

Future, Interrupted: Examining the Impact of a Large Worksite Enforcement Operation on Students' Educational and Workforce Pathways



J. JACOB KIRKSEY AND CAROLYN SATTIN-BAJAJ

This study investigates the impact of the 2018 immigration raid at Load Trail LLC, a trailer manufacturing company in Sumner, Texas. It analyzes the raid's severe and enduring effects on the postsecondary pathways of students in the surrounding areas. Situated within the broader discourse on legal vulnerability, this research highlights how exposure to immigration enforcement operations and pervasive anti-immigrant sentiments contributes to diminished educational opportunities. Using robust longitudinal data from Texas, the findings indicate pronounced declines in four-year college enrollment and shifts toward employment during high school, particularly among Latinx and English-learner students. These results delineate the extensive collateral consequences of immigration enforcement on community members not directly targeted by the raid. By documenting the raid's deleterious effects on both immediate educational engagement and longer-term career prospects, this article calls for targeted policy measures designed to buffer the negative impacts and support the resilience and upward mobility of affected student populations.

Keywords: immigration enforcement, postsecondary pathways, Latinx students, English learners, Texas, longitudinal data

There is abundant evidence about the large- and long-lasting detrimental effects for children and young adults associated with living in a state of legal vulnerability—whether it be due to their own undocumented status or that of their family members (Amuedo-Dorantes and Lopez 2015, 2017; Brabeck and Xu 2010; Velarde

Pierce et al. 2021). Increasingly, scholars, educators, and policymakers have been interested in the relationship between legal vulnerability and students' academic performance, postsecondary aspirations, enrollment, and persistence, given the strong link between postsecondary credentials and a host of life-course

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outcomes (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2023; Amuedo-Dorantes and Lopez 2017; Bellows 2019; Bjorklund 2018; Enriquez 2017; Enriquez et al. 2021; García et al. 2022; Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2021, 2023; Kreisberg and Hsin 2021; Patler 2018; Terriquez 2014; Carnevale et al. 2021; Daugherty 2022; Zajacova and Lawrence 2021). This research has largely sought to measure the impacts of undocumented status overall on post-secondary pathways, participation, and outcomes, with specific attention paid to the impact of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) eligibility on educational decisions. There is much less emphasis on examining the consequences of exposure to immigration enforcement for school-age children, specifically how enforcement activities resulting in individual or mass deportations impact school and other outcomes (Hamilton, Patler, and Langer 2021; Hamilton, Patler, and Savinar 2021; Hsin and Ortega 2018; Kuka et al. 2020).

Interior enforcement and the fear of deportation are salient parts of millions of undocumented immigrants' and their families' lives, only exacerbated by the current administration's aggressive and indiscriminate approach to dealing with all aspects of immigration policy and enforcement (Chishti and Bush-Joseph 2025). Understanding how legal vulnerability in general and the effects of enforcement episodes in particular influence students in the short and long term is thus an issue of ongoing importance (Dreby and Macias 2023). Furthermore, with the latest federal court ruling deeming the DACA program unlawful, no first-time DACA applications are being accepted, and only individuals who were DACA recipients as of July 16, 2021, or whose DACA has lapsed for less than a year can continue to apply for DACA renewals (National Immigration Law Center 2023). Consequently, the college-going calculus for undocumented students has changed. Knowing how students' postsecondary opportunities and pathways may be affected by immigration enforcement therefore represents a critical focal point in a larger research agenda dedicated to studying the consequences of the powerful deportation system shaping the lives of millions of people—US citizens and noncitizen immigrants alike. These indicators pro-

vide a clear, observable set of outcomes that can shed light on the sequelae stemming from immigration enforcement actions and the deportation that frequently ensues (Patler and Jones 2025, this issue).

Large-scale workforce employment operations (LWEO) are one example of a discrete enforcement episode whose effects can be measured empirically. Knowledge of the aftermath of raids and deportation events is critical so that public officials, social institutions, service providers, and society at large can be prepared to respond with appropriate and adequate resources and supports to minimize the damage that these destructive acts of community violence cause for individuals, families, and entire communities (Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2018, 2021). This includes financial and housing instability, health and social-emotional distress, and immediate- and longer-term educational, professional, and economic consequences (Capps et al. 2007; Chaudry et al. 2010; Collins et al. 2022; Heinrich et al. 2023; Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2023; Kirksey et al. 2020; Lopez et al. 2017, 2022).

