

NPR analysis shows skyrocketing number of 'no-shows' in immigration court

NPR | By Ximena Bustillo, Rahul Mukherjee

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A Paraguayan woman whose relative was detained by federal agents scuffles with officers in the halls of immigration court at the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in New York City in July.

An [immigration judge](#) issues a stern warning: "If you don't show up, there is a good chance the court will order you removed."

She speaks to an immigrant from El Salvador in a quiet immigration courtroom in Hyattsville, Md., in November. Clad in an all-black dress jacket and shirt, the immigrant

— who was identified only by the number of his case — swears that his last immigration notice was lost in the mail.

The judge tells him to check his mail regularly, ahead of his next appearance in January.

As the room empties out, the judge says out loud that there are a number of no-shows that day. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, attorney in court files motions to remove five people "in absentia." The judge grants it. Those people can now be deported.

A similar scene has played out, and increasingly so, in nearly every immigration court nationwide over the past year, according to immigration attorneys and NPR's early analysis of court data. The results mirror those of Joseph Gunther, an independent researcher, who has also been tracking the data closely. More immigrants are not showing up for their mandatory immigration court hearings, allowing the government to order their immediate deportation.

"What happened is that the word spread that if you go to court, you could get picked up from ICE," said Ruby Powers, an immigration lawyer based in Texas with cases all over the country.

In 2025, ICE [turned to arrests](#) directly from federal or immigration courtrooms in order to meet arrest quotas set by the Trump administration.

"Those instances weren't consistent around the country, but at least the word had spread, the fear had spread. And so individuals were really hesitant to go into court," Powers said.

The number of in absentia removals was [generally already on an upward trend](#) each year since 2022, said Andrew Arthur, resident law and policy fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, a nonprofit that advocates for lower levels of migration. Still, the number of such removal orders in fiscal year 2025 [nearly tripled that](#) of the previous year — topping over 50,000.

NPR calculated just how many people were ordered removed "in absentia."

Each of the top 10 cities with the largest number of completed immigration cases in

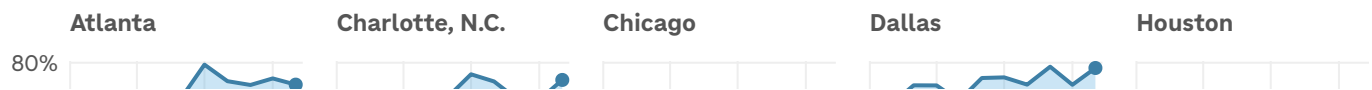


they started. That is according to data from the Executive Office for Immigration Review — part of the Department of Justice — from January through November.

Each of these courts experienced an uptick in this kind of removal order starting in the summer months. That timeline is consistent with when immigration attorneys say ICE officers began arresting people inside the courts.

In absentia removal rates rose for the cities with the most completed immigration cases

Rate of in absentia removals since January 2025 for the 10 largest cities based on total completed cases



NPR has spoken with the [family members of immigrants](#) who came to court in New York, for example, in place of their parents or partners — out of concern their loved ones might be detained. New York's courts have become [notorious this year](#) for scenes of violent arrests and [confrontations with federal](#) officers.

Powers said that there are other reasons people may fear coming to court, including that they may not win their case or get deported to a [third country](#). There are logistical barriers, too.

"A lot of times people don't even know that they have a hearing, or hearing dates can change without receiving the notice in the mail," Powers said. Sometimes immigrants can move and addresses are not immediately updated with the court, or go to places like apartment buildings that have less consistent mail delivery, she said. Notices can also be sent to [completely incorrect addresses](#), which lawyers said has been an issue in years past.

Immigration attorneys across the country have noticed an uptick in this kind of removal order. Organizations like the [Center for Immigration Studies](#) have also spotted it.

In absentia removal rates have risen in most courts across the U.S. since January

Change in rates of in absentia removals by immigration courts from January to November 2025



In many cases, the Department of Homeland Security has to receive a removal order issued by an immigration judge before it can physically deport any person from the U.S., Arthur said.

