



When Law Enforcement Looks Like Occupation: How Federal Immigration Surge in Operation Midway Blitz Impacts Chicago

Testimony before the Illinois Accountability commission on January 30, 2026

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO

Political violence

30 years studying political violence

20 years focused on terrorism and propaganda

Studied major democratic “occupation-like” deployments

- Internal (Northern Ireland)
- Foreign (Iraq, Afghanistan)

Focus: how communities interpret coercive power

Core Insight:

Legitimacy is not a moral add-on — it is a strategic asset



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THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO

Data Driven Research that Gets Out In Front of Problems

Advisor to....

U.S. military on defeating adversaries without fueling escalation

FBI to improve disruption and sting operations



WHY CHICAGO, WHY NOW



- Chicago is not just another city experiencing immigration enforcement.
- Under Operation Midway Blitz, it has become a testing ground for a new model of federal power—one that blurs the line between law enforcement and political control.
- Minneapolis shows where this dynamic can lead when legitimacy collapses.
- Chicago is where we can still decide whether it does



Photo: Joshua Lott/The Washington Post via Getty Images

THIS TESTIMONY IS...



1. Not anti-immigration enforcement
2. Not anti-border control
3. Not minimizing the impacts or extent of crime
4. Not predicting a mass uprising

WHAT THIS TESTIMONY IS ARGUING:

THE CONDITIONS THAT
HISTORICALLY PRECEDE TRAGEDY
ARE NOW PRESENT –
EVEN IF NO ONE INTENDS TRAGEDY TO OCCUR

“OCCUPATION” IS A REASONABLE INTERPRETATION OF EVENTS



- This talk does not argue that Operation Midway Blitz is illegal *per se*
- It argues that its scale, tactics, and political context are transforming how enforcement is interpreted – and that these interpretations are reasonable, not hysterical
- Occupation is not defined by Uniforms
 - it is defined by perceived intent
- Communities decide whether force “enforces” law – or “imposes control”
- We care about how communities perceive action, because it is the communities that react



WHAT IS OPERATION MIDWAY BLITZ

WHAT IS “OPERATION MIDWAY BLITZ”



Sept 8 – Nov 15: 10x increase in enforcement

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Before	Midway Blitz
65 agents	300 agents



