



POLICE  
ICE

# REPORTER'S FIELD GUIDE

IMMIGRATION  
ENFORCEMENT

# Reporter's Field Guide: Immigration Enforcement

By Paloma Esquivel

[Lea esta guía en español](#)

This guide is designed to help reporters covering immigration enforcement in California understand access to state and local public records, immigration courts and detention centers.

While immigration enforcement is largely a federal matter, this guide explains how reporters in California can use state and local records available under the California Public Records Act to report on immigration enforcement. It also provides information on immigration courts and detention centers across the state. Links to guides for accessing federal records through the Freedom of Information Act can be found in Section IV.

The explainer is divided into five sections:

**Section I:** California laws that create public records related to immigration enforcement

**Section II:** An overview of access to immigration courts

**Section III:** California detention centers and media access

**Section IV:** Additional resources, including links to glossaries of terms

**Section V:** Examples of immigration reporting using state/local records

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **I. California Laws that Create Public Records Related to Immigration Enforcement**

Conditions in Immigration Detention: County Health Inspections

Conditions in Immigration Detention: California Department of Justice Reviews

Conditions in Immigration Detention: Private Detention Centers and CPRA

Cooperation between Local Law Enforcement and Federal Immigration Authorities:  
Transfers and Joint Operations

Cooperation between Local Law Enforcement and ICE: Transfer Notifications

Public School Policies on Immigration Enforcement

### **II. Access to Immigration Courts in California**

Observing Immigration Court Hearings

Recording and Photography in Immigration Court

Immigration Court Judges

Immigration Case Data

Immigration Court Records

### **III. Immigration Detention in California and Media Access**

Finding and Interviewing People who Are Detained

### **IV. More Resources**

### **V. Immigration Reporting Examples**

# I. California Laws that Create Public Records Related to Immigration Enforcement

California has a number of laws that create a trail of public records about immigration-related topics that can be used in a wide range of coverage.

**Reporting Questions:** Are you interested in reporting on conditions in California's six immigration detention centers? Are you looking for inspection reports of detention facilities? These are some laws and resources that can help.

## Conditions in Immigration Detention: County Health Inspections

- [SB 1132](#) (2024) authorizes county health officers to investigate private immigration detention facilities. The law does not require annual inspections, so the volume of records will vary.
- Records that may be available include county health officers' inspection reports and correspondence about whether to inspect.

## Conditions in Immigration Detention: California Department of Justice Reviews

- [AB 103](#) (2017) requires the California Department of Justice to review and report on conditions at county, local or private immigration detention facilities until July 1, 2027.
- As of the publication of this guide, the DOJ has issued four reports on its investigations into the facilities, including the most [recent report](#) in April 2025.
- Additional DOJ reports on immigration detention under AB 103 can be found [here](#).

## Conditions in Immigration Detention: Private Detention Centers and CPRA

- All six immigration detention centers in California are run by private companies, which are not generally subject to the CPRA.

- However, [SB 29](#) (2017) requires that “any facility that detains a noncitizen pursuant to a contract with a city, county, city and county, or a local law enforcement agency is subject to the California Public Records Act.”

**Reporting Questions:** Do you want to know whether local law enforcement in your community is cooperating with federal immigration agents? Are you interested in reviewing communications between federal immigration agents and local police? Would you like to get information about joint operations between federal immigration agencies and local law enforcement? There are laws that can help you access records.

## Cooperation between Local Law Enforcement and Federal Immigration Authorities: Transfers and Joint Operations

- [SB 54](#) (2017), the California Values Act, commonly referred to as California’s sanctuary law, prevents the use of state and local resources for federal immigration enforcement and bars local law enforcement from notifying immigration agents about the release of arrestees. Many exceptions are allowed but they must be documented.
- Transfers of persons from state or local custody to immigration authorities are prohibited unless authorized by a judicial warrant or judicial probable cause determination, or under specific conditions outlined in California Government Code [Section 7282.5](#).
- The law requires law enforcement to keep and report data on transfers and any joint task force operations with federal immigration agents.
- Annual transfer data is reported [here](#) under “Values Act Transfer Data.”
- More up-to-date data (for example, transfers since January 2025) can be requested directly from local police and sheriff’s departments. See this [sample request](#). Some agencies, including the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department, post updated data [online](#).
- The [2025 statistical reporting requirements guide](#) issued in January by the California Attorney General’s Office explains what data law enforcement is required to report about joint task force operations with immigration authorities and local immigration transfers.
- California state prisons are exempt from many of the provisions of SB 54, and every year, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (“CDCR”) transfers hundreds of individuals to ICE custody. Details about those transfers can be found [here](#) on the CDCR’s website. See also: [CalMatters reporting](#).