Despite increased attention to the experiences of undocumented immigrants and their children in recent years, important questions remain about the direct relationship between enforcement activities and students' postsecondary pathways. We focus on educational outcomes because they represent a critical factor influencing individuals' long-term financial, social, and physical well-being (Carnevale et al. 2021; Daugherty 2022; Zajacova and Lawrence 2021; see also Bennett et al. 2025, this issue). Moreover, tracking students' educational pathways in the aftermath of a large-scale raid allows us to capture the spillover effects of such events for people within the community who may themselves not be at risk of deportation; as such, the broad reach of the federal deportation machine can be more fully estimated.

In this article, we leverage data from Texas to examine the impacts of one LWEO, the 2018 immigration raid at Load Trail LLC, on students' educational and career trajectories in nearby school districts. Workplace raids warrant careful scrutiny given their power to influence a large number of individuals' lives while simultaneously transforming entire communi-

ties with a single act. These are shocking events that people may experience as violent traumas that can produce both immediate- and long-term harm for the direct targets, their family members, and the broader areas where they live (Capps et al. 2007; Chaudry et al. 2010; Collins et al. 2022; Heinrich et al. 2023; Lopez 2019; Lopez et al. 2017, 2022; Novak et al. 2017). Empirically, the sudden nature of these events results in an exogenous source of variation to identify causal effects of a specific immigration enforcement action on students' educational trajectories. In this article we answer the following research questions: What is the effect of exposure to a large worksite enforcement operation on enrollment rates at two- and four-year colleges? What are the high school outcomes—such as indicators of college readiness, working during high school, and applications for financial aid—that help explain the effects on postsecondary outcomes? We also ask whether these effects differ based on students' race-ethnicity background or English learner status?

CURRENT STUDY: LARGE-SCALE WORKPLACE ENFORCEMENT OPERATION IN SUMNER, TEXAS

On August 28, 2018, 159 people were arrested on the grounds of Load Trail LLC, a trailer manufacturing plant in the North Texas town of Sumner when over 300 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents entered the facility and held individuals suspected of living and working in the United States without legal authorization (Lundstrom 2018). This raid occurred roughly three weeks into the start of the new school year; it was the sixth and largest workplace raid conducted in the calendar year. Leveraging publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, we examine post-raid high school-to-postsecondary outcomes for students in the four surrounding counties: Fannin, Grayson, Lamar, and Hunt. By disaggregating results to separately analyze the outcomes of students who are more likely to be directly affected by immigration enforcement activity—those classified as Latinx, English learners, or both—and those of their non-Latinx, non-English learner peers, our study

continues in the tradition of work informed by Joanna Dreby's (2012) concept of a pyramid of immigration enforcement effects. This concept attempts to measure the full scope of immigration enforcement consequences for a wider population and to track the heterogeneous impacts of such events across different subgroups (Heinrich et al. 2023; Kirksey 2023; Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2021, 2023; Bellows 2019).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: HOW ENFORCEMENT EPISODES INTERACT WITH LEGAL VULNERABILITY

Our analysis of the ways that an LWEO affected students' educational engagement, decision-making, and postsecondary pathways is shaped by prior work measuring the extensive and manifold consequences associated with living in a state of legal vulnerability (Brabeck and Xu 2010; Cebulko and Silver 2016; Velarde Pierce et al. 2021). We draw on scholarship elaborating the multiple, distinct dimensions of legal vulnerability and apply this concept to understand aggregate group outcomes after an enforcement event. This is a shift from the extant literature that has focused on examining individual-level outcomes associated with diverse aspects of legal vulnerability but has not explored direct responses to specific enforcement episodes like an LWEO, specifically in terms of the implications of exposure to immigration enforcement activity for postsecondary educational enrollment and workforce participation.

We hypothesize that the interaction between legal vulnerability and an extreme enforcement episode like the Sumner LWEO operates via multiple, mutually reinforcing channels to produce significant impacts on students' postsecondary trajectories. Specifically, we attempt to isolate some of the mechanisms through which students' postsecondary pathways and decisions are affected. This involves exploring changes to college readiness, working during high school, and applications for financial aid. Significantly, the availability of such educational indicators allows us to ground the bellicose deportation system in a concrete manifestation—that is, an LWEO—and link it to tangible, measurable outcomes.