Customs and Border Patrol

Before	Midway Blitz
0 agents	300 agents

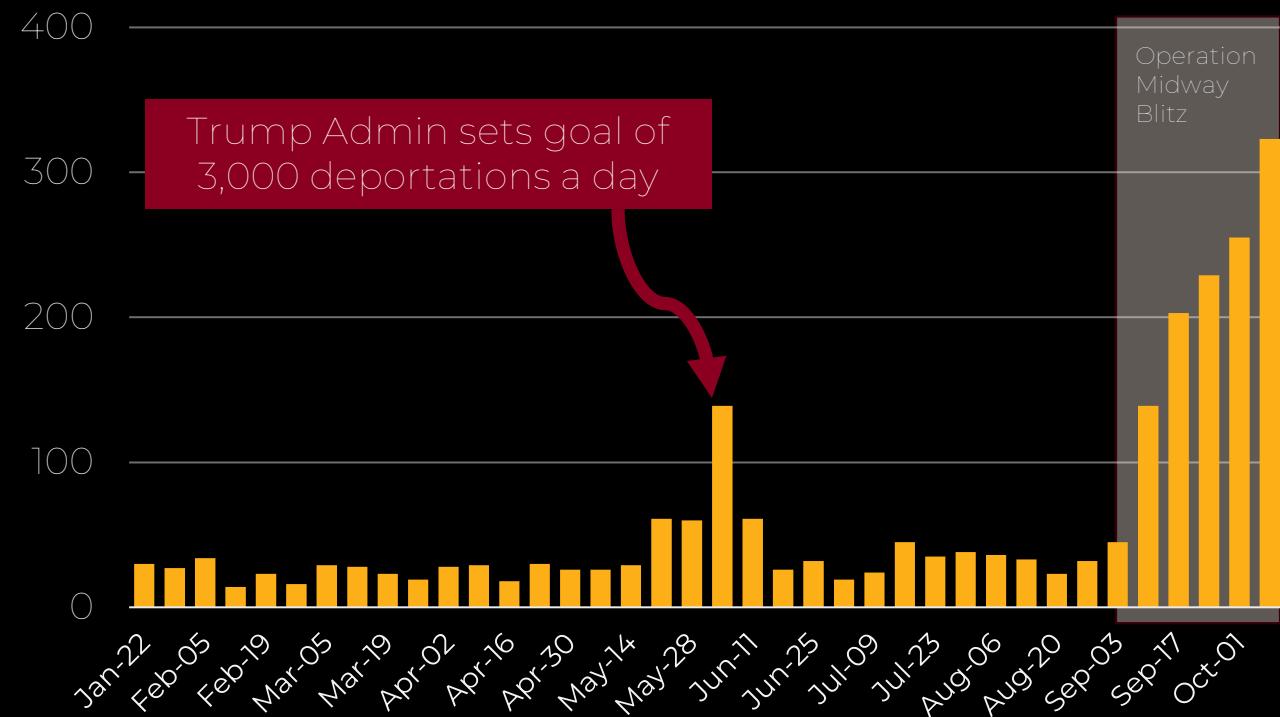


ARREST PROFILE HAS SHIFTED

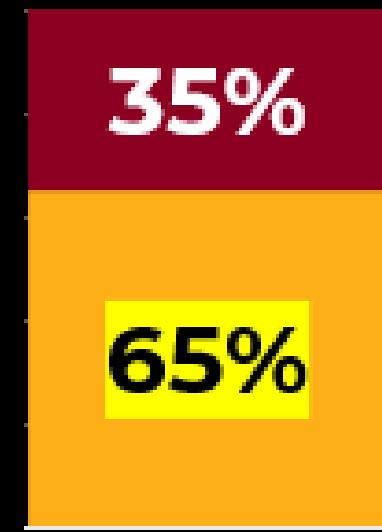
OMB Well Beyond “Worst of the Worst”



Total Weekly ICE Arrests (Illinois + Indiana)
Immigrants with No Prior Criminal Conviction



Arrests in Midway Blitz



Illinois

- Criminal (Conviction/Pending)
- Non-criminal

Source: Deportation Data Project, Data Through October 15, 2025

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF IMPACT:

