

‘Hard times are coming.’ An immigration raid in New Bedford 18 years ago may offer a glimpse of what’s to come.

By [Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 16, 2025, 6:09 a.m.



Jason Riz was 2 years old when his mother, Juana Garcia, was arrested during a 2007 ICE raid at the Michael Bianco Inc. factory where she worked in New Bedford. He stood in the kitchen as his mom prepared a meal in the same city where the raid happened. Riz, now 20, feels that period was why, for years, he was scared of being separated from his mother and that it also hurt their bond. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

NEW BEDFORD — For weeks after Ricardo Gómez Garcia was arrested at his textile job in the [largest workplace raid](#) in modern Massachusetts history, his autistic 4-year-old son would scour the family’s apartment trying to find him.

Mauricio Gutierrez had delighted in his outings with his father — to the park or to pick up treats before dinner. Where had he gone?

The boy could not sleep. He refused to eat, his mother, Dominga Gutierrez Toj, recalled. “He would just look, and search,” Gutierrez Toj, 54, said in Spanish on a recent evening at her New Bedford apartment. She tried to reassure Mauricio that everything would be OK.



An employee cried outside the Michael Bianco Inc. textiles plant in New Bedford on March 6, 2007. The sweep caused chaos, which saw some workers try to flee, only to be turned back by the bitter cold. AP PHOTO/PETER PEREIRA-THE NEW BEDFORD STANDARD TIMES

But it would not be OK, for her small family and hundreds of others in New Bedford whose lives were fractured forever after that late winter morning almost 18 years ago, when Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents swarmed the Michael Bianco Inc. leather goods factory and arrested 361 undocumented immigrants. Some were detained for weeks or months. Many fought long court battles to stay in the United States after they were released. An estimated 150 workers, including many parents of young children, were deported, including Mauricio's father, Gómez Garcia.

The raid had lasting effects on New Bedford, too: a disruption of the labor market, an avalanche of job losses, and new anxiety about immigration enforcement among employers and their workers.

Now, as President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office, his [promises of mass deportations](#) are surfacing painful memories of the Bianco factory raid and its aftermath and stoking fear about what the next four years could hold, especially for the estimated 200,000 undocumented immigrants in Massachusetts. An estimated 10,000 of them live in the New Bedford area, [though some advocates say those numbers could be much higher.](#)

“Hard times are coming,” Adrián Ventura, the executive director for the Centro Comunitario de Trabajadores, an immigrant advocacy group, told more than 300 people, many of them undocumented immigrants, who had gathered on a December night to learn about their rights in anticipation of the next Trump administration.

Ventura, an immigrant from Guatemala who was previously an undocumented worker, handed out hundreds of cards printed with the names and numbers of lawyers and community groups, for use in case ICE agents began conducting sweeps.

But, “this is not going to save you,” he added ruefully.

The first Trump administration amped up worksite enforcement, arresting hundreds in Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi, and Texas in raids on meatpacking, poultry, and other

plants. The Biden administration discontinued those raids, but Trump and his aides have promised to reverse course, saying mass arrests at workplaces are necessary to accelerate the removal of immigrants without permission to be in the country.

“You can count on worksite enforcement coming back,” Tom Homan, Trump’s former acting head of ICE, whom Trump has tapped to be “border czar,” said in an [interview with NBC News](#) in January.



A woman cried while holding her 4-month-old daughter as she talked about being held by federal immigration agents on March 9, 2007, in New Bedford. She was released so she could take care of her daughter. DOMINIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF

ICE officials have defended the agency’s actions in the 2007 raid, which came during the second administration of President George W. Bush. Bruce Foucart, the special agent in charge of Homeland Security Investigations in Boston at the time, was a top official organizing the raid, which he said was planned meticulously and conducted strictly according to guidelines.

He said he did not blame the workers for searching for a better life. “These streets are paved with gold compared to where they’re coming from,” he said.

“However,” he said, “it’s right, and just, to do it legally, and do it the right way.”