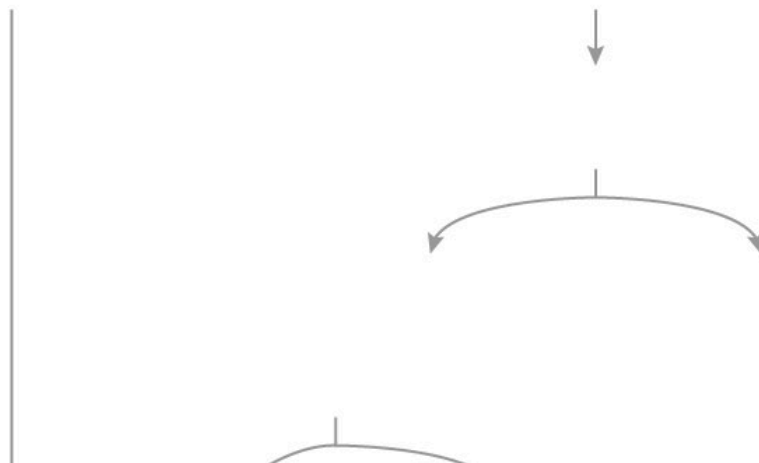
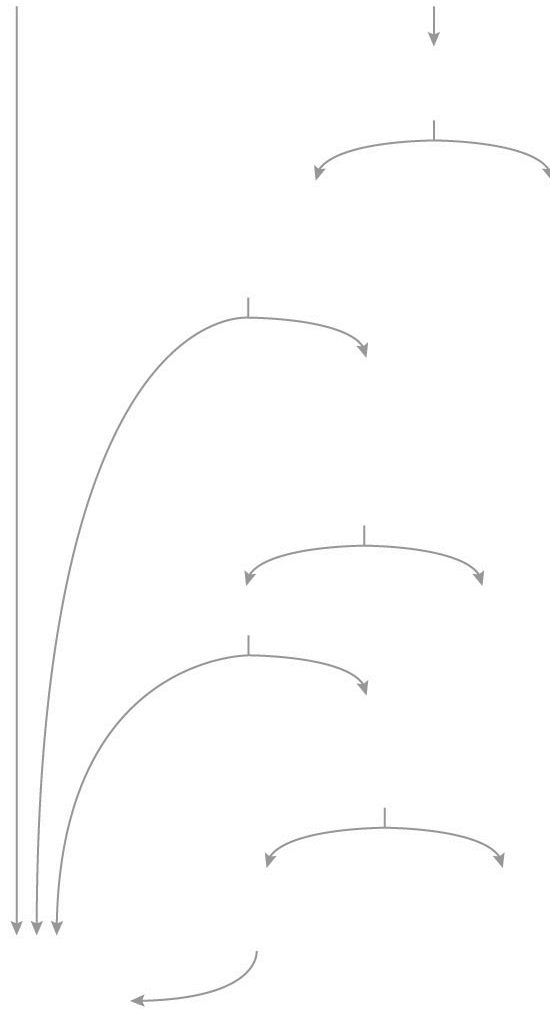
"The more orders of removal in absentia or at the end of proceedings that are issued, the more people that ICE can then target for removal from the United States," he said.

Arthur said that immigrants who fail to appear opt to not take the government up on the offer for due process.

"The more people who are under final orders for removal ... the more people who are going to end up in ICE custody because the law requires that ICE take into custody everybody who's under a final order of removal, notwithstanding the administration's stated focus on the worst," Arthur said.



In Absentia process



Immigrants may have the opportunity to reopen their cases. However, most people in immigration court do not have legal representation, which they must pay for themselves.

Nonprofits like the organization Mobile Pathways [have tracked a low rate of arrests in courts](#). But immigrant advocates said that doesn't mean the fear and negative perceptions go away.

"It probably falls into the narrative that the administration wants to be portrayed, that these individuals are not participating in the process that they're supposed to," Powers said, about the rise in no-show removal orders.

Some families she represents have fled violence, are working through trauma, or are navigating language and other barriers in addition to the immigration law system.

"[They] are just making the best decisions they can with the information they have provided to them," Powers said, adding that most immigrants are still showing up for their court appointments. "It's just because a lot of things are being stacked up against them. And that's why we're seeing these numbers."

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Corrected: January 2, 2026 at 3:29 PM EST

An earlier photo caption misspelled the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building as the Jacob K. Javitz Federal Building.

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Government & Politics

Fort Myers Beach Pier, Blind Pass dredging and pickleball courts on Pine Island get some action by Lee Commissioners

WGPU Staff

The Fort Myers Beach Pier, dredging of an almost filled in Blind Pass and pickleball courts on Pine Island were among issues the Lee County Board of County Commissioners tackled on Tuesday.



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