1. Scale and Saturation
2. Militarized Optics
3. Loss of Local Control
4. Everyday Life Disruption

DIMENSION 1: SCALE AND SATURATION

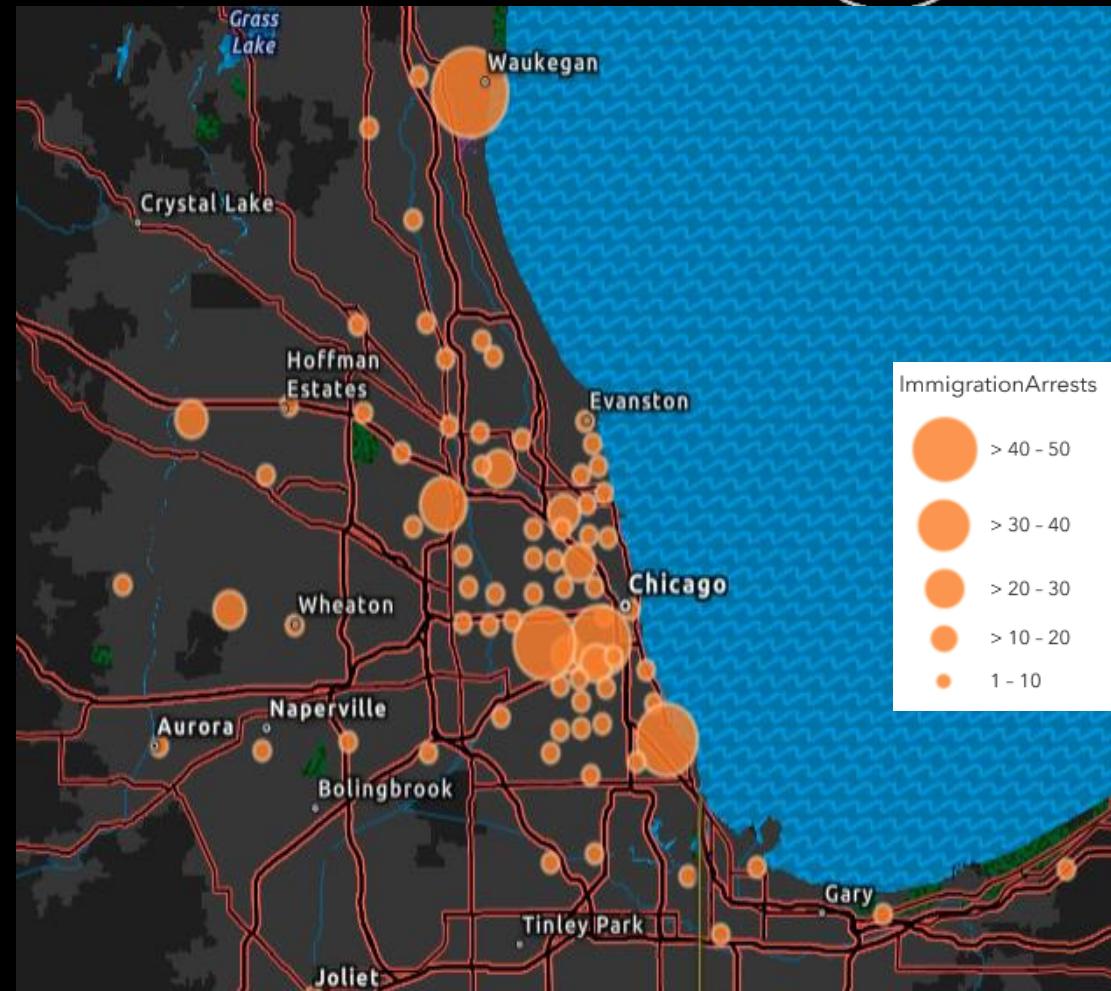


284 +

OMB Enforcement Events
in Chicago,
Sept 8 to Nov 15
(reported in media)

- *Sustained, multi-agency federal deployment*
- *Across neighborhoods, not confined facilities.*
- *Federal presence rivals local law enforcement visibility.*

Data: CPOST Dataset of Enforcement and Protest Events
During Operation Midway Blitz



When enforcement becomes *the atmosphere*, it feels like control of civic space.

DIMENSION 2: MILITARIZED OPTICS AND TACTICS



Tactical Gear and Crowd Control Tools



Armored Vehicles



- Tactical gear
- Armored vehicles
- Surprise residential raids
- Tear gas

WHY OPTICS MATTER



In political violence research,
citizens infer intent from
appearance, not internal
policy memos



Chicago's South Side, October 14, 2025
REUTERS/Jim Vondruska

DIMENSION 3: LOSS OF LOCAL CONTROL

- City and state leaders publicly oppose OMB tactics
- Federal enforcement without local consent or accountability
- Courts intervene—only after harm occurs.

“Occupation” is felt most acutely when force operates
above elected local institutions

DIMENSION 4: EVERYDAY LIFE DISRUPTION



- Observed Effects in Latino areas
 - School attendance: Down 12-14%
 - Business Revenues: Down > 20%
 - Clinics, churches, and workplaces become sites of fear

CRAIN'S CHICAGO BUSINESS

Immigration crackdown deals a blow to Chicago's Latino business corridors

By Marlen Garcia

September 04, 2025 08:46 AM

In interviews, small-business owners and leaders who serve Latino communities in the Chicago area have blamed immigration arrests and deportations as the main factor behind year-over-year revenue drops ranging from 20% to 50%.

When enforcement reshapes daily routines, it ceases to feel targeted and starts to feel collective in nature

ENFORCEMENT EVENT → SPONTANEOUS PROTEST



A Predictable Three Step Dynamic



Enforcement and Protest become Mutually Reinforcing

STEPS 1 & 2: ENFORCEMENT → PROTEST



Surprise Raids Provoke Spontaneous Community Protests



Federal agents stand guard as community members gather near a car crash site in Chicago on Tuesday, October 14. (Jim Vondruska/Reuters)

STEP 3: SUPPRESSION AND SPILLOVER HARM



Harm - and Fear
Spread Beyond Intended Targets



Federal officers detain a person while members of the community and activists protest near the 3900 block of South Kedzie Avenue, Oct. 4, in Chicago.
Armando L. Sanchez/Tribune News Service

FREQUENCY MATTERS



- 48 Spontaneous protests at surprise raids in communities
- 17 Chemical agent deployments at these spontaneous protests
- These are patterns, not isolated incidents



These dynamics are not driven by criminal intent – they are driven by perceived illegitimacy

NOT INHERENTLY TROUBLESOME

October 18 “No Kings” Protest



- 250k protesters marched against ICE/CBP and Trump policy
- No evidence of violence (arrests, tear gas by authorities)



NARRATIVE FRAMING ENCOURAGES “OCCUPATION” INTERPRETATION

ELITE RHETORIC RAISES THE STAKES



President Trump to Generals

Sept 30

“The Democrats run most of the cities that are in bad shape....”