- The ACLU of Northern California and other organizations successfully requested records of communications between CDRC and ICE, and published their results in [this report](#).
- Examples of reporting on ICE transfers:
  - [Sheriff says she's 'not crossing any lines' in cooperating with ICE](#) (*San Diego Union-Tribune*)
  - [L.A. County jails are handing inmates over to ICE for the first time in years](#) (*Los Angeles Times*)

## Cooperation between Local Law Enforcement and ICE: Transfer Notifications

- [AB 2792](#) (2017) makes clear that records about ICE access to people detained in local jails are public under the CPRA.
- The law requires law enforcement to notify individuals in their custody about their rights when immigration agents try to contact them.
- If ICE seeks to interview someone in the custody of local law enforcement, that person must be given a written consent form in a language they understand.
- If ICE seeks to detain someone in a local agency's custody, the agency must give that person a copy of the detainer/transfer request form and notify them whether the agency plans to comply.
- Under the law, all records related to ICE access, "[including](#) all communication with ICE," are subject to the CPRA. Various exemptions may apply.
- The law specifies that: "records relating to ICE access include, but are not limited to, data maintained by the local law enforcement agency regarding the number and demographic characteristics of individuals to whom the agency has provided ICE access, the date ICE access was provided, and whether the ICE access was provided through a hold, transfer, or notification request or through other means."

- The law allows for personal identifying information to be redacted before the records are made public, and agencies may be able to claim exemptions under the CPRA.

**Reporting Questions:** Do you want to know whether local schools have procedures in place for interacting with federal immigration agents? Are you wondering whether schools are following policies that require campuses to be as safe as possible for students, regardless of immigration status?

## Public School Policies on Immigration Enforcement

- [AB 699](#) (2017) limits California public schools' ability to assist immigration enforcement.
- The law also required that by July 1, 2018, all local school districts “publish model policies limiting assistance with immigration enforcement at public schools, to the fullest extent possible consistent with federal and state law, and ensuring that public schools remain safe and accessible to all California residents, regardless of immigration status.”
- In December 2024, the California Attorney General issued additional [guidance](#) and said any updates to reflect model policies should be adopted by districts by May 1, 2025.
- Examples: Long Beach Unified School District's [policy](#), Santa Ana Unified School District's [board resolution](#) and Los Angeles Unified School District's [reference guide](#).

**Additional reporting tips on state and local records:** We have outlined some California laws that specify public records related to immigration enforcement. But the CPRA is broad and there are likely many other relevant records that could be available at the state and local level under the law to help inform your reporting. Think about ways in which immigration agents interact with state and local governments. For example, are there any contracts or MOUs at the local level related to detention centers? Have there been communications between state and local officials or governments and federal immigration authorities?

## II. Access to Immigration Courts in California

You may cover court cases involving people undergoing removal proceedings in immigration courts, which are administrative courts within the U.S. Department of Justice and are separate from other federal courts. This section provides a basic overview:

- There are 11 immigration courts in California. The Adelanto and Otay Mesa courts are located inside immigration detention centers. Remote court hearings may also be held from other detention centers. Hours, addresses and visiting information can be found by following the links.
  - [Adelanto](#)
  - [Concord](#)
  - [Imperial](#)
  - Los Angeles ([N. Los Angeles Street](#))
  - Los Angeles ([West Los Angeles](#))
  - Los Angeles ([Van Nuys](#))
  - [Otay Mesa](#)
  - [Sacramento](#)
  - [San Diego](#)
  - [San Francisco](#)
  - [Santa Ana](#)

