



ISSUE BRIEF

Fear Is Reshaping Daily Life for Immigrant Michiganders: Evidence from Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, and Ypsilanti

May 2026

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Introduction

Immigration enforcement fears are not staying at the border — they are reshaping daily life in communities across Michigan. A survey of 204 immigrant Michigan residents, conducted between November 2025 and January 2026 across Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, and Ypsilanti, documents a widespread chilling effect: people are avoiding doctors, keeping children home from school, skipping work, and withdrawing from church and community spaces out of fear of drawing attention to their immigration status.

This report draws on data from the University of Michigan's [Detroit Metro Area Communities Study](#) (DMACS) and the [Michigan Metro Area Communities Study](#) (MIMACS) to examine the experiences, perceptions, and concerns of immigrant residents across these four communities. The survey captured the views of 204 Michiganders, including 105 Detroit residents, 14 Flint residents, 38 Grand Rapids residents, and 47 Ypsilanti/Ypsilanti Township residents drawn from a representative sample of households. The sample includes immigrants from over 50 countries spanning Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, representing a range of immigration statuses including naturalized citizens, green card holders, asylees, and refugees.

Key Findings

- More than half (55.8%) of immigrant Michiganders — or someone they know — have avoided everyday activities due to fear of drawing attention to their immigration status.
- Six in 10 (61.1%) say current federal immigration policies have harmed immigrants a lot; 72.2% say they have been harmful to some degree.
- Six in 10 (63.1%) have seen or heard about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity in their communities. More than half (57.1%) worry about their own or a family member's detention or deportation, regardless of citizenship status.
- Nearly 1 in 4 (23.7%) report experiencing discrimination or mistreatment in the past six months based on race, ethnicity, appearance, accent, or immigration status.
- Women, non-citizens, and Mexican-born respondents report higher levels of concern and more frequent experiences of discrimination than other immigrants.

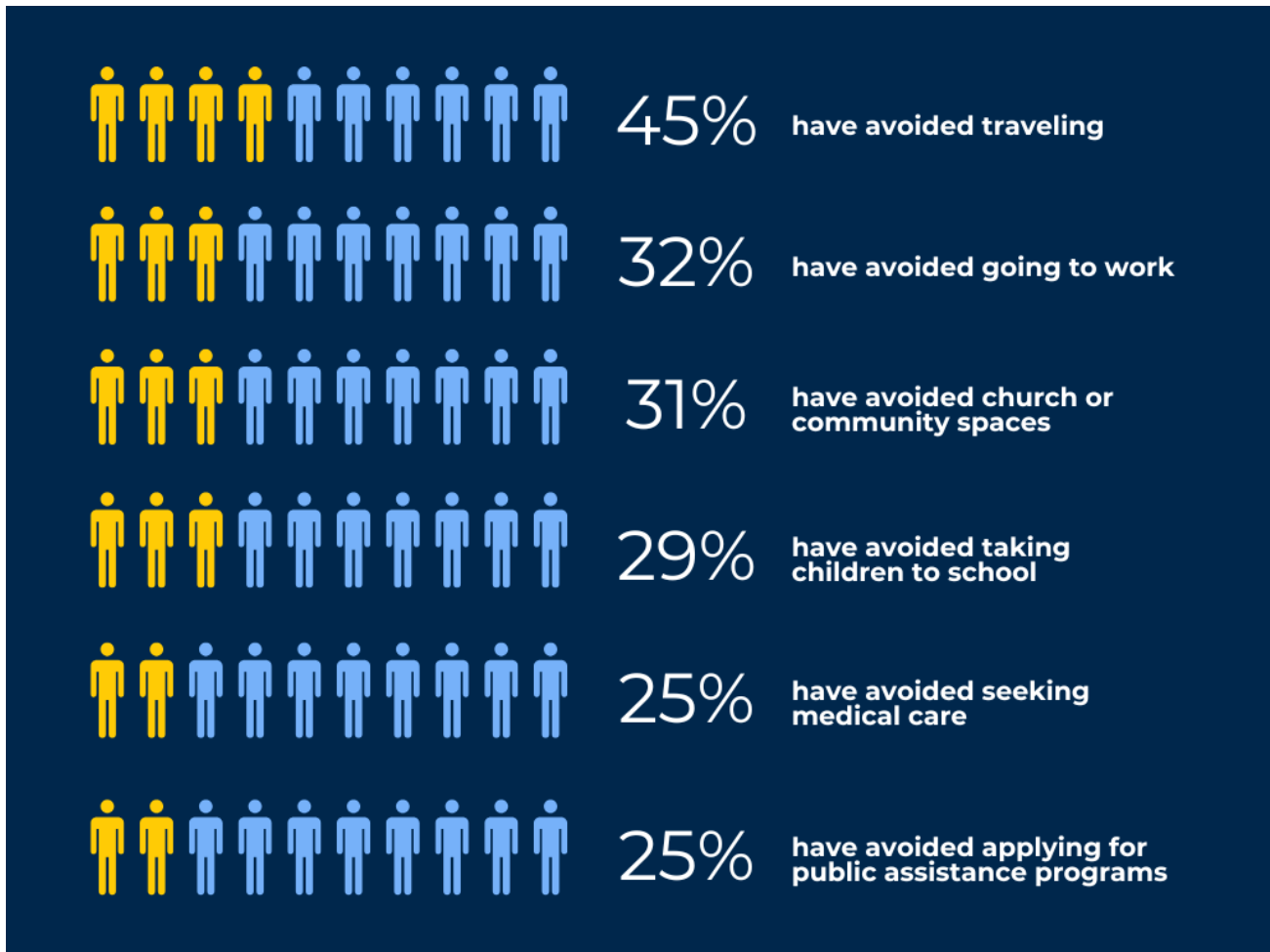
The chilling effect: Enforcement fear is changing how people live