“We should use some of these dangerous cities as training grounds for our military... we're going into Chicago very soon.”

“I say, they spit, we hit.”

DHS Secretary Noem

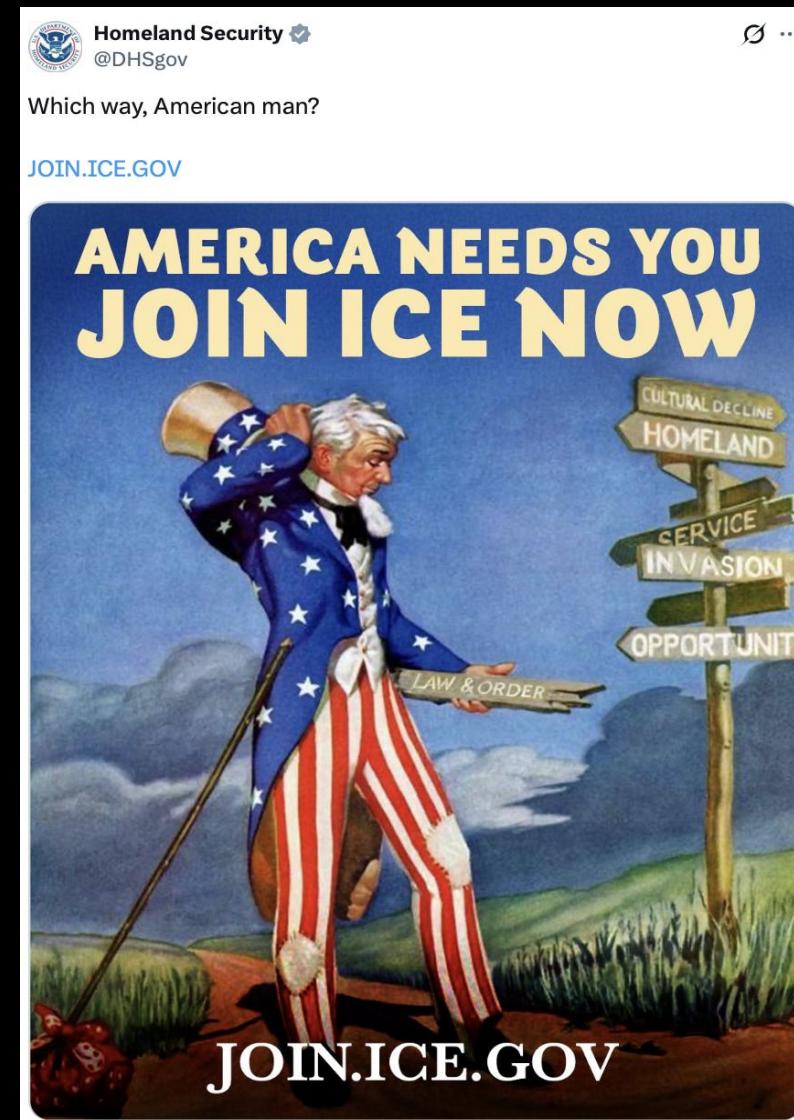
June 12

“We are not going away. We are staying here to liberate this city from the socialist and burdensome leadership that this Governor Newsom and this mayor placed on this country”