## Observing Immigration Court Hearings

- Immigration court hearings are generally open to the public, though immigration judges have discretion to close proceedings or restrict access to certain people in some circumstances. This [Immigration Court Practice Manual](#) from the Executive Office of Immigration Review provides an overview. For more information, see Section II of the Immigration Reporting Legal Guide by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press ([English](#), [Spanish](#)).
- If space is limited in a courtroom, [federal rules](#) say priority should be given to the press.
- For courts that are inside detention centers, ICE controls access to the building and can require additional security screenings. Reporters can contact ICE's public affairs department to coordinate a visit in [advance](#).
- At times, courts may offer online access to immigration courts via videoconferencing. Links and access codes for each court can be found [here](#).
- Advocacy may be [useful](#) in pushing immigration judges to enable virtual access to hearings that are also open to those attending in person.
- Press access issues have been documented recently in California immigration courts. In Sacramento, security guards [barred access](#) to buildings where immigration courtrooms are located, preventing press coverage of otherwise public proceedings. In San Diego, a reporter was [evicted](#) from a courtroom.



## Recording and Photography in Immigration Court

- There is a general prohibition on the use of recording devices (including cameras, video and cassette recorders) inside the courtroom.
- Rules and practices related to photography and recording in other immigration court spaces, such as in hallways, are less clear. For more detailed information on some of the policies and related issues, contact FAC.

## Reporting Tips:

- If you're hoping to observe inside an immigration courtroom, keep a copy of the [public access rules](#) on your phone or print them out to share with security guards if they try and bar you from entering.
- Understand [the rules](#) (for example, hearings involving abused children) that allow immigration judges to close hearings.
- If you have problems with access or face intimidation when reporting from immigration court, you can [notify FAC](#). We are tracking these reports. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press also offers a free [Legal Hotline](#), including rapid response for reporters facing immediate arrest.

## Immigration Court Judges

- A Department of Justice list of immigration judges by court can be found [here](#).
- The Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) has issued [reports](#) detailing asylum case denial rates by individual immigration judges.

## Immigration Case Data

The Executive Office for Immigration Review releases monthly case-by-case datasets [here](#).

## Immigration Court Records

- Unlike other federal court records, immigration court records are generally **not** available online, on an immigration court website or via PACER.

- The [Automated Case Information System](#) allows the press and public to check case status online with an Alien Registration Number, known as an A-number.
- Parties to an immigration court proceeding (individuals in removal proceedings and their lawyers) can request their own court files through a [Record of Proceeding Request](#) to the court. They can also request the file in person at immigration court.
- A journalist can request an immigration court file through a [FOIA request](#) to the Executive Office of Immigration Review. According to EOIR, “if a disclosure would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, EOIR may not release the requested information without a signed form [EOIR-59](#),” which allows the individual whose case file is being requested to authorize its release.
- A daily docket of cases will be posted inside the immigration courthouses. (In detention centers, a docket might be posted on paper outside each courtroom.)
- Immigration-related cases do sometimes end up in U.S. district courts and federal appeals courts. For example, when a person files a habeas petition for wrongful detention or petition for review of a removal order is initiated. (See reporting tips below to find these cases.)
- In these cases, records may be available via the federal court records system known as PACER, but you might have to go to the federal courthouse in person to review documents on a public access computer.
- This is because civil procedure [rules](#) in federal cases related to “an order of removal, to relief from removal, or to immigration benefits or detention” limit online PACER access to the docket, orders and opinions. The full file can be viewed by visiting the courthouse in person and using the court’s public access computers, which are free for anyone to use (fees may be charged for printing).
- Journalists, members of the public, people whose cases are being heard and their attorneys can ask judges to lift these restrictions.
- News outlets have persuaded courts to lift the restriction of online access in some instances, including in one [recent case](#) in which the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press represented The Intercept in a motion opposing restrictions. In August 2025, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press [sent letters](#) to five federal district courts asking them to limit restrictions on remote public access.

## Reporting Tips:

- [Habeas Dockets](#) was created as a tool to monitor immigration-related habeas cases filed in U.S. district court. You can search by district (for example, Southern District of California or Northern District of California) or by circuit for cases in which people are challenging their detention in federal court.
- [PacerMonitor](#) is also a great tool for searching federal cases by type, including immigration-related federal court cases.

### III. Immigration Detention in California and Media Access

There are six immigration detention centers in California (and one new facility in the works).