- More than half of respondents (55.8%) report that they or someone they know have avoided everyday activities because of concerns about drawing attention to their immigration status (see Figure 1).¹
 - These findings suggest that immigration-related fears extend well beyond undocumented residents and well beyond attitudes. When people avoid doctors, schools, and workplaces, the consequences ripple outward into public health systems, classrooms, and local economies.
- Concerns about enforcement are grounded in direct exposure.
 - Six in 10 respondents (63.1%) have seen or heard reports of ICE presence in their communities.²
 - More than half (57.1%) worry about their own or a family member's detention or deportation, regardless of their citizenship status.³



Figure 1: Many immigrant Michiganders are withdrawing from public life

In the past 6 months, have you or someone you know avoided any of the following activities because of concerns about drawing attention to immigration status?

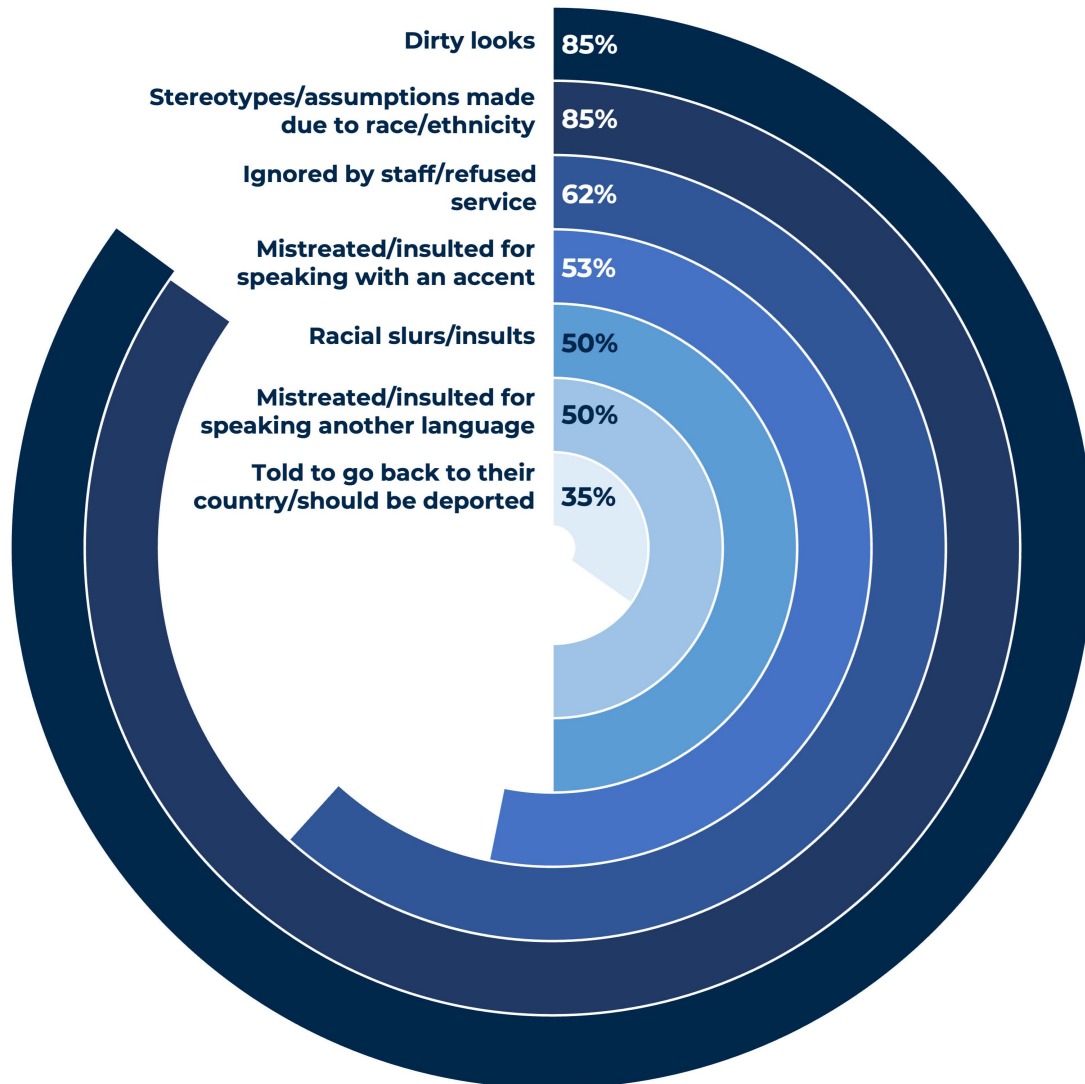


Discrimination compounds the effects of enforcement fear

- Nearly 1 in 4 respondents (23.7%) report experiencing discrimination or mistreatment in the past six months based on their race, ethnicity, appearance, accent, or immigration status.⁴
- Among those who reported discrimination, the most common experiences included (see Figure 2):
 - Receiving dirty looks (85.1%)
 - Facing stereotypes or assumptions based on race, ethnicity, or immigration status (84.8%)
 - Being ignored by staff or refused service (61.7%)
 - Mistreatment or insults for speaking with an accent (53.2%)
 - Racial slurs or insults (50%)
 - Mistreatment or insults for speaking another language (50%)
 - Being told to go back to their country or that they should be deported (34.8%)
- Taken together, these experiences point to a climate in which discrimination compounds the effects of enforcement concerns, making everyday public life feel risky for a significant share of Michigan's immigrant population.

Figure 2: Types of discriminatory experiences, among respondents who reported discrimination/mistreatment in last six months

Thinking about the time when you experienced discrimination or were mistreated, did any of the following happen to you?



