

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

**Texans care about hard work, safety and the economy. ICE doesn't.**

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By Chelsie Kramer

If the federal government were truly serious about reducing undocumented immigration or its impact on the American workforce, the crackdowns wouldn't be focused on Minneapolis or Chicago. They'd be focused on Houston.

Harris County alone is estimated to be home to roughly 600,000 undocumented immigrants — more than four times as many as are estimated to live in the entire state of Minnesota. Yet Houston is conspicuously absent from calls for mass deportation, and unlike other U.S. cities, it's rarely described as "overrun."

What gives? I think it's this: National immigration policy is being driven by party politics. And those politics run counter to Texas values

I'm an average Harris County resident and a fifth-generation Texan. My dad raised our family while working at the Shell plant in Deer Park. I grew up raising livestock and showing at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, where I earned a scholarship to Texas A&M University. I've worked on Republican political campaigns and served as a legislative staffer in Austin.

So why do I care about immigration policy? Or more importantly, why should every Houstonian?

After more than 15 years working alongside Texas business leaders, I have yet to meet one who is anti-immigrant. What I encounter instead are employers frustrated by a broken system and a national discourse that doesn't reflect reality.

Texans care about hard work, safety, opportunity and whether their communities are economically strong enough to support the next generation. Those values are not anti-immigrant. They align closely with how immigrants contribute across Texas every day. Immigrants make up nearly 18% of Texas' population and more than 22% of its workforce. In Houston, immigrants account for 31% of the employed labor force.

Yet a persistent national perception remains that red states are anti-immigrant. That framing misunderstands how Texans actually experience immigration and obscures a more uncomfortable truth: Today's national immigration discourse is not really about immigrants at all.

Polling and economic stats prove it. A Quinnipiac University poll found that 57% of voters disapprove of how ICE enforces immigration laws. While Gallup reports that a record 45% of Americans identify as political independents, signaling a rejection of tribal politics.

Immigrants are deeply embedded in the industries Texans rely on most. In health care, immigrants account for nearly one-third of physicians and pharmacists. In energy, they support 32.5% of engineering roles critical to the state's growth. In construction, 40% of workers are immigrants, with even higher shares among laborers. Go to the doctor, flip on the lights or walk into a new building in Houston, and you're seeing immigrant work in action.

Immigrant households in Texas contribute \$58.1 billion in taxes each year, including \$22.6 billion to Social Security and \$6 billion to Medicare. Undocumented Texans pay \$13.8 billion annually in taxes, and legal status — not currently available to this population — could generate an additional \$473.9 million in state and local taxes per year. At the same time, undocumented immigrants are largely barred from Medicaid, Medicare, CHIP, SNAP, ACA marketplace coverage, and Social Security benefits, despite paying into the system. That is participation without access.

Crime narratives also don't match the data. Even as the immigrant share of the population doubled from 1980 to 2022, overall crime fell by more than 60%, and research shows no link between immigration and higher crime. Meanwhile, ICE detention has shifted sharply: People with no criminal record now make up 41% of detainees, a 2,450% increase in less than a year.

As Texans feel the strain of a cooling job market, valid employment concerns are rising. But even as hiring slows in some areas, Texas faces structural workforce gaps driven by demographics. Millions of Texans are nearing retirement, while

persistent labor shortages remain in health care, education and construction. Immigrants complement, rather than replace, the U.S.-born workforce and make up nearly one-third of Texas entrepreneurs.

Texas business leaders understand this reality. Steve Stephens, CEO of Amegy Bank, has warned in these pages that workforce instability threatens Houston's competitiveness when immigration policy ignores labor-market realities. **Justin Yancy of the Texas Business Leadership Council has highlighted immigrant talent easing labor shortages statewide.** Houston construction leader Stan Marek calls practical immigration solutions "a win-win." Houston business leader Massey Villarreal has cautioned that "if we lose 10% of our workforce, we can't advance the agenda of business in Houston."

These are not fringe views. They reflect lived economic reality. Texans know immigrants aren't the problem, and Houston's economy proves it every day.

Texans aren't anti-immigrant. We're anti-chaos, and we want a system that works.