- [Adelanto ICE Processing Center](#) (Adelanto)
- [Desert View Annex](#) (Adelanto)
- [Golden State Annex](#) (McFarland)
- [Imperial Regional Detention Facility](#) (Calexico)
- [Mesa Verde ICE Processing Center](#) (Bakersfield)
- [Otay Mesa Detention Center](#) (San Diego)
- [California City Immigration Processing Center](#) (California City, in development as of summer 2025)

### Finding and Interviewing People who Are Detained

- The press and public can use ICE's [Online Detainee Locator System](#) to find where a person is being held. You must have the person's country of birth along with either their full name or A-number. A person might not immediately show up in the locator system if they are being held in a temporary location.
- Journalists can request interviews with people who have been detained by ICE. The agency generally requires media to submit interview requests in writing to its field offices or public affairs representatives.
- Rapid response networks can be resources to help journalists identify who was detained after a raid or action by ICE and provide community contacts. The California Immigrant Policy Center has created a directory of networks [here](#).
- Detainees must grant consent to be interviewed in writing.
- Contact information for requesting interviews can be found under the Press & Media section at the individual detention center links above.

## IV. More Resources

- If you have questions about access to public records, court documents and proceedings in California, [FAC's legal hotline](#) can help. Reach out to us!
- FAC also offers a [primer on the California Public Records Act](#).
- For questions about this guide, reach out to Paloma Esquivel and Thadeus Greenson, FAC's press education specialists: [education \[at\] firstamendmentcoalition \[dot\] org](mailto:education[at]firstamendmentcoalition[dot]org).
- A thorough explainer on accessing federal immigration records through FOIA can be found here: [Immigration Reporting Legal Guide/ Guía Legal Para Reportajes de Inmigración](#) from Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press.
- [FOIA Wiki](#) by Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press offers detailed FOIA guidance for federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security.
- USCIS has an [online glossary](#) that explains how that agency defines various immigration-related terms, including alien, foreign national, green card and many others.
- The Immigration Justice Campaign has its own glossary of terms [here](#).
- The National Association of Hispanic Journalists' [Cultural Competence Handbook](#) offers a glossary of migration-related terms and guidance for covering immigration. (Some outlets are also rethinking how to protect immigrant sources See: [El Tímpano](#) and [Los Angeles Public Press](#).)
- The [Deportation Data Project](#) posts deportation data that can be localized.

## V. Immigration Reporting Examples

Below are a few examples of reporting that used state and local records to explore immigration-related stories in California.

[There's an ICE office in Redding. Here's what we know.](#)

ShastaScout requested records under the CPRA for documents, including permit applications and MOUs, to confirm the presence of a little-known ICE office in the community of Redding.

['There was a lot of fear': Central Valley immigration raids drive up absences in schools, study finds](#)

This story is based on an [academic study](#) that looked at daily attendance data for Central Valley school districts in January and February. Reporters could request attendance data from local school districts to see if a similar pattern exists in other communities.

[Hundreds of agencies tap Atherton's surveillance system for feds; town fails to follow own rules and SF, Oakland cops illegally funneled license plate data to feds](#)

Journalists examined local records on automated license plate readers to show how ICE and other federal agencies have accessed data from license plate readers despite rules and a state law that ban sharing it with federal authorities.

[Before LA immigration raids, California prisons tried to help ICE deport its top targets](#)

CalMatters obtained emails and other state records to explain how the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation cooperated with ICE to attempt to hand over two of the agency's top targets from state prison.

[Orange County Schools Prep for ICE](#)

Voice of OC asked school districts about their policies on immigration enforcement on campus and shared the policies in a story.

[2,123 lives: Inside the stats and stories of those arrested by ICE from the S.F. area](#)

Mission Local used localized data from the [Deportation Data Project](#), interviews and other records and data to map what happened to thousands of people arrested by ICE in the San Francisco area.

## Credits and Contacts

This guide was authored in August 2025 by Paloma Esquivel, press education specialist at the First Amendment Coalition, with contributions by Thadeus Greenson, FAC press education specialist; Ginny LaRoe, advocacy director for FAC; and Wendy Fry, investigative journalist for CalMatters. This guide is available in English and Spanish. Thank you to FAC Legal Fellow Elizabeth Sanchez for providing translation support.

If you have questions or would like to request a workshop for your newsroom on any of these topics, contact [education@firstamendmentcoalition.org](mailto:education@firstamendmentcoalition.org).