

JOURNALISM PROTECTION INITIATIVE

Immigration Enforcement & Journalist Safety

What Newsroom Leaders Need to Know

Yemile Bucay • July 17, 2025

US Press Freedom Series

The Journalism Protection Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism is commissioning a series of briefing papers from top experts to address emerging threats to press freedom in the United States and fill gaps in knowledge and understanding.

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Immigration Enforcement as a Press Freedom Threat

A [student arrested](#) by masked plain clothes ICE officers outside her apartment building for co-authoring an op-ed. A [researcher denied entry](#) into the US because of messages about the administration. A [journalist detained by ICE](#) after covering an immigration protest.

These cases create a chilling effect far beyond those directly targeted. Such moves by the second Trump administration have made clear that immigration enforcement is not just a tool of border control—it's a strategy to control dissent, making immigration enforcement a First Amendment issue for newsrooms.

Visa revocations, social-media vetting, and border detentions have spread widespread fear in immigrant communities. For noncitizen journalists working in the US, the risks have increased substantially.

To maintain their operations, newsroom leaders may need to ensure they are in a position to defend the legal rights of their reporters, and may also be required to defend them publicly in the face of online harassment or threats. There are additional measures that news managers should consider to provide more structural support, reducing fear and uncertainty. This memo outlines the key areas of immigration-related risk and offers concrete guidance for how newsroom decision-makers can prepare. While this briefing draws on immigration law, it should not be read as legal advice of any kind. For legal advice, always consult a specialized lawyer.

1. Acknowledge the Expanding Enforcement Landscape

Immigration-enforcement impacts different journalists in different ways. Journalists with only work authorization may fear that critical reporting could lead immigration authorities to change their visa status, or seek to deport them. They may fear coming into contact with law enforcement while carrying out their reporting because they could be detained. They may fear they could be subject to heightened scrutiny and review while crossing the US border. Even journalists with US citizenship who present as immigrants because of accents or appearance may have concerns about such actions in the current climate.

The current threat environment includes

- Mass ICE raids in major cities
- Social media reviews in [visa adjudications](#)
- Arrests and surveillance of student journalists
- Detention of [non-citizen journalists](#) at ports of entry
- Retaliatory use of visa revocation against critical speech
- Abrupt closure of government funded news outlets and subsequent visa terminations for non-citizens journalists

Key risks to anticipate

- **Immigration status vulnerabilities:** Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) programs remain politically precarious. Many journalists rely on work permits that can be delayed or revoked. Denials or bureaucratic slowdowns could prevent staff from legally continuing their employment or renewing contracts.
- **Surveillance and targeted harassment:** Immigrant journalists may be monitored more aggressively at the border or online. Several reporters have already been flagged in DHS databases, especially those covering migration or protests. Others can face doxxing, smear campaigns, or false reports made to immigration authorities.
- **Editorial chilling effects:** Journalists from vulnerable communities may feel pressure to avoid politically sensitive beats or stay silent about threats they're facing. This risks skewing coverage and diminishing editorial integrity.

- **Reputational and legal exposure:** Newsrooms could come under attack for “harboring” or “aiding” undocumented workers. Such accusations may be spurious, but they can generate headlines and legal headaches.
- **Emotional strain and burnout:** The climate of fear surrounding immigration enforcement can have real psychological impacts, especially for journalists who are part of immigrant and diaspora communities targeted for deportation.

2. Identify Your Newsroom's Exposure

Build an internal snapshot of your risk landscape. This should be voluntary, confidential, and distinct from employment eligibility verification. The goal is not to track individuals or their immigration histories, but to surface categories of vulnerability that could impact newsroom operations or staff well-being and to plan accordingly.

A Note on Work Authorization vs. Immigration Status

All U.S. employers are required by law to verify work authorization, not immigration status. This is done via the Form I-9, which confirms an employee is legally allowed to work in the U.S. Employees can choose which valid documents to provide from an approved list—such as a U.S. passport, work permit, or permanent resident card. Employers may not ask for specific documents or inquire about visa type or immigration history.