NARRATIVE ESCALATION: MORALIZED ENFORCEMENT

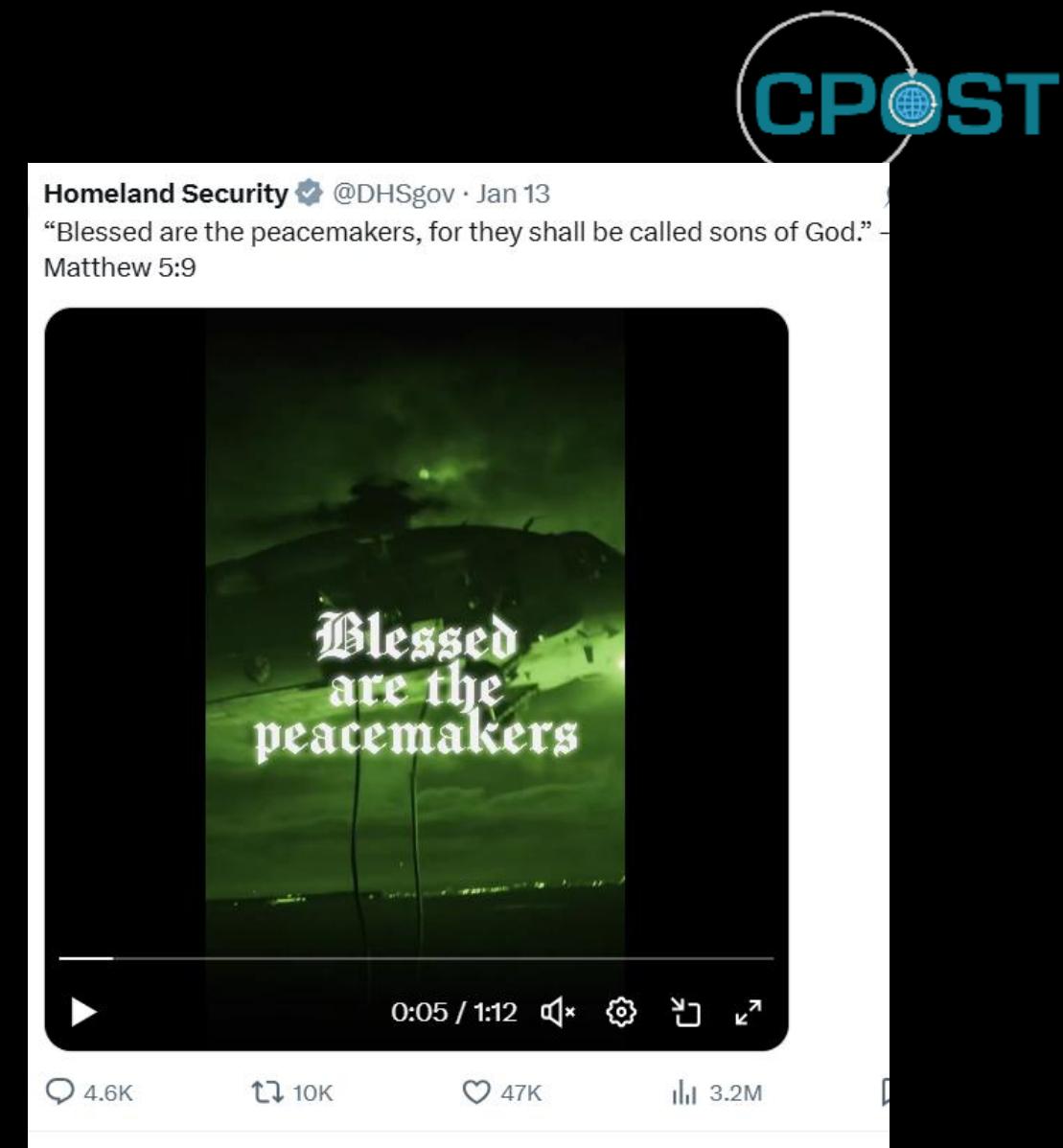


- DHS/ ICE increasingly frame enforcement as:
 - Moral struggle, not administrative law
 - Heroism versus “enemies”
 - Linked to national identity conflicts, not legal violations



WHY NARRATIVE MATTERS

- In polarized environments, moralized narratives amplify perceptions that force is being used to impose political control rather than enforce neutral rules.
- Research on political violence shows that when state force is framed as existential struggle, civilian resistance becomes more likely—even among people who reject violence in principle.



Moralization activates supporters – and erodes restraint

REALITY GAPS DIMINISH CREDIBILITY



DHS Claims

- Bovino: “an individual approached U.S. Border Patrol with a 9mm semiautomatic handgun”
- Noem: “an individual arrived at the scene to inflict maximum damage on individuals and to kill law enforcement.”

Video Evidence

- But footage shows Petti approached with a cellphone [1]
- Petti never reached for his weapon even when pepper sprayed [2]
- Petti was disarmed before he was shot [3]

1



2



3



LIKE PRETTI AND GOOD, MARTINEZ WAS SHOT, WRONGLY ACCUSED OF THREATENING CBP



DHS Claims

- “Border Patrol ... were ambushed by domestic terrorists that rammed federal agents with their vehicles.”
- “Marimar Martinez, was armed with a semi-automatic weapon”
- “She took defensive fire from CBP agents.”

