



IMMIGRANT RIGHTS CLINIC

For Immediate Release

Monday, August 3, 2026

Contact: Ajay Singh, as11021@nyu.edu

*****PRESS RELEASE*****

NEW REPORT EXPOSES HARMS OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S IMMIGRATION FINES PROGRAM

NEW YORK CITY, NY — The NYU Immigrant Rights Clinic (“IRC”)* today released [*Debt and the Deportation Agenda: Immigration Fines under the Second Trump Administration*](#). The report exposes the harms of the second Trump Administration’s civil fines program, which has imposed more than \$84 billion in massive, unpayable debts on more than 103,000 noncitizens. Based on the first survey of fine recipients and their legal representatives, the report finds that ICE and CBP have targeted individuals who have deep ties to the United States, including those who have status or are actively pursuing lawful pathways to remain in the United States.

Despite the immense scale of the administration’s fines program, the stories of the people receiving these penalties have largely gone untold. Fine recipients fear retaliation by the administration for speaking out against the administration's practices. For the first time, the report passes the microphone to the real people whose lives have been upended by sudden, crushing debt, allowing immigrants and their advocates to speak in their own words about the nature of these fines and the reality of the daily lives of those receiving these fines.

“The scale of the second Trump administration’s immigration fines program feels unimaginable. But behind every one of these fines is a person or family thrown into crisis,” said **Ajay Singh**, one of the authors of the report at **NYU Immigrant Rights Clinic**. “We hope our report can bring the lives and struggles of fine recipients and their advocates back to the center of the conversation to bear on not only the terror of these fines and their consequences, but also the false and destructive narratives used to justify such cruelty.”

Key findings from the surveys include:

- The government is alleging that fine recipients “willfully” or “voluntarily” failed to depart from the United States following a removal or voluntary departure order—a penalty that requires the government to establish that a person had a bad purpose or no justification for remaining in the U.S. According to the survey, however, many of these fines are being imposed on individuals who have status or are actively pursuing lawful pathways to stay



IMMIGRANT RIGHTS CLINIC

in the United States. Surveyed attorneys who have clients with removal orders report that 71% of these clients either currently hold or are actively pursuing lawful immigration status or protection from deportation; for those with voluntary departure orders, that figure rises to 82%. Many fine recipients have lived in the U.S. for a decade or more since receiving their order, and immigration law permits such individuals to seek waivers and other forms of protection to remain in the United States.

- The fines primarily target working people who could never afford to pay the fine. Every attorney responding on behalf of their client reported that their client could never fully pay the fine assessed against them. More than half of surveyed households who reported their income fall below the federal poverty line, even though the vast majority of recipients are employed and pay taxes.
- The fines have upended the lives of those receiving them. Fine recipients and their families report significant psychological and emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and fear of family separation. Several attorneys surveyed reported that they have at least one client who is considering abandoning a legitimate application for immigration relief after receiving a fine.

As one person who received a fine explained in the survey, “In my opinion, it's something very wrong that they're doing. Because it's such a big quantity of money, and a person like me would never be able to pay it. So it seems like they issued a fine so large I wouldn't be able to pay it, so that I would run into additional problems as a result. And in fact that is exactly what happened.”

The report also details the history and the legal framework of immigration fines and the broader implications of the current fine program:

- Immigration fines are being imposed at an unprecedented scale. No president other than Trump has sought to impose civil penalties under these provisions. The first Trump Administration was the first to ever impose the fines, and had 26 active cases by its end. The current program has grown far beyond that scale, now reaching over 100,000 fines issued in just over a year.
- Through an interim final rule, the government has largely eliminated due process for those receiving and challenging their fines. Moreover, IRC's review of government forms found that legally required determinations of “willful” or “voluntary” failure to depart are made through generic checkboxes and without any individualized review of the specific circumstances of the person receiving the fines, despite Supreme Court precedent requiring proof of a “bad purpose” or lack of a justifiable excuse for willful or voluntary failure.
- The fines program reveals a new and aggressive expansion of the federal government's immigration enforcement power. ICE and CBP have begun using every weapon in their



IMMIGRANT RIGHTS CLINIC

arsenal to impose and collect these fines, working with other agencies and private actors. Recipients face wage garnishment, property liens, referrals to private debt collectors, seizure of tax refunds through the Treasury Offset Program, and lawsuits filed by the Department of Justice.

The report comes as advocates have mounted a legal challenge to the civil fines policy, [*Maria L. v. Mullin*](#) in the District of Massachusetts.

“We have known from the beginning that the government’s assessment of these fines was unlawful,” said **Charles Moore, Senior Attorney with Public Justice**, one of the organizations representing the plaintiffs in the *Maria L.* case. “This report highlights just how harmful that lawlessness has been. Not only are those targeted by the government often complying with the law and pursuing lawful status, the government is inflicting extreme harm.”

"The Trump Administration is weaponizing the civil fines program, forgoing even the semblance of due process in order to inflict maximum pain," said **Hasan Shafiqullah, Immigration Supervising Attorney at The Legal Aid Society**. "The report shines a light on the human suffering caused by the Administration's deliberate lawlessness."

“ICE has weaponized the legal system again to terrorize hardworking immigrants, this time with huge fines designed to push people out of the country,” said **David Bennion, Executive Director of the Free Migration Project**. “The civil fines program is another scheme of this corrupt administration to take billions of dollars from working people to give to ICE.”

“The Trump administration is manufacturing financial ruin to force people to give up on their American dream. This is not about ‘law and order’—it's about using predatory fines to target our immigrant neighbors systematically and fuel the administration’s mass deportation agenda,” said **Javier Hidalgo, Public Affairs Director at RAICES**. “We must recognize this for what it is: a threat to us all. Our own rights are inextricably linked to the rights of those seeking to build a future in the country we all call home.”

For more information and resources on immigration fines, please visit noimmigrationfines.org.

* IRC is a program of Washington Square Legal Services, Inc., at NYU School of Law. NYU is listed for identification purposes only, and the report does not necessarily represent the views of the university.