If your newsroom wants to proactively assess risk related to immigration enforcement, you may need to go beyond standard onboarding practices in a voluntary and confidential way. This step involves creating space for staff to disclose concerns related to their visa category or immigration situation, which may not be visible from Form I-9 information.

This effort should be handled with care and with clear boundaries:

- If you have legal counsel, involve them in the process to ensure that this is done lawfully and that discussions of immigration status are privileged.
- Do not ask immigration-related questions in hiring or onboarding outside of required I-9 procedures.
- Do not retain or review I-9 documentation for the purpose of mapping visa categories.
- Do not compel anyone to disclose visa status.

Try to map how many contributors, editors, interns, or freelancers may be at risk because of their immigration status. It's important to understand what specific visa types and statuses are present in your newsroom, as each may be jeopardized in different ways. These categories might include:

- F1- visa holders like international student interns
- Recent graduates on OPT (Optional Practical Training)
- DACA recipients (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)
- TPS (Temporary Protected Status) holders
- Asylum seekers with pending cases

- Staff on non-immigrant work visas (e.g., H-1B, O-1),
- Contractors from outside the U.S. under temporary contracts
- Family members at risk of deportation or in mixed-status households
- Green card holders
- Those traveling internationally as part of their work

It's also important to assess whether immigration status is shaping editorial decision-making—for example, are non-citizen journalists avoiding high-risk stories or being excluded from international assignments due to travel risks.

How to do this

Begin by creating space for dialogue. Journalists and staff with uncertain or temporary immigration status may not have previously discussed it with their employer. Employees may have also experienced a change in their immigration status. (In some instances it may be in the best interest of a vulnerable employee not to disclose certain information to their employer. Employees with questions or concerns should be encouraged to consult with an immigration lawyer and should make a determination based on legal guidance.)

- Designate a point person for immigration-related questions or disclosures, ideally someone from HR or legal counsel.
- Determine which visa categories are present in your newsroom. You can do this by holding anonymous newsroom-wide surveys of visa categories to surface trends without identifying individuals.
- Engage with immigration counsel to map your exposure across visa categories. If you cannot find suitable immigration counsel, employment lawyers may be able to assist.
- Establish a clear, secure, confidential internal channel for staff to raise status-based concerns safely. Consider including a lawyer here to maintain privilege over the conversations.

3. Define the Scope of Institutional Support

Before a crisis hits, newsroom leaders should decide how—and when—they will intervene on behalf of a journalist facing immigration enforcement. Not all legal jeopardy stems from retaliation. In fact, at this point, most do not. Some journalists may lose status due to broader immigration crackdowns—like the cancellation of DACA or TPS programs—or visa denials that aren't explicitly tied to their reporting. Leadership must be clear: will the organization provide support only in cases of press freedom retaliation, or is it in a position to extend help more broadly? This may depend on how exposed your newsrooms' operations are to changes in immigration enforcement, if, for example, you run a newsroom staffed principally by non-citizen journalists. It may also depend on the resources available.

Accounting for these considerations in advance can help avoid confusion, ad-hoc decisions, and seemingly unequal treatment later. It also can also prepare the newsroom to communicate consistently—with board and staff—about what support it can (or can't) provide.

Key questions to address

- Will the newsroom intervene when a journalist is detained in retaliation for their reporting?
- Will the newsroom limit its involvement to cases and circumstances in which First Amendment Rights are implicated?
- Will the newsroom provide legal or other support if a staffer loses status due to a broad policy change (e.g., end of TPS)?
- What are the limits to who qualifies for support (e.g., staff vs. freelancers, U.S.-based vs. abroad)?
- Will the organization contribute funds for legal aid, offer letters of support, or go public with advocacy?
- How will these decisions be made—and who will be involved in them (e.g., leadership team, HR, legal counsel)?