The notion of legal vulnerability has emerged as an analytic tool to better comprehend immigrants' and their family members' experiences and behaviors. In existing work, scholars have conceptualized legal vulnerability as an individual state of being, measuring its impacts at an individual level as well as identifying those dimensions of legal vulnerability that may affect an individual's life, opportunities, and outcomes. This includes examining how another person's legal vulnerability (for example, that of a parent) may affect a separate individual, such as their child (Brabeck and Xu, 2010; Velarde Pierce et al. 2021).

In the present study, we are interested in exploring how legal vulnerability may function as a collective experience manifesting through behaviors and outcomes measurable at a community level, particularly in response to an acute enforcement episode like an LWEO. In other words, we examine how living in communities and attending schools affected by an act of community violence in the form of a workplace raid can be detected in aggregate outcomes—in this case, postsecondary enrollment and workforce participation measured at the county level. (Barajas-Gonzales et al. 2018, 2021; Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2023). By considering legal vulnerability as a community-level phenomenon and one that extends to individuals who themselves may not be undocumented or at risk of deportation, we can explore its impacts overall while also being attentive to variation in the intensity of impacts by particular student characteristics such as race-ethnicity, language background, and grade level. Moreover, we focus on the interaction between students' legal vulnerability and one discrete event, an LWEO, to elucidate the forms, scale, and scope of repercussions of this dimension of the deportation machine for students and school communities.

Immigration Enforcement as Acts of Community Violence

Scholars have argued that anti-immigrant rhetoric, policies, and actions, including immigration enforcement, should be considered acts of community violence, and they have shown empirically how exposure to such forces can be detrimental to people's physical health, mental

health, development, and well-being (Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2018, 2021; Kirksey 2024; Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2023). We continue in this line of work by analyzing the consequences of a specific, identifiable act of community violence as evidenced by postsecondary educational indicators and workforce participation data measured at the county level among students most likely to be exposed to an LWEO and its aftermath.

In our conceptualization of legal vulnerability as a collective state shared among members living in the same community, vulnerability may result from multiple forces. First, there may be frequent, active, and extreme immigration enforcement activity that produces ongoing fear, stress, and instability (Watson 2014; Vargas and Pirog 2016; Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2018; Hong et al. 2025, this issue). Relatedly, undocumented people may live in or near the community, which in turn increases the risk of enforcement activity and heightens the direct harm resulting from detentions and deportations via removals, including family separations, sudden financial instability, housing insecurity, and trauma (Chaudry et al. 2010; Lopez et al. 2022). Next, community members may experience the spillover effects of fear and volatility associated with undocumented status and the threat or enactment of immigration enforcement, including what has been called multigenerational punishment (Enriquez 2015). In this study, we use student data from school districts in Fannin, Grayson, Lamar, and Hunt counties precisely because the dramatic increase in the number of deportation orders filed in immigration courts in these counties in the month after the Load Trail raid reflects a high likelihood of legal vulnerability on these three grounds. In other words, we hypothesize that students attending school in these counties would be more likely than otherwise similar students elsewhere in the state to have been exposed to immigration enforcement activity and to know someone directly or indirectly affected by the August 2018 raid.

Even without enforcement activity, living in a restrictive, anti-immigrant environment could be a final source of legal vulnerability operating at a community level and producing tangible restrictions on people. It could affect

the functioning of a community via policies, practices, or climate that limit a sense of freedom, safety, decision-making, and behaviors (Amuedo-Dorantes and Lopez 2015, 2017; Pottochnick et al. 2017; Dee and Murphy 2020). In the present study, we focus exclusively on the first form of legal vulnerability—that is, exposure to immigration enforcement events or episodes—and isolate the particular effects on students' educational choices, behaviors, and outcomes. In what follows, we review the research on how contact with immigration enforcement activity is associated with two main factors that can contribute to students' post-secondary pathways and decision-making: students' academic engagement, performance, and college enrollment, and students' economic precarity and how it influences employment and educational decisions.

