and their teams to proactively support families in creating plans for the care of

see Deportation Data Project, U.S. Immigration Enforcement Data (Data Guide), DEPORTATION DATA PROJECT (Mar. 4, 2025), https://deportationdata.org/guide.html.

[3] Jesse Marx, Immigration Arrests Surge by 1500% in San Diego, CALMATTERS (Jan. 28, 2026), https://calmatters.org/justice/2026/01/san-diego-immigration-arrest-surge/ and Alina Marquez, ICE Arrests Tripled Last Year in LA—and More Than Half of Those Arrested Had No Criminal Record, LAIST (Mar. 30, 2026), https://laist.com/news/ice-arrests-tripled-los-angeles-immigration-customs-enforcement-data

[4] This section reflects the topics that are covered by the ACIN (ACIN I-25-25, p. 2).

[5] ACIN I-25-25 at page 3.

children or youth that prevent unnecessary entrance into foster care and/or juvenile court involvement, such as informal arrangements with trusted substitute caregivers.

5) Legal provisions related to dependency and foster care placement, including provisions that authorize approval of and placement with an undocumented relative or non-related extended family member (NREFM).
6) Screening tools and resources for social workers and probation officers to assess trafficking risk, which may increase when family separation suddenly occurs due to immigration enforcement actions; and
7) Available CDSS and external resources, including programs and services that support immigrant families and CDSS Program and Policy contact information for individuals who need more guidance or have additional questions.

Best Practices and Key Takeaways from the ACIN:

CDSS advises that Child Welfare and Probation Agencies should:

1. Maintain strict confidentiality and limit information sharing.
    - Do not disclose any information about children or families to immigration enforcement without a judicial order;
    - Do not confirm or deny whether a family is involved with the agency;
    - Refer all requests from immigration officials to supervisors and agency counsel;
    - Establish internal protocols for handling requests from immigration enforcement.

Key Takeaway: Confidentiality is mandatory and applies even in interactions with federal immigration authorities.

2. Social workers or juvenile probation officers should not participate in immigration enforcement activities.
    - If contacted by an immigration enforcement agency and asked to assist with a request, staff should:
        - immediately contact a supervisor and/or designated agency official and provide location/status to ensure personal safety and receive direction around how to proceed;
        - Work with county counsel before responding to any and all requests.

Key Takeaway: Agency staff should not act as extensions of immigration enforcement and doing so may, at minimum, violate existing state and federal laws pertaining to confidentiality and information sharing.

3. Identify resources and proactively support families in the event of immigration enforcement.
    - Agency staff should provide families information about their rights, resources for legal support, and guidance on creating a plan of care for children;
    - Agency staff should also encourage parents to identify trusted caregivers in advance and inform parents of their right to make alternative care arrangements before immigration-based enforcement actions (i.e. detention).

Key Takeaway: Agency staff should proactively support children, youth, and families to help prevent unnecessary child welfare involvement if a parent is detained due to immigration enforcement. It is important that agency staff work collaboratively with kin in crafting the solutions that best fit the needs of youth and their families whenever possible.

4. Understand, identify, and respond to increased risks to children and youth impacted by family separation due to immigration enforcement actions:
    - Use available screening tools and resources to assess risks;
    - Identify whether children and youth are at increased risk of harm, mental health challenges, and instability;
    - Create networks and systems of support for children and youth through providing trauma-informed services and referrals and connecting with organizations with expertise in serving immigrant populations.

Key Takeaway: Because immigration-related separation increases vulnerability, agencies should familiarize themselves with screening tools and holistic networks that can better support these children and youth.

Questions Advocates Can Ask Agencies Regarding ACIN I-25-25 Implementation

Advocates working with court involved youth can help ensure implementation of ACIN I-25-25 and the confidentiality provisions and best practices it references by asking agencies and agency staff questions about their local practices. Below are some suggested areas for inquiry and advocacy for your local jurisdiction.

Intake, inquiry, and documentation

- Do your intake and ongoing assessment tools include specific prompts to ask about immigration enforcement–related separations, – including inquiring about alternative plan documents prepared by a parent in the case of family separation?
- Where in the case file do you document that a child, youth, or parent has been impacted by immigration enforcement, and how is that flag used to trigger follow-up actions or supports?
- What written guidance or training are provided to social workers/probation officers about how to ask families about immigration enforcement–related separations in a trauma-informed and culturally responsive way?

Identifying and preserving family relationships

- What procedures are in place to locate and maintain contact between children/youth and parents or caregivers who have been detained or deported due to immigration enforcement?
- Do you have protocols for coordinating with consulates, ORR, ICE, or foreign child-protection authorities to locate parents/caregivers and assess placement options, and how often are staff using them?
- How do you ensure that immigration detention or deportation alone is not treated as evidence of parental unfitness or abandonment in safety and permanency assessments?
- Can you provide examples of cases where you facilitated sibling or parent-child contact across borders or detention facilities, and what barriers you encountered?