Martinez was charged with forcibly assaulting a federal officer under 18 USC 111

Evidence Presented

- Bodycam footage shows that she did not ram the federal agents before she was shot — in fact, their vehicle had struck hers
- Martinez had a concealed carry license and her weapon was stored in her purse at the time
- Bodycam footage showed one of the border patrol agents saying “Do something, bitch”

Judicial Result

- Following an evidentiary hearing, prosecutors moved to dismiss the indictment

This is one of 11 cases against protestors in Chicago that have been dropped. 0 protestors have been convicted, and 1 has been acquitted.

NOT THE “WORST OF THE WORST”



SECRETARY KRISTI NOEM

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
HOMELAND SECURITY

Homeland Security



**ARRESTED:
WORST OF THE
WORST**

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is highlighting the worst of worst criminal aliens arrested by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Under Secretary Noem's leadership, the hardworking men and women of DHS and ICE are fulfilling President Trump's promise and carrying out mass deportations - starting with the worst of the worst - including the illegal aliens you see here.

DHS Claims

- DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin: “This operation will target the worst of the worst criminal illegal aliens in Chicago.”

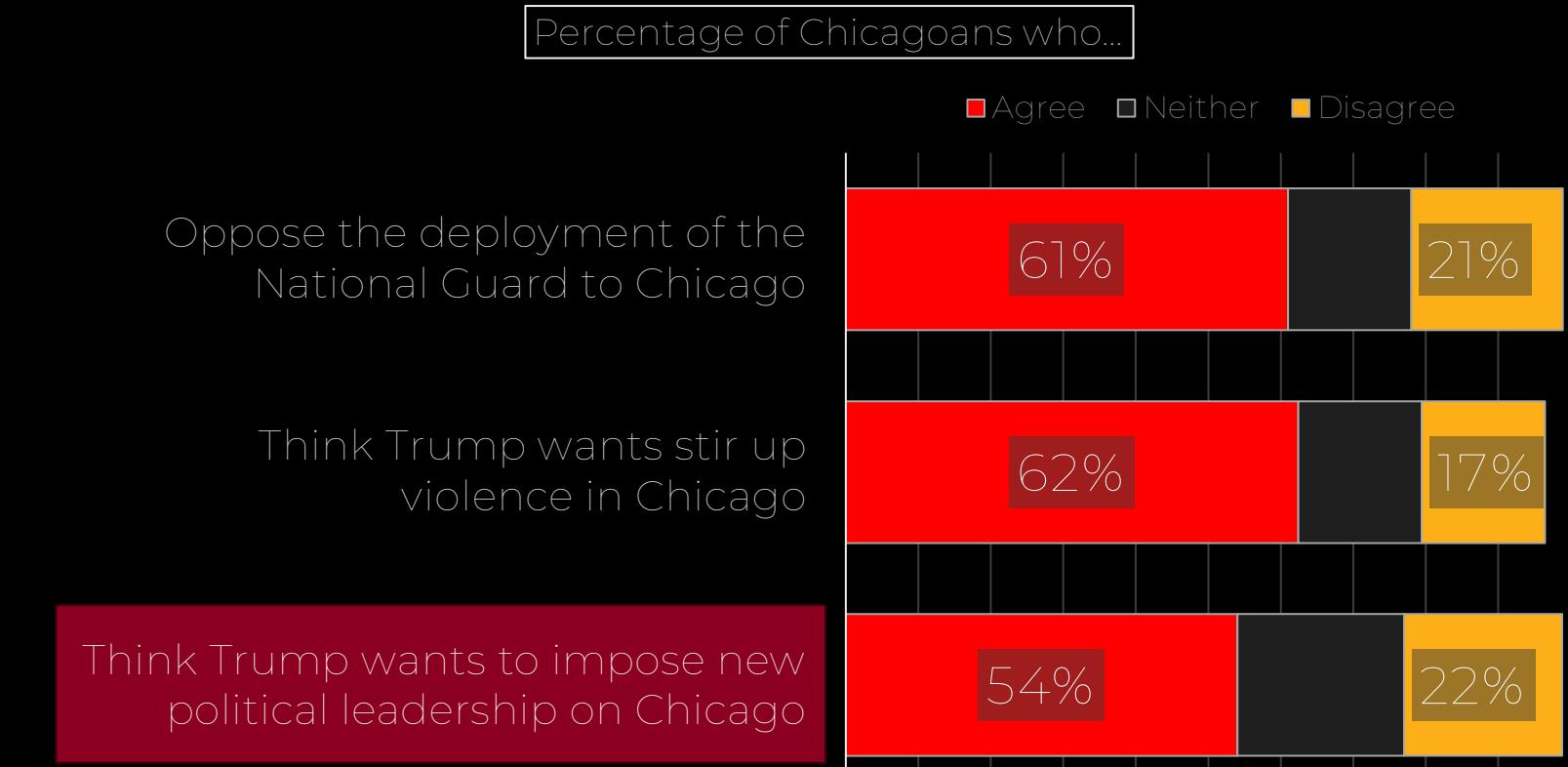
Evidence from ICE Data

- But ICE’s own data, shows that 97% of people detained during Midway Blitz did not have a violent criminal conviction, and 65% have no prior or pending criminal conviction of any kind