The New Bedford raid stunned workers inside the Bianco factory. On a Tuesday morning, as they started their shifts at their sewing stations, a voice on the company’s intercom suddenly ordered: *Don’t run. Immigration officers are in the building*, the Globe reported at the time. Some ran anyway, as agents stormed in; others hid in the basement. The air filled with screaming and crying. The workers, many of them Indigenous Mayans from Guatemala who had come to the United States to escape persecution back home, had been making vests, backpacks, and other equipment for the US military at the height of the Iraq War.

Advocates descended on the city and raced to compile the names of those detained and notify their loved ones. Workers who were arrested, many of whom spoke a Mayan language called K’iche’, tried to call lawyers or family members, desperate to have their children picked up from school or from babysitters. Many were first taken to a former army base in Massachusetts and subsequently, more than 200 were sent to facilities in Texas and other states, [advocates said](#).

“It was like a bomb had gone off,” said John Willshire Carrera, assistant director of the Harvard Immigration and Refugee Clinic at Greater Boston Legal Services, who represented many of the families in their legal cases, pro bono.

The Bush administration was conducting similar raids across the country to make it clear that unauthorized workers were breaking the law, Foucart said. “They wanted the shock and awe of these mass arrests and mass removals,” he said.

The owner of the Michael Bianco factory, Francesco Insolita, ultimately pleaded guilty to harboring and concealing undocumented immigrants and was sentenced by US District Judge Douglas Woodlock in 2009 to [12 months in federal prison](#).

New ownership took over the factory in late 2007, and then, about two years later, [shut it down and moved operations to Puerto Rico](#).

The sweep rippled through New Bedford: Many undocumented immigrants at other workplaces in the area lost their jobs after the raid, as employers cracked down on work permits, said Corinn Williams, director of the Community Economic Development Center of Southeastern Massachusetts. Families came to her center in the aftermath, sharing hardships about paying the bills and asking for assistance.

“The ripple effect was really substantial,” she said, “and hit all kinds of parts of the community.”



Luis Matias and his wife posed with a tenant's children in 2007. They received a phone call asking if they could babysit the two children while the woman was at work on March 6, 2007. The mother was detained by federal immigration agents, who raided

the Michael Bianco factory, and was not released. DOMINIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF

Perhaps most significantly, though, the raid had a massive psychological effect on immigrants and their families. Mothers were detained while still lactating; fathers were deported away from their children. The raid targeted only the workers inside the factory; many family members who were also undocumented were not arrested, though they lived in fear of being rounded up without warning.

The Bianco factory raid is “really part of the collective memory,” said Lisa Maya Knauer, an anthropology professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth who has studied the city’s Mayan community. “There is this kind of constant fear that you could be deported at any minute.”

ICE was in communication with the local police department, the New Bedford mayor’s office, and social services agencies, said Foucart, the former official, and was aware of the “humanitarian issues” that would arise. In any case, he said: “The blame is not on the government for enforcing the laws.”

“The responsibility is on the parents who brought their children in here illegally, or came in illegally and had their kids,” said Foucart, who now owns an investigative consulting firm.

The psychological effects, many immigrants and their advocates say, were nevertheless severe. Around 80 of the children whose parents were arrested in the raid were under the age of 6 at the time, [according to a 2007 study](#) by the Urban Institute, for the National Council of La Raza.

Amaro Laria, a clinical psychologist who organized a support group in New Bedford after the raid, said parents who were arrested spoke of their children living in a perpetual state of distrust. Experiencing early separation from parents, Laria said, can lead to “very severe attachment disruptions that are going to follow them throughout their whole lives.

“The way that we cope with stressors in life is by feeling safe, feeling protected, feeling trust,” Laria said. “So when we don’t have those things, we’re prone to develop very severe anxiety.”

Jason Riz was 2 when ICE arrested his mother at the Bianco factory. He was hospitalized with severe asthma while his mother was detained, first in Massachusetts, then in Texas.



Riz looked at a photo of himself when he was approximately 2 years old, the age he was during the raid. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

She was released after nine days, but Riz, now 20, feels that period was why, for years, he was terrified of being separated from his mother and that it also hurt their bond. As he grew up, Riz remembers watching other children interact with their parents and feeling his connection with his mother “wasn’t as strong.”