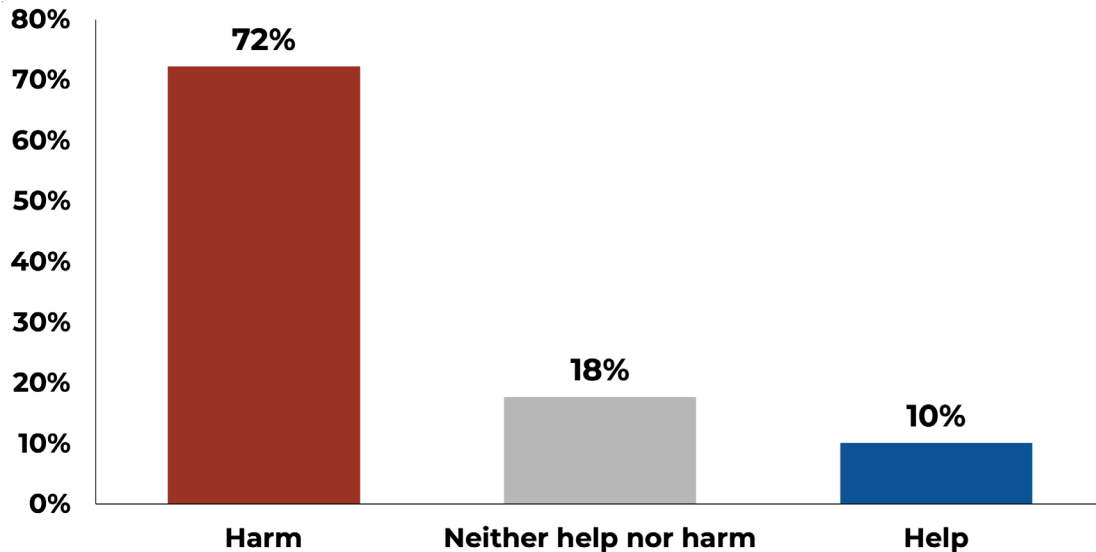
Immigrant Michiganders are following immigration news closely and are concerned

The behavioral changes documented above are occurring against a backdrop of close attention to federal immigration policy and largely negative perceptions of its effects.

- Over three-quarters of respondents (78.3%) say they have followed news about U.S. immigration policy closely in the past six months, including 42.4% who followed it very closely.⁵
- More than 7 in 10 (72.2%) perceive current immigration policies as harmful to immigrants to some degree, including 61.1% who say the current administration has harmed immigrant communities a lot (see Figure 3).⁶
- More than half (55.8%) say the current administration's actions have had a generally negative impact on themselves and their families.

Figure 3: Most immigrant Michiganders believe U.S. president has harmed immigrants

Do you think the U.S. President has done more to help or harm immigrants?



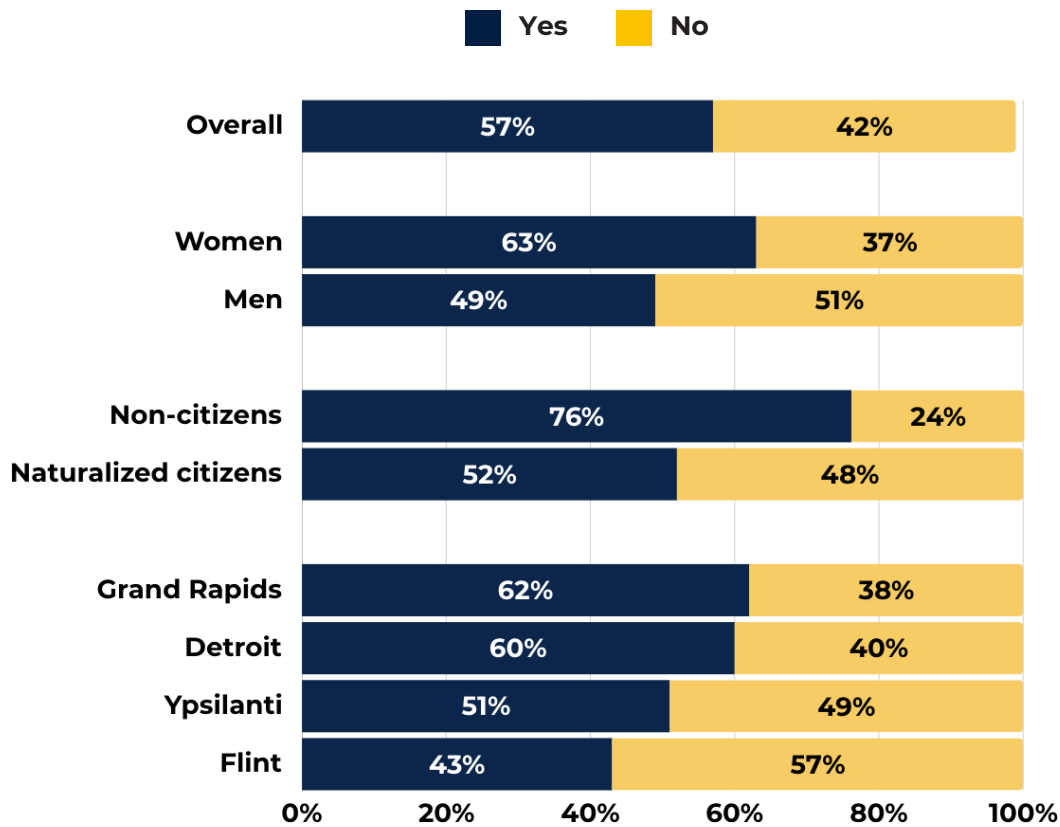
Concern and exposure are not evenly distributed: Women and non-citizens face unique burden