Source: <https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/immigration-arrests-operation-midway-blitz-few-criminal-records/>

UNSURPRISING CULMINATION: PERCEIVED POLITICAL CONTROL

- Majorities:
 - Do Not Want Federal Agents Present
 - See Federal Intent as Political Control
- In escalation dynamics, perception is not noise – it is the reality through which legitimacy either stabilizes or collapses.
- Resistance is response to perceived illegitimacy – when people think action is not fair and right



Note: Probability sample of 1,362 Chicago adults from NORC's ChicagoSpeaks panel matching Chicagoans on political, demographic, and geographic dimensions. Data collected Sept 16-29, 2025 (Operation Midway Blitz began Sept. 8). Margin of error: ±3.73%.

CHICAGO OPPOSES FEDERAL AGENTS CITYWIDE

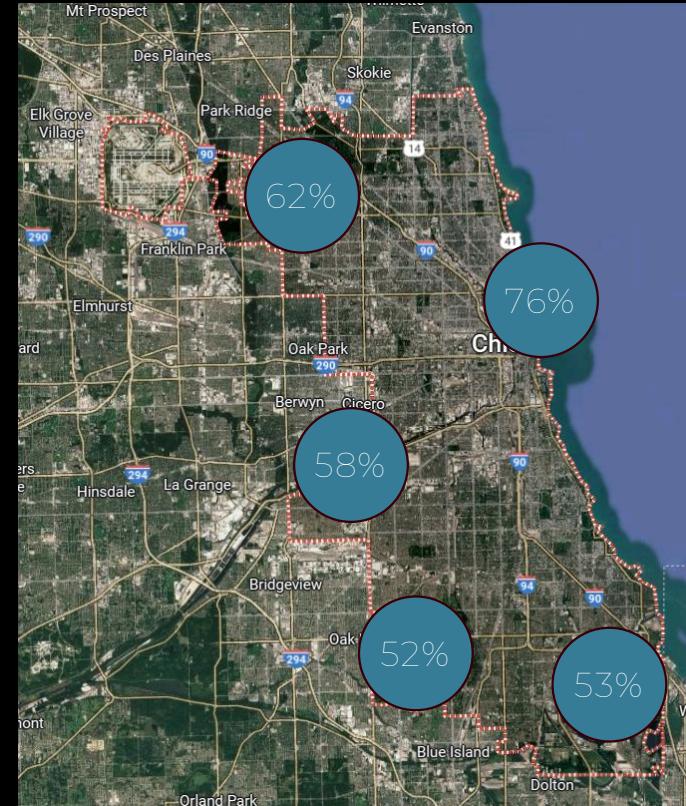


"I oppose the deployment of the National Guard by the President to Chicago."

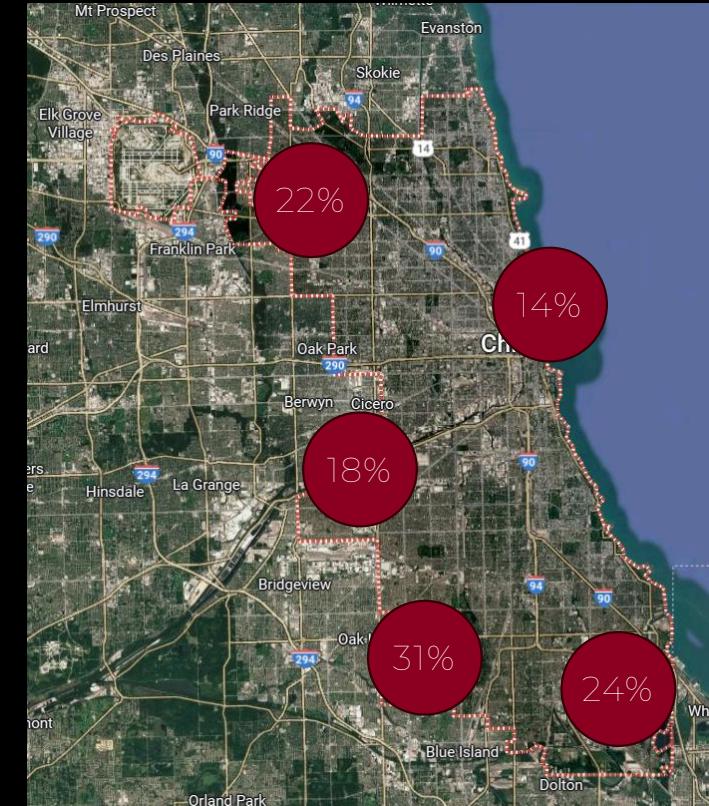
- No district* in Chicago has more than 31% support for President Trump deploying the National Guard to Chicago
- Every district has majority opposition to the National Guard being deployed by President Trump to Chicago