“I would just think, ‘Wow, why is it different for me?’” Riz said.

Mauricio, the 4-year-old child with autism, would eventually be reunited with his father, Gómez Garcia, but for a tragically brief moment. His mother, Gutierrez Toj, would cradle Mauricio, who is nonverbal, trying to reassure him his father would return. And Gómez Garcia did, in fact, come back, crossing the border illegally about seven months after his arrest. But just one day after reuniting with his family in New Bedford, Gómez Garcia suffered an airway obstruction and died, the state medical examiner said at the time.

Gutierrez Toj, who was also undocumented, lost her job at another nearby factory because of her immigration status. She was later granted asylum, and two of her older children have since joined her from Guatemala. But she has been battling cancer since 2021. Her hair, which once flowed down to her hips, is slowly growing back after chemotherapy treatments.

Mauricio has changed little from the 4-year-old grappling with his father's sudden disappearance, she said. Gutierrez Toj prays often, asking God to help her stay around so she can look after Mauricio, who still needs help with everyday tasks.

"I adore him," she said.

Luis Gomez was 16 when his mother was arrested and detained for more than two weeks, and the raid was a stark awakening to the reality of his own immigration status — he had crossed the border as an unaccompanied minor at age 8. He realized he, too, could be sent back to Guatemala. His father was deported a few years later and never returned.

"I was in a situation where I would be next," he said.



Gabriela Gomez; Angel Gomez, their mother; Zoila Chingo de Gomez, who was detained during the factory raid; and her son Luis Gomez posed for a portrait in Dartmouth. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

With his mother detained, and his father working two jobs to compensate for the loss of income, Gomez was thrust into an early adulthood. He left behind the high school robotics club and soccer team, even the simple joys of friends' birthday parties, to become a primary caregiver for his 1-year-old sister and 4-year-old brother.

During that time, his mother, Zoila Chingo de Gomez, felt constant anguish about her children.

"I would not wish that upon any mother," she said. "You try to forget, but you can't."

Gomez's mother eventually obtained legal residency and nearly two decades later, Gomez himself became a citizen in 2024. In that time, he has built a full life. An electrician, Gomez lives in Dartmouth with his wife and two young children.

Reminders of the raid come up often, though, sometimes on a drive to the beach with his family, as they pass the massive brick building where his mother was arrested.

“When something is broken, it’s never going to be the same,” Gomez said, his voice trailing off as he lifted his glasses to wipe away tears.

Some of those who were deported in 2007, and who have since returned without authorization, are now afraid their lives may be shattered again.

Tomas, an immigrant from Guatemala who was arrested at the Michael Bianco factory, was among those who attended the December community meeting in New Bedford, accompanied by his wife and their toddler daughter. After the 2007 raid, he was detained for 10 months and then deported, leaving behind his previous wife, who was pregnant, and their 1-year-old son.

Tomas’s past gave him little chance of being allowed to stay in the United States. In 2003 he had pleaded not guilty to a felony assault charge in Rhode Island and then failed to appear in court for a pretrial conference, so a warrant was issued for his arrest, according to court records.

As he boarded the plane to Guatemala after the raid, Tomas said, he kept thinking: “I have to go back for my children.” His children are US citizens; his second son was born while he was detained.

A year later, he returned to New Bedford, crossing the border illegally again. It took time to build a relationship with his sons, and he knows that the separation bruised their relationship. He eventually separated from his first wife.

Tomas remains undocumented. He asked to be identified by his first name because of his status. He has since remarried and works at a scallop factory. When he came home from

work on a recent Friday evening, his older daughter, almost 3, ran to the door, yelling: “Papi!”

He is all too aware of what the future could hold. “We are here again, with that same fear,” he said. “It’s always on my mind, that I don’t want to lose my children again.”



Zoila Chingo de Gomez and her children visited the former Michael Bianco Inc. factory in New Bedford. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio can be reached at giulia.mcdnr@globe.com. Follow her [@giuliamcdnr](https://twitter.com/giuliamcdnr).

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