Exposure to Immigration Enforcement Activity

Exposure to immigration enforcement activity—be it via an arrest, detention, or deportation of oneself, a loved one, or a member of one's local community—constitutes a form of legal vulnerability that has been shown to affect students' academic performance, engagement, and educational decisions in a number of significant ways. Absenteeism is one of the primary indicators that scholars have tracked following enforcement episodes, finding that student absenteeism rates tend to increase in schools located in areas with more frequent and proximate ICE activity, especially immediately following such events (Kirksey 2024; Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2023; Heinrich et al. 2023). Students' English language arts (ELA) and math test scores also suffer when immigration enforcement actions occur, and school enrollment patterns for Latinx students can be sensitive to immigration enforcement (Kirksey 2023; Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2023; Bellows 2019). Research has shown that student mobility increases concomitant with enforcement activity and declines in Head Start and school enrollment among Latinx students are associated with increased ICE arrests (Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2023; Bucheli et al. 2021; Hong et al. 2025, this issue; Santillano et al. 2020). Less is known, however, about how students' (and

families') behaviors and choices related to investing in higher education may be impacted by enforcement events, such as fulfilling college entrance requirements, applying for financial aid, and enrolling in four-year versus two-year colleges.

Immigration enforcement can also produce immediate, extreme, and long-term economic devastation for families. Researchers have documented the extent to which lost income due to detention and deportation of key earners produces dramatic changes in families' financial stability (Capps et al. 2007; Chaudry et al. 2010; Dreby 2012; Lopez et al. 2022). Randolph Capps and colleagues (2016) estimated that families had lost anywhere from 40 to 90 percent of their income within six months of a parent's immigration-related arrest, detention, or deportation. Another analysis using US Census Bureau data showed that household income falls up to 45 percent when a family member is deported (Preston 2020). Finally, William D. Lopez and colleagues (2022) and others found evidence of heightened food, housing, and financial insecurity in the immediate weeks and months following ICE raids, with lasting, irreversible consequences that persisted over time (Capps et al. 2007; Chaudry et al. 2010).

The mental and physical health effects associated with exposure to immigration enforcement episodes have been well documented, with large-scale events like an LWEO producing complex and sustained sequelae for individuals and broader communities. Research tracking the effects of a raid of a meat-processing plant in Postville, Iowa, in 2008 found that infants born to Latina mothers in the thirty-seven-week period after the raid had a nearly 25 percent higher risk of preterm low birth weights compared to the prior year (Novak et al. 2017). Another study showed higher self-reported stress and lower self-rated health scores for Latinx survey respondents living in a Michigan county where a warehouse raid took place (Lopez et al. 2017). Lastly, Carolyn Heinrich and colleagues (2023) found increased diagnoses of depression, substance use disorder, and higher incidence of self-harm, suicide attempts, and sexual abuse among children in Tennessee after a 2018 LWEO in Morristown.

Taken together, studies of the aftermath of immigration enforcement episodes paint a clear picture of severe and often lingering damage wrought by these incidents that strike at the heart of communities. This growing body of evidence elucidates the precise ways that enforcement penetrates school buildings and classrooms, via impacts on student attendance, health and well-being, and performance on exams. Yet, large gaps remain in empirical understandings of how exposure to immigration enforcement activities shapes students' educational trajectories—in particular, their pathways to and through college. Using robust, longitudinal data from Texas students, our analysis focuses on identifying the effects of an LWEO on key postsecondary outcomes, such as direct enrollment and degree completion, while also exploring potential mechanisms underlying these impacts. This work advances knowledge of the ways that young people experience and react to an act of community violence in the form of an LWEO via their postsecondary choices and actions. We draw attention to the enduring consequences that immigration enforcement can produce for students' educational opportunities and outcomes—consequences that may have long-range implications for personal, professional, and financial success at the individual level and for community well-being overall.

METHOD

We analyzed data obtained from the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), and the Texas Workforce Commission. THECB data are supplemented with postsecondary information from the National Student Clearinghouse to track students who attended college out of state. Our sample includes students in grades nine through twelve during the academic years spanning from 2013–2014 to 2021–2023, allowing for a comparison between five high school cohorts graduating before the LWEO and five cohorts graduating afterward. We aggregate data on students across Texas counties, constituting $N = 2,540$ county-by-year observations.

