



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Opening Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Field Hearing - *Immigration Raids: Impacts and Aftermath on Mississippi Communities*

November 7, 2019

Tougaloo College - Mississippi

Tougaloo College is where I started to get involved in politics and civil rights, organizing voter registration drives throughout the Mississippi Delta. Tougaloo was at the center of the civil rights movement in Mississippi and helped set the stage for activism that changed the direction of our country. The college is a fitting venue for the Committee on Homeland Security to meet today to examine the recent immigration raids and their effect on Mississippi families, children, and communities.

Three months ago, on August 7, 2019, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement sent hundreds of agents to Mississippi to arrest nearly 700 workers at seven chicken processing plants across the state. It was the largest statewide workplace raid in U.S. history, with 680 community members arrested. Far from being hardened criminals or posing a public safety hazard, those arrested were trying to provide for their families, send their children to school, and build a life free from the violence, crime, and poverty at home.

But perhaps the most troubling aspect of these raids is the way ICE failed to take into account that children would be left without one or both parents as a result. Hundreds of children, by some estimates over a thousand children, were directly affected by the raids. Children finished their first day of school only to find that there was no one to pick them up or no one waiting for them at home. Schools, social services, and entire communities had to scramble to try to find separated children.

In the town of Forrest, Mississippi, strangers and neighbors brought crying children to a community gym where the owner had offered them a place to sleep. Bedding and food was donated until children could be reunited with their parents, or in some cases with extended family.

The day after the raids, ICE believed that all children were reunited with at least one parent. Sadly, we know this is not the case. We know of a single mother who remains in ICE custody even though her three minor children are being cared for by an unrelated neighbor.

In some cases, it appears both parents or single parents could be deported. But what happens to the children? Will families be forced to send children back to a country they have never seen or speak the language of, or grow up here without any parents? What happens when these children are U.S. citizens?

Because of the way this operation was carried out, our communities are living in fear, people are afraid to leave their homes, children are terrified to go to school because they may return home to find their remaining parent gone, and local businesses are suffering.

Of note, none of the employers have suffered any criminal consequences. Mike Hurst, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Mississippi has stated, "To those who use illegal aliens for a competitive advantage or to make a quick buck, we have something to say to you: If we find you have violated federal criminal law, we are coming for you."

And yet, not one employer or person from management has been arrested. No one has been charged. In fact, prosecutions of companies who hire undocumented workers have declined compared to the previous Administration's numbers. The selective way the Administration is enforcing our laws is disappointing.

Today, we are joined by witnesses from all walks of life who will share their perspectives about what happened on August 7th, what has happened in the aftermath of the raids, and what can be done to help those who are still suffering as a result. I hope to also hear from our witnesses about how we can help ensure the mistakes ICE made during the recent raids are not repeated here in Mississippi or elsewhere around the country.

I support immigration reform to ensure that employers can hire the workers they need and good people who want to work to support their families will have way to do so.

In the meantime, I am committed to ensuring that the Department of Homeland Security enforce the laws in keeping with our values and exercises discretion where necessary to protect children and other vulnerable populations.

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