- Women consistently reported higher levels of concern than men (see Figure 4).
 - Two-thirds of women (69.1%) say current policies harm immigrants a lot, compared to fewer than half of men (47.3%). Women are also more likely than men to report that the current administration's actions have had a negative impact on their families (59.8% vs. 48.7%) and more likely to worry about their own or a family member's deportation (62.8% vs. 48.7%).
 - Women also report greater direct exposure to enforcement: more than 2 in 3 women (70.7%) have seen or heard reports of ICE presence in their communities, compared to just over half of men (51.4%). Roughly 1 in 4 immigrant women (26.8%) report experiencing recent discrimination, compared to fewer than 1 in 5 men (18.9%).
 - Together, these findings point to a clear and consistent gendered dimension to immigrant experiences under current federal policy.
- Non-citizens – which can include people with legal immigration status – expressed substantially higher levels of concern than naturalized citizens.
 - Non-citizens are more likely to follow immigration news very closely (53.5%) than naturalized citizens (38.1%). Non-citizens (66.7%) are also more likely to say current policies have harmed immigrants a lot relative to naturalized citizens (61.6%) and to report that the current administration's actions have had a negative impact on their families (61.9% vs. 50.9%).
 - The gap is especially stark when it comes to deportation fears: more than 3 in 4 non-citizens (76.2%) worry about their own or a family member's deportation, compared to about half of naturalized citizens (52.3%). Non-citizens are also significantly more likely to report experiencing recent discrimination or mistreatment (33.3%) than naturalized citizens (20.5%).
 - One notable exception: non-citizens (66.7%) and naturalized citizens (66.1%) were equally likely to report having seen or heard about ICE presence in their communities, suggesting that exposure to enforcement activity is broadly shared regardless of citizenship status – even as the fear and impact of that exposure differ considerably.
- Levels of concern, exposure, and impact vary across the four Michigan communities in our sample, with Grand Rapids warranting particular attention.

- Residents of Grand Rapids are the most likely to follow immigration news very closely (47.4%), compared to Ypsilanti (45.7%), Detroit (41.0%), and Flint (28.6%).
- Grand Rapids residents are also the most likely to say current policies have harmed immigrants a lot (70.3%), compared to Detroit (62.8%), Ypsilanti (57.8%), and Flint (35.7%). Similarly, nearly two-thirds of Grand Rapids respondents (64.9%) say the current administration's actions have had a negative impact on their families, compared to Detroit (59.4%), Ypsilanti (48.9%), and Flint (28.6%).
- Deportation worry follows a similar pattern: 62.2% of Grand Rapids residents worry about their own or a family member's deportation, compared to Detroit (60%), Ypsilanti (51.1%), and Flint (42.9%). Grand Rapids also leads on reported discrimination – more than 1 in 3 immigrant residents (37.8%) report recent discrimination or mistreatment, compared to Ypsilanti (23.9%), Detroit (19.8%), and Flint (14.3%).
- One area where Grand Rapids does not lead is ICE visibility. Detroit residents were the most likely to report having seen or heard about ICE presence in their communities (70.3%), followed by Grand Rapids (64.9%), Ypsilanti (56.5%), and Flint (28.6%). The fact that Grand Rapids reports high levels of fear and discrimination despite somewhat lower ICE visibility than Detroit may suggest that enforcement activity there has had an outsized effect on community concern – consistent with the possibility that Grand Rapids immigrants are being more directly targeted.