To pinpoint students potentially impacted by the LWEO, we analyze data from the Trans-

actional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University, which tracks immigration enforcement actions across the US (TRAC, n.d.). TRAC data suggests that deportations from the LWEO were concentrated in four North Texas counties: Fannin, Grayson, Lamar, and Hunt. These counties were identified based on a significant increase in deportation filings that occurred in August 2018, as highlighted in table 1. The marked increase in filings during that month was clearly distinct compared to both prior and subsequent periods, indicating a concentrated surge of immigration enforcement activity during the LWEO period. The decision to focus on this region was driven by both the magnitude of enforcement activity and the counties' geographic proximity, as they form a contiguous region where the concentrated impact of the LWEO was most likely to be felt. Our analysis focused on outcomes for all students in the affected counties as well as subsamples of Latinx students and students designated as English learners, as prior research has shown these subgroups tend to experience disproportionate impacts of immigration enforcement.

Constructing a Comparable Control Group

After identifying the sample of students from the affected counties, we sought to construct a control group that would provide a comparison to measure the potential impact of the LWEO on student outcomes. This control group needed to represent what the affected counties might have looked like in the absence of the LWEO, accounting for preexisting trends in student demographics and educational outcomes. To achieve this, we employed an optimization algorithm that allowed us to select a group of non-affected counties, referred to as donor counties in our analysis, using the synthetic control method (SCM), whose characteristics closely mirrored those of the affected counties prior to the LWEO. The SCM employs an optimization algorithm to assign weights to donor counties based on their similarity to the affected counties in terms of key pre-intervention characteristics, such as student demographic composition, economic conditions, and outcomes, including prior trends in postsecondary enrollment, college readiness, and high school

Table 1. New Deportation Proceedings Processed Through Immigration Courts in 2018 (Texas Counties)

	June	July	August	September	October
Counties near Load Trail, LLC					
Fannin	3	1	31	2	1
Grayson	7	12	36	2	4
Lamar	1	1	51	0	1
Hunt	6	3	31	2	6
Other surrounding counties					
Cooke	2	1	2	6	2
Collin	67	80	47	65	77
Rockwall	4	1	6	1	6
Delta	0	0	0	0	0
Hopkins	0	2	0	0	7
Rains	0	0	0	0	0

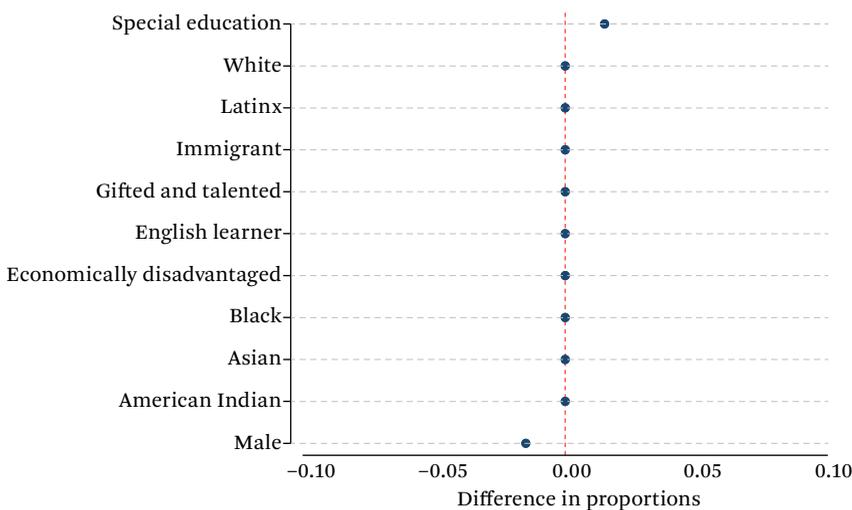
Source: TRAC Immigration, n.d.

employment rates. The algorithm assigned greater weights to counties that exhibited pre-LWEO trends most similar to those of the affected counties, combining them into a synthetic group that closely matches the affected counties on observable characteristics.

Figure 1 presents differences in demographic characteristics of students enrolled in school districts located in counties affected by the LWEO prior to the raid compared to those

in the constructed synthetic control group. All differences in demographic characteristics between the LWEO and donor counties are at or near zero. From the sample of students in the affected counties, we also constructed distinct subsamples for Latinx and English-learner students to examine whether the LWEO had disproportionate impacts on particular populations. Within the overall affected-county sample, 1 percent of students were Asian, 9 per-

Figure 1. Differences Between LWEO Counties and Synthetic Control Group



Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Points to the right of the center line indicate higher values in LWEO counties.

cent were Black, 22 percent were White Latinx, and 61 percent were White non-Latinx. During the 2018–2019 school year, 78 percent of these students were considered economically disadvantaged, 11 percent participated in a gifted and talented program, 1 percent were identified as immigrant students, 15 percent were current English learners, and 21 percent received special education services.