*Districts are North-Central, Northwest, West, Southwest, and South, as defined by NORC

OPPOSE NATIONAL GUARD DEPLOYMENT



SUPPORT NATIONAL GUARD DEPLOYMENT



Source: Probability sample of 1,362 Chicago adults from NORC's ChicagoSpeaks panel matching Chicagoans on political, demographic, and geographic dimensions. Data collected Sept 16-29, 2025 (Operation Midway Blitz began Sept. 8). Margin of error: $\pm 3.73\%$.

RISING FEAR AND ANGER

This not radicalization. It is legitimacy response

A LEGITIMACY CRISIS – NOT A PARTISAN ONE



When Authority Loses Legitimacy, Escalation Follows

- Presidential authority depends not only on legal power, but on perceived legitimacy across political lines.
- When federal force is exercised without credible oversight, transparency, or restraint, legitimacy erodes — not just among political opponents, but among a broad swath of Americans.
- This is not a Democratic concern or a Republican concern.
- It is a national concern.

When legitimacy weakens, enforcement generates resistance --
not compliance

PROTEST IS DEMOCRACY -- BUT DISCIPLINE IS THE VARIABLE



The Path Forward is Conditional

- Mass protest is not democratic breakdown – it is democracy in action
- But history shows protest only expands coalitions when it remains overwhelmingly peaceful
- Once violence enters:
 - Legitimacy collapses
 - Coalitions fracture
 - Executive power hardens rather than constrains

Peaceful protest builds democratic power. Violence dissolves it.

THE HISTORICAL WARNING – AND THE CHOICE AHEAD

A Fork in the Road



- The 1960s offer a warning
- Vietnam and the draft mobilized Americans
 - across race, class, and party lines
- Political violence prevented civil rights and antiwar movements from converging
- The result
 - Political fragmentation
 - Executive escalation
 - A law-and-order backlash
- That risk exists again

Restraint, transparency, and accountability are not concessions. They are the only path to democratic stability.

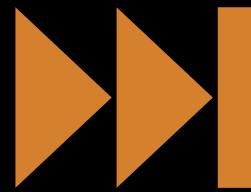
MINNEAPOLIS: WHEN LEGITIMACY COLLAPSES



- Broader Than George Floyd:
 - First Amendment protest rights
 - Boundaries on federal power and cities
- These dynamics resonate across parties, ideologies, and identities
- Minneapolis shows what happens after legitimacy collapses – not where Chicago must go



WHY LAWFUL AUTHORITY IS NOT ENOUGH



Authority and Legitimacy

Authority: Who can act

Legitimacy: Why people comply

Resistance: Response to perceived illegitimacy of force

OMB Reality

- Lawful Authority may exist

- Legitimacy is eroding

- Federal escalation will not restore it

Further escalation by the federal government will only further degrade the perception of legitimacy in cities like Minneapolis and Chicago

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Federal Enforcement is blurring into occupation dynamics



For Chicago and Illinois

Promote peaceful exercise of rights

Exercise institutional restraint

Civic legitimacy preservation

Consider cooperation on immigration detainees

For the Trump Administration

pause militarized operations in residential zones

Adopt time limits and exit criteria

Narrow geographic scope

Independent civilian oversight

These are not concessions. They are legitimacy preserving measures.

PRESERVING LEGITIMACY IS THE ONLY EXIT RAMP



- Restraint → keeps protest peaceful
- Oversight → restores credibility
- Clear limits → signal non-occupation intent

Peaceful protest is democracy in action – but only succeeds when leaders actively encourage restraint along side accountability

What Happens in Chicago Will Not Stay in Chicago

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