Potential next steps

- Draft an internal position or values statement clarifying your newsroom's approach.
- Brief relevant leadership on what support you're prepared to offer and when.
- Coordinate with HR and legal counsel to ensure consistency with employment policies and laws.
- Be ready to revisit your stance as the legal and political landscape evolves.
- Setting clear boundaries doesn't mean closing the door to compassion—it means making values-driven decisions before you're in a high-pressure situation. Doing so protects both your people and your credibility.

4. Build Legal Readiness for Status-Related Crises

Immigration challenges require specialized legal expertise. Standard media law support may not suffice if visas are revoked, border denials occur, or ICE shows up unexpectedly.

Key legal preparedness steps

- Start building relationships with experienced immigration counsel, ideally with experience supporting journalists. (See [Appendix A](#) for organizations that could help you find an immigration lawyer.)
- Budget for legal consultations or emergency representation. The specific amount your newsroom can gather will vary by its resources. If you can, budget \$5,000 - \$10,000 for urgent immigration defense and legal filings. See [Appendix B](#) for a table of cost ranges.
- Know the protocols for supporting a detained staff member, including who to contact (e.g., family, friends, personal lawyer) and how to manage press inquiries.
- Clarify how your general counsel or external law firm supports non-citizen employees.
- Confirm whether your newsroom's legal insurance covers immigration defense.
- If working with freelancers or international contractors, understand your obligations and theirs.
- Pre-identify emergency legal contacts and make sure relevant leaders have their info.

5. Anticipate Cross-Border and Re-entry Risks

Global travel is a heightened risk point for non-citizen journalists working across borders. Journalists may be flagged [for reporting on protest zones](#), migration, or repressive regimes—and targeted for secondary screening or advanced device cloning when re-entering the country. While such cases have been limited, anxiety is high, and US immigration authorities have broad legal authority and discretion.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) may conduct warrantless device searches — ranging from simple swipes to full forensic scans depending on the jurisdiction — on people entering the country, including journalists. Unlike U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents (LPRs), non-citizens without a green card [risk detention or denial of entry](#) if they refuse to unlock their device. U.S. citizens and LPRs can still be held in secondary processing for a period or have their devices confiscated for a prolonged period when refusing a search. However, a search of unsecured devices can expose contacts, story plans, or leaks to surveillance, threatening both individuals and journalistic integrity.

Preventive steps to take include

- Digital security: Implement enhanced digital hygiene measures to clean up laptops and phones for travel. Distribute a tailored digital-security checklist in advance of any travel with risk. For more guidance on how to secure devices for travel see Freedom of the Press Foundation’s guide to [preparing devices for travel through a US Border](#), [Security in a Box](#), and CPJ’s [guide to border crossing safety](#) for journalists.
- Train staff on what to say if [detained or interrogated](#) at ports of entry. Remind staff never to lie to authorities.
- Avoid assigning travel to staff whose status makes reentry risky. Where possible, discuss the risks and your approach with impacted staff members.
- Document known issues related to journalist harassment at US points of entry and include these in safety protocols.
- Line up immigration attorneys if you anticipate possible detention at points of entry.
- Ensure editorial continuity—a plan for coverage to continue if a reporter is delayed at the border.
- Consider implementing check-in protocols around border crossings and international travel through airports.

If a journalist is detained at the border, your newsroom needs to act quickly to coordinate legal, logistical, and public response.

Special Risk: Reporters Traveling on Tourist Visas (B-1/B-2)

News organizations should be especially cautious when working with reporters entering the U.S. on tourist visas. B-1/B-2 visas do not permit journalistic activity, including conducting interviews, attending press events, or filing stories for publication. Officers have been known to [search phones, laptops, and social media](#) for signs of reporting, especially on politically sensitive topics (e.g., protests, immigration, foreign policy). Journalists found to be working while on a tourist visa may be denied entry, detained, deported, or barred from future travel to the U.S.