Key Variables

Our study centers on two sets of outcomes. The first set of outcomes deals with the postsecondary trajectories, specifically analyzing direct enrollment in two-year and four-year colleges. We define direct enrollment as the enrollment of students in a postsecondary institution within one year following their high school graduation. This measure provides insights into the immediate educational progression of students and serves as a gauge for the broader educational aspirations and accessibility of higher education opportunities in the wake of the LWEO.

The second set of outcomes addresses several critical high school indicators that precede and likely influence postsecondary education decisions. These include assessing whether students met the college readiness standards for four-year institutions as defined by the THECB. Additionally, we evaluate completion rates of either the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TAFSA) applications for financial aid to attend college. We also explore the likelihood of students working during their high school years, a factor that can significantly influence academic performance and the ability to engage in extracurricular activities that enhance college applications.

Appendix table A.1 presents the mean differences in outcomes for students in LWEO counties before and after the LWEO in 2019. The four-year college direct enrollment rate increased from 3.24 percent to 4.56 percent. Conversely, four-year college readiness dropped from 4.42 percent pre-LWEO to 3.22 percent post-LWEO. FAFSA and TAFSA application rates decreased from 57.84 percent to 46.06 percent. The proportion of students working during high school showed a minor decline, though this difference was not statistically significant.

Lastly, two-year college direct enrollment experienced a small decrease, but this change was also not statistically significant. While these descriptive results show mixed trends in student outcomes following the LWEO, these findings do not account for broader time trends and confounding factors that might influence these outcomes.

We incorporate a rich set of covariates to account for factors that may influence the outcomes of interest. The covariates included a broad set of demographic information aggregated to the county level, providing a detailed snapshot of the student population within each county. This includes the percentage of students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, the sex of the students, economic disadvantage status, English learner status, and the percentage of students receiving special education services. These covariates account for a wide range of observable characteristics that could confound estimates in identifying the effects of the LWEO on students' educational trajectories.

Empirical Strategy

In our preferred analysis of the impact of the LWEO on educational outcomes, we adopt the SCM to construct a comparable counterfactual scenario representing what would have transpired had the raid not occurred. This approach is particularly apt for assessing events like the LWEO that affect a relatively small number of observational units—counties, in this case—where a constructed counterfactual can provide insight into what outcomes would have occurred in the absence of the intervention. The SCM technique leverages observed characteristics aggregated across multiple counties over time to create a synthetic control group that closely mirrors the attributes of the four affected counties (Abadie et al. 2010). Through SCM, we generated a synthetic control group for each model employed, incorporating covariates and lagged measures of outcomes in three of the preceding academic years (2013–2014, 2015–2016, and 2017–2018). The construction of the synthetic control uses an optimization algorithm to determine the appropriate weights for potential control units, which consist of other counties not impacted by the LWEO. By

optimizing the selection of these weights, the synthetic control group was designed to closely mirror the pre-intervention characteristics of the LWEO-affected counties. This methodological approach allowed us to create a credible baseline against which we could measure the actual impacts of the LWEO, providing a clear view of the intervention’s effects on student educational trajectories. Figure 1 illustrates the similarity between the synthetic control group and the four affected counties, showing negligible differences across observable characteristics. This consistency was observed across all models employed in this study. Our analysis uses SCM models to examine outcomes for all students, as well as subsamples of Latinx and English-learner students, aligning with previous research highlighting variations in the effects of immigration enforcement across different student populations (Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2021, 2023).

