

Leominster family says ICE agents held their daughter outside their home so they would turn themselves over

Agents ask the parents to come out of their house multiple times as their 5-year-old sits in the driveway surrounded by federal immigration officers, video shows

By [Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio](#) and [Samantha J. Gross](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 23, 2025, 7:11 p.m.



The 5-year-old girl who was briefly held by ICE. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

A Leominster family who has lived in the United States for more than 20 years said federal [immigration agents](#) held their 5-year-old daughter, who is a US-citizen and autistic, in custody outside their home in an effort to pressure the

parents to turn themselves over to agents.

In a series of videos of the incident that the family shared with the Globe, [several agents with vests marked “POLICE”](#) on them — often worn by officials from Immigration and Customs Enforcement — linger outside the family’s home, next to the the girl.

In one of the videos, the girl is sitting on a stool in her driveway next to an SUV, surrounded by about three federal agents who towered over her, equipped with guns strapped to their bodies. The girl is wearing bright pink pants, her hair pulled back in a braid, drinking water as officers beckon her father, Edwards Hip Mejia, to come out of the house, waving him over to his driveway.

“Don’t touch her!” Hip Mejia, who is from Guatemala, yells at the agents.

“You’re more than welcome to come pick her up,” one of the officers says.

Immigration officials countered that Hip Mejia, who had previously been arrested on allegations that included domestic abuse, strangulation, and vandalizing property, abandoned his daughter while running away from agents. The girl was eventually brought to a police station, where she was later picked up by her grandmother.

In an interview with the Globe, the girl’s mother, Jeannette, said Hip Mejia was taking her to the hospital last Tuesday because she was severely ill with a fever and was having trouble breathing. He soon realized cars were trailing him, and turned around back into his family’s driveway, when agents blocked his car, Jeannette, his wife, said in Spanish. She requested the Globe use only her middle name to protect her privacy.

Hip Mejia ran into the home as it looked that agents were going to try to arrest him, his wife said, and their daughter remained in the car in their driveway.

In a statement, Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said Hip Mejia entered the United States unlawfully in 2000.

McLaughlin said Hip Mejia was the “target” of an ICE operation.

“ICE agents NEVER used a 5-year-old girl as ‘bait,’ ” she said, adding that Hip Mejia “abandoned his own child in a car.”

McLaughlin said Hip Mejia “ignored” emergency lights to pull over and drove back to his home, fled the car, “gave officers the double middle finger, and darted inside his house.”

“Officers helped rescue the child and called local police to report the abandonment,” McLaughlin said. The child was brought to the police station and her grandmother picked her up, the family said, after about three hours of being separated from her family.

Governor Maura Healey said Tuesday that ICE is using tactics that are “really horrifying,” adding that she watched the video of “that poor little girl, 5 years old. My heart breaks for her.”

“It’s bad enough that ICE [agents] are picking up landscapers, construction workers, nannies, grandmothers who are home health aides . . . where there’s no criminal record and they’re just living their lives. Some of them have been here for decades. Ripping kids away from their parents,” she said. “The video showing ICE using this 5-year-old girl as a bargaining chip: That’s horrifying. That doesn’t make us safer. That’s not about public safety, and it’s got to stop.”

In January 2024, Hip Mejia was arrested on four charges, according to Massachusetts district court records; two felonies and two misdemeanors. The charges were strangulation or suffocation, vandalizing property, assault and battery on a family or household member, and reckless endangerment of a child. All charges were dismissed in April 2024, court records show.

His wife said the charges stem from a domestic incident but she did not elaborate. She was also arrested with similar charges, which were dismissed as well in April 2024, according to court records.

Two days after they picked up his daughter, ICE agents intercepted Hip Mejia as he was leaving his home Thursday to go to work. This time, they arrested and took him into custody. About six agents, some of them wearing ICE vests, dragged Hip Mejia out of his car, handcuffed his wrists behind his back, and shackled his ankles on his front lawn, according to videos the family took of the arrest.

Hip Mejia was led into an unmarked SUV, and is currently being held at the Plymouth correctional facility. An attorney for Hip Mejia filed a petition for his release in federal court last week, and a judge has ordered that he not be transferred out of state.

Jacob Geller, the family's immigration lawyer, said upon reviewing the videos and hearing testimony from the family, agents were "clearly using the 5-year-old" to try and lure the parents out of the home.

"It's absolutely inhumane," he said. "And that they would release a statement saying they would never do that is further dishonesty from ICE."

Hip Mejia had a pending asylum case, for which he had an upcoming court hearing in early 2026, and Jeannette has a pending request to obtain a legal status through her eldest son, who is a US citizen.

The arrest is among a growing number of recent incidents that have made national news and sent shock waves through Massachusetts' immigrant communities.

“They are definitely escalating when it comes to violence and force,” said Victoria Miranda, a senior attorney at Lawyers for Civil Rights who leads the Boston-based group's immigration litigation. “It was already bad, and it seems like it's getting worse at this point.”

For months, Massachusetts has been a focal point of the Trump administration's “Operation Patriot,” which the administration said targets people accused of serious crimes who are in the country without authorization. ICE has defended its actions, saying it is arresting violent criminals.

The administration has set [quotas of 3,000 arrests](#) a day. But, advocates said, many of those apprehended do not have a criminal background.

LUCE Immigration Justice Network, a volunteer-driven organization that runs a robust hotline for residents to report ICE sightings across the state, fielded 700 calls last week, said Jaya Savita, executive director of the Asian Pacific Islanders Civic Action Network, and a steering committee member of LUCE. That number is double the sightings documented over the same period two weeks ago.

People who were not a priority of federal immigration officials, such as those with active immigration applications pending or court dates scheduled, are being arrested at a faster clip, said Maggie Morgan, managing attorney of Greater Boston Legal Services' immigration unit. The arrests often happen early in the morning as people leave their homes.

Morgan also agreed that the manner by which people are being arrested has changed. One of her clients is [Edgar Hernan Elias Escobar](#), who was detained last week in Malden after ICE agents smashed his window and aimed a taser

at him during a stop on his way to work.

“This is heightening people’s fears. We have to deal with this reality that people are scared,” she said.

Attorney General Andrea Campbell, who has challenged Trump’s immigration policies in court, said the White House’s agenda was “cruel,” adding that these “aggressive enforcement tactics have nothing to do with public safety and instead serve to sow fear, chaos, and confusion in our communities.”

In another video the family recorded, Jeannette tells the agents multiple times that her daughter has autism.

The father, Hip Mejia, steps in again. “Shame on you,” the dad says.

“You left the kid in the car,” an officer says. “It’s called child endangerment.”

Since the incident, Jeannette has not left the house, she said. Community members have dropped off food for them. The school system has helped get the 5-year-old into therapy.

Hip Mejia has a mechanical workshop in which he fixes up buses and other vehicles, Jeannette said. The couple has been married for 14 years, and has three girls together, 12 and 17, besides the 5-year-old.

“He’s very caring with them, he is a good father,” she said.

The 5-year-old, who is in kindergarten, has been traumatized by the situation, Jeannette said. “She was telling me yesterday, ‘Mami, tengo miedo,’” Jeannette said. “Mom, I’m scared.”

Matt Stout of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio can be reached at giulia.mcdnr@globe.com. Follow her [@giuliamcdnr](https://www.instagram.com/giuliamcdnr). Samantha J. Gross can be reached at samantha.gross@globe.com. Follow her [@samanthajgross](https://www.instagram.com/samanthajgross).

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