In addition to all of the above precautions for border crossings, consider the following:

- Do not assign field reporting, live interviews, or event coverage to anyone on a tourist visa—especially if publication is expected.
- Ensure travelers understand that even appearing to engage in journalism—carrying credentials, camera gear, or press passes—can raise suspicion.
- Provide legal guidance before travel if B-1 travel is necessary for non-reporting purposes (e.g., training, meetings).
- Keep a record of who is traveling on which visa, and what their stated purpose of travel is.
- Consider applying for appropriate visas (e.g., I or O-1) for regular contributors or at-risk reporters.

Working while on a tourist visa is legally risky for the individual journalist and operationally risky for the newsroom. If your newsroom regularly works with international reporters, build clear visa protocols into your onboarding, assignments, and legal planning—and err on the side of caution.

6. Create Protocols for Immigration-Linked Threats

Detention or surveillance can happen without warning. You need a plan to support any journalist who is targeted, and to preserve editorial continuity in their absence. If a journalist is targeted due to their immigration status or reporting:

- Immediately notify legal counsel.
- Use a secure communications channel (ex: Signal) to alert key leadership to an incident.
- Assign a designated communications lead for internal and external updates.
- Connect the journalist to trauma-informed support or counseling, where possible.
- Prepare public messaging (if appropriate), but prioritize the individual's safety and consent.
- Consider staff redistribution to ensure continuity of coverage and reduce exposure.

Build template protocols in advance—timing is critical in these scenarios. Include:

- A rapid-response checklist for ICE detentions, including who to call and what to do
- Pre-drafted statement public statement template for detentions, device seizures, or travel denials
- Private internal communications plans—Signal or similar encrypted apps
- Emergency funding capacity for legal fees or temporary housing
- Mental health resources to support affected journalists and their peers
- If possible, run a tabletop exercise with your leadership team to stress-test your plan.

7. Counter the Chilling Effect on Coverage

Journalists working under immigration scrutiny may self-censor. While it is unlawful to discriminate in the assignment of work on the basis of national origin and immigration status, editors may unconsciously reassign stories to avoid exposing immigrant reporters to risk. Over time, this erodes your newsroom's independence.

You can counteract this by:

- Reaffirming that editorial assignments will be made with awareness of but not avoidance of—status-based risk.
- Ensuring reporters can raise assignment concerns without penalty.
- Considering byline strategies (e.g., joint or organizational bylines) for high-risk pieces.
- Making space for immigrant journalists to shape safety policy—not just be subject to it.

Your newsroom must protect the ability of all staff to report freely, without fear that their immigration status will be used against them.

8. Support Staff Well-Being and Morale

Immigration enforcement is not only a legal risk—it's a psychological one. Fear, burnout, and moral injury—the psychological distress that can arise when you witness, participate in, or fail to prevent an act that violates your morals and values—can affect staff far beyond those directly targeted. The psychological toll may affect journalists whose own immigration status is not at risk, but who have family and loved ones at risk of detention or deportation. Well-being and mental health are essential to safety, not secondary to it.

Support practices may include:

- Offer access to confidential mental health services.
- Create regular space for processing difficult news, including optional staff debriefs.
- Encourage peer-to-peer check-ins, especially among staff with shared lived experience.
- Allow flexible scheduling or quiet leave after high-stress incidents or threats.
- Permit temporary step-back from public-facing work when needed.
- Build decompression time into coverage of high-risk or identity-related beats.
- Check in directly with those most affected, without placing additional burden.
- Publicly and privately affirm institutional support based on your own established guidelines for immigrant and non-citizen staff.