Visitation, communication, and reasonable efforts

- When a parent is detained or deported, how do you adjust visitation and communication plans to ensure meaningful parent-child contact (e.g., phone, video, in-person visits at facilities, cross-border arrangements)?
- What specific steps do you expect social workers/probation officers to take to satisfy “reasonable efforts” when a parent is in immigration detention or outside

the country (e.g., providing contact information, coordinating with counsel, consulate involvement)?

- How do you document immigration-related barriers (distance, facility rules, fees, technology constraints) and the steps taken to overcome them in court reports and case plans?
- Have you adjusted your visitation and case-plan templates to explicitly address scenarios where a parent is detained, deported, or living abroad because of immigration enforcement?

Case planning, services, and permanency

- How do you ensure that existing immigration-related issues (detention, deportation risk, status, pending immigration case) are explicitly considered in safety, permanency, and well-being planning for each impacted child or youth?
- What guidance are staff given about including immigration legal needs (e.g., SIJS, asylum, U- or T-visa screening, consular assistance) in case plans as services or supports?
- How do you avoid pursuing fast-track permanency options (termination of parental rights, adoption) based solely or primarily on a parent's immigration detention or deportation, contrary to the ACIN's warnings?
- Can you describe a recent case where you adjusted timelines or permanency goals because of immigration-related barriers while still protecting the child's safety and well-being?

Access to immigration-related legal services

- What is your process for screening children and youth in your caseload for potential immigration relief (SIJS, asylum, VAWA, U- or T-visas), and who conducts that screening?
- How do you connect eligible children, youth, and parents with immigration legal services (e.g., legal aid providers, removal-defense providers funded through CDSS Immigration Services, or other resources)?
- Do your contracts or MOUs with immigration legal providers explicitly cover youth in child welfare or juvenile probation cases and mixed-status families impacted by immigration enforcement?
- What tracking mechanisms do you use to ensure that referrals to immigration counsel are actually made, accepted, and followed through, especially for youth approaching age 18 or 21?

Coordination with courts and counsel

- How do you ensure juvenile court judges and all attorneys (minor's counsel, parent's counsel, county counsel, probation counsel) are aware when immigration enforcement has occurred and how it affects a family's ability to appear, visit, or comply with services and case plans?

- Do you have standard language or templates for court reports to flag immigration enforcement–related separations and requests for accommodations (e.g., telephonic appearance, continuances, modified visitation orders)?
- What steps do you take to coordinate with criminal defense and immigration counsel to reduce conflicting orders or requirements that undermine reunification or permanency for youth impacted by enforcement?

Training, policies, and staff support

- What mandatory training have you implemented in response to ACIN I-25-25 for social workers, probation officers, supervisors, and managers on the rights of children, youth, and parents separated due to immigration enforcement?
- Do you have written local policies or practice guides that operationalize ACIN I-25-25 (beyond simply forwarding the ACIN) for child welfare and probation staff?
- How do you incorporate trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches when discussing immigration enforcement with youth and families, and what tools or curricula are you using?
- Have you designated any staff leads or “immigration liaisons” within child welfare or probation to help workers navigate consulates, detention facilities, and immigration legal referrals?

Data, monitoring, and quality improvement

- How are you tracking cases where immigration enforcement has contributed to family separation (e.g., data fields in CWS-CARES or probation systems, internal tracking), and can you share aggregate numbers or trends?
- Do you monitor outcomes (time to reunification, TPR rates, placement stability) separately for children and youth impacted by immigration enforcement to identify disparities or systemic barriers?
- What internal quality-assurance or case-review processes (e.g., CFT reviews, case audits, QA unit) are used to verify that ACIN I-25-25’s best practices are being followed in these cases?
- Have you sought feedback from impacted youth and families, or from community and legal aid partners, on how well your agency is implementing the ACIN and what gaps remain?

Collaboration with tribes, consulates, and community partners

- How do you coordinate with tribes that have California IV-E agreements when an Indian child’s family is affected by immigration enforcement, to ensure ICWA and ACIN I-25-25 are both honored?
- What relationships or protocols do you maintain with foreign consulates (especially of high-migration-origin countries) to support parents and kin abroad in participating in case planning, visitation, and permanency decisions?

- Which community-based organizations (immigrant-serving organizations, youth programs, faith-based organizations) do you partner with to support youth and families navigating immigration enforcement actions, and how are those partnerships formalized?

Safety, well-being, and youth voice

- How are you assessing and addressing the specific trauma, fear, and instability that youth experience as a result of immigration enforcement actions against their family members (e.g., targeted mental-health screening, referrals, supports)?
- Are youth impacted by immigration enforcement routinely invited to and supported in participating in Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings, with clear opportunities to voice how enforcement has affected their needs and goals?
- What steps do you take to make sure youth understand, in age-appropriate language, their rights and available supports (including immigration legal options) when their families are impacted by immigration enforcement?
- Can you provide examples of case plans that explicitly integrate youth voices and perspectives about immigration enforcement–related fears and future plans (e.g., reunification abroad, dual-country permanency planning)?