Figure 4: Deportation concerns, among immigrant Michiganders

Regardless of your own immigration or citizenship status, do you ever worry that you or a family member could be detained or deported?



Immigrant Michiganders trust their local government far more than the federal government

- Less than one quarter of immigrant Michiganders (24%) report trusting the federal government to do the right thing “some” or “a lot” – meaning more than 3 in 4 express little or no trust at all.⁷
- By contrast, half (50%) of immigrant Michiganders express some level of trust in their local government – more than double the rate of federal trust.⁸
- Levels of local trust vary across municipalities. Among those who trust their local government “some” or “a lot,” Ypsilanti residents report the highest levels (66%), followed by Flint (50%), Grand Rapids (47.7%), and Detroit (43.7%).

Conclusion

Findings from the MIMACS survey highlight the extent to which immigration policy shapes the daily lives of immigrant Michiganders. High levels of concern about deportation, widespread behavioral changes, and notable rates of discrimination point to a climate of uncertainty and vulnerability.

At the same time, variation across gender, citizenship status, country of origin, and geography underscores that immigrant experiences are not uniform. These differences suggest the need for targeted policy and community responses that address the specific needs of diverse immigrant populations across the state.

About the Authors:

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Acknowledgement:

This work was partially funded by a Global Development Research Funding Award from the Stanford King Center on Global Development, with additional support provided by the Kresge Foundation.

Endnotes

- 1 To assess changes in behavior due to immigration concerns, respondents were asked: "In the past 6 months, have you or someone you know avoided any of the following activities because of concerns about drawing attention to immigration status?" A list of activities were presented: "Going to work", "Traveling", "Seeking medical care", "Taking a child to school or attending school events", "Going to church or other community spaces or activities", "Applying for a government assistance program." For each item, respondents can select "Yes" or "No."
- 2 To assess exposure to Immigration and Customs Enforcement activity, respondents were asked: "In the last 6 months, have you seen or heard reports about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) being present in your community?" Response options included: "Yes", "No."
- 3 To assess concerns about the deportation or detention of close friends or family, respondents were asked: "Regardless of your own immigration or citizenship status, do you ever worry that you or a family member could be detained or deported?" Response options included: "Yes", "No."
- 4 To assess experiences with discrimination, respondents were asked: "In the last 6 months, have you experienced discrimination or mistreatment based on your race or ethnicity, appearance, accent, or immigration status?" Response options included: "Yes", "No."
- 5 To assess levels of engagement with immigration-related news and policy developments, respondents were asked: "How much have you followed news about U.S. immigration policy in the last 6 months?" Response options included: "Very closely", "Somewhat closely", "Not very closely", "Not at all."
- 6 To assess views of the current administration's immigration policies, respondents were asked: "Have the actions of the current U.S. president had a generally positive impact, generally negative impact, or have they had no real impact on you and your family?" Response options included: "Generally positive", "Generally negative", "No real impact."
- 7 To assess the level of trust with the federal government, we asked: "How much do you trust the federal government in Washington, D.C. to do the right thing?" Response options included: "Not at all", "A little", "Some", "A lot."
- 8 To assess the level of trust with their local government, we asked: "How much do you trust the local government in Detroit/Flint/Grand Rapids/Ypsilanti to do the right thing?" Response options included: "Not at all", "A little", "Some", "A lot."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on MIMACS, please contact
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Learn more at www.detroiturvey.umich.edu