9. Embed Immigration Preparedness into Long-Term Ops

Immigration-related risk should not be treated as a one-time emergency or a niche concern—it must be built into the structure of how your newsroom operates. Just as you plan for cyberattacks or libel threats, you may need standing policies and procedures for what happens when a visa is revoked, a border stop occurs, or a journalist faces detention. Doing so reinforces that immigrant and non-citizen journalists are not exceptions to protect—they are integral to your team’s safety, continuity, and mission. All news organizations may face some level of immigration-related risk, but those that focus on coverage of immigrant communities or have newsrooms staffed by reporters or managers from those communities are particularly vulnerable.

To build resilience, integrate immigration preparedness into the following core areas:

- **Annual newsroom safety reviews:** Include immigration risk when assessing beat assignments, travel planning, and staff support needs. Where appropriate and possible, involve legal counsel in internal discussions.
- **Emergency preparedness plans:** Add ICE detention, visa revocation, and reentry denial to your crisis scenarios. Identify who responds, who communicates, and what steps are taken.
- **Editorial planning and risk briefings:** Consider immigration exposure when assigning high-risk beats, especially those involving protest, border regions, or overseas travel. Build flexibility into coverage plans when a reporter’s ability to travel or publish may shift. Where appropriate and possible, involve legal counsel in such discussions.
- **Board and funder engagement:** Keep leadership informed about the structural risks immigration enforcement poses to staffing and operations. Consider developing a protocol for supporting non-citizen staff in crisis.
- **Budgeting:** Factor in costs related to immigration-related legal aid, emergency travel, and trauma support in safety and operations budgets. If you’re a nonprofit newsroom, account for this in your grant budgets as well.
- **Cross-team training:** Ensure that editors, HR staff, and security or legal liaisons understand how immigration enforcement may affect individual reporters and your newsroom as a whole.

Concluding Thoughts

This is not an issue of HR compliance or optional risk planning. The right of non-citizen journalists to report—and to live and work without fear—is fundamental to press freedom in the U.S. Those who are most at risk are often those closest to the communities your newsroom seeks to serve. Their insights, reporting, and presence are essential.

Preparing now—quietly, deliberately, and with empathy—will allow your newsroom to act from a place of strength and solidarity. The threats ahead are serious, but they are not insurmountable.

Appendix A

Legal & Organizational Resources

Immigration attorneys with experience supporting journalists are essential. Consult local legal aid nonprofits, national media legal networks, or pro bono immigration support centers.

LEGAL SUPPORT

- [National Immigration Law Center](#)
- [National Immigrant Justice Center](#)
- [American Immigration Lawyers' Association](#)
- [Kuck and Baxter](#), a law firm specialized in complex immigration matters
- [Lawyers for Reporters](#) and the [Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press](#) may be able to help connect you to specialized counsel.

PRESS FREEDOM ORGANIZATIONS

Press freedom organizations such as [PEN America](#), the [International Women's Media Foundation](#), and the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) often maintain referral lists for legal and psychological support for journalists facing government repression.

DIGITAL RIGHTS GROUPS

Digital rights groups such as the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#) and [Freedom of the Press Foundation](#) offer guidance on protecting personal devices and communications from searches and surveillance.

Appendix B

General Ranges for Immigration Legal Fees

TYPE OF REPRESENTATION	TYPICAL COST RANGE
Bond hearing (to get out of detention)	\$1,500 – \$5,000
ICE detention defense (full case)	\$5,000 – \$15,000+
Asylum application (affirmative or defensive)	\$3,000 – \$10,000+
Work visa applications (e.g., O-1, H-1B)	\$2,500 – \$6,000+
Green card (adjustment of status)	\$1,500 – \$4,000
TPS or DACA renewal	\$300 – \$1,500
Waivers / appeals / motions to reopen	\$2,000 – \$7,500+
Emergency response (e.g., airport detention)	\$2,000 – \$10,000+

Actual costs will vary around the country and will also depend on the complexity and particulars of a given case. Some attorneys charge hourly rates (\$150–\$500/hour), especially for consultations or unusual cases. Many require upfront retainers, which can range from \$2,000–\$5,000 or more.