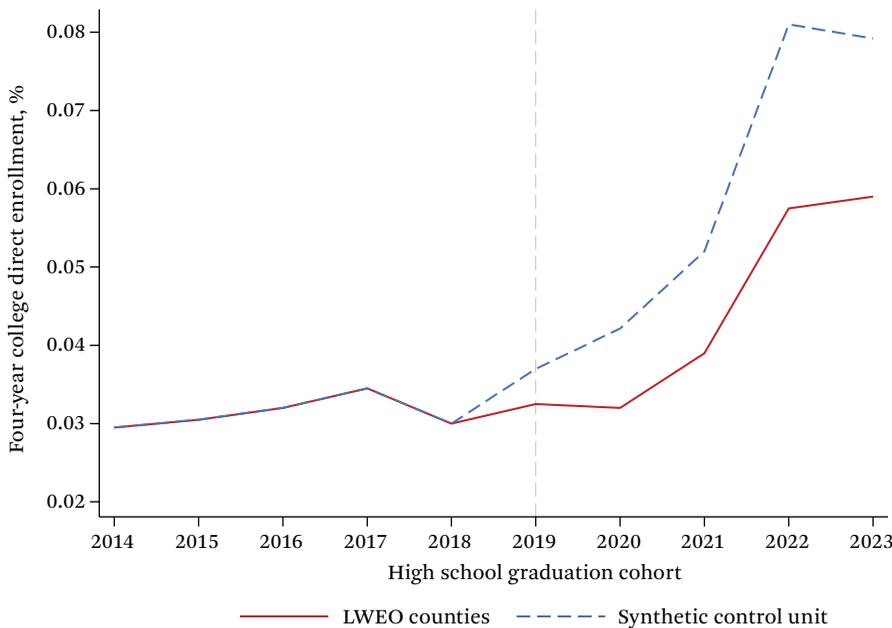
RESULTS

Our main study results are depicted through figures 2 to 6. Each graph contrasts observed trends in student outcomes before and after

the LWEO, represented by solid lines, against those of a synthetic control group, depicted by dashed lines. This control group models the expected outcomes had the LWEO not occurred, serving as a counterfactual to assess the real impact of the enforcement operation. A vertical line within each graph delineates the 2018–2019 school year, the first school year when students would possibly be affected by the LWEO.

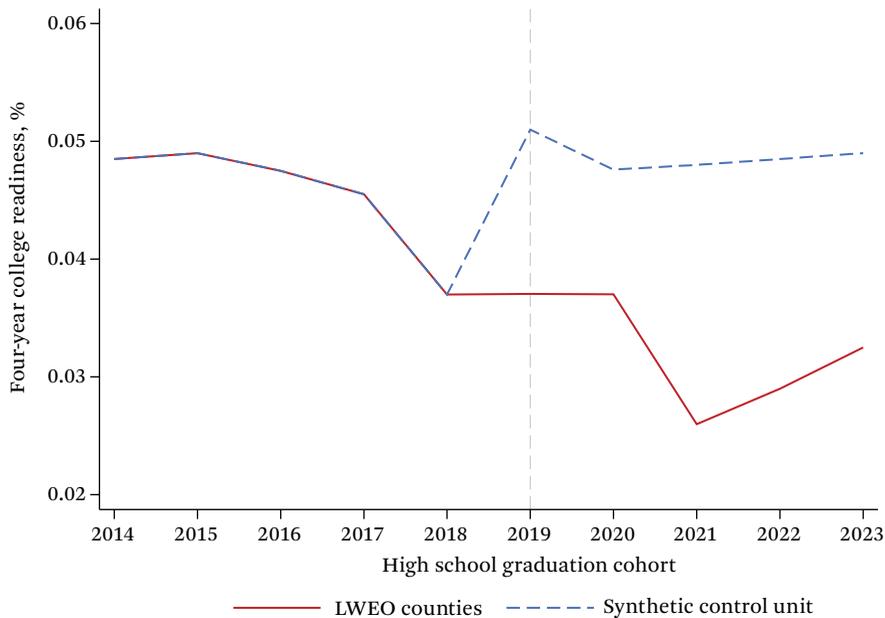
In figure 2, the data reveal a marked decline in the rate of direct enrollment to four-year colleges in the counties affected by the LWEO post-2018. This downturn is sharply contrasted by an upward trend within the synthetic control group, suggesting a disruption in students’ college-bound trajectories. While we present clear evidence of the decline in direct enrollment in four-year colleges, our analyses did not yield evidence of a decline in enrollment in two-year colleges. While the overall trends indicate a significant disruption in college enrollment across LWEO-affected counties, the impact is notably more severe among Latinx and English-learner students. These students, already facing various systemic barriers to higher

Figure 2. LWEO Effect on Four-Year College Direct Enrollment Rate



Source: Authors’ calculations.

Note: The dashed vertical line indicates the year of the LWEO (2019).

Figure 3. LWEO Effect on Four-Year College Readiness

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: The dashed vertical line indicates the year of the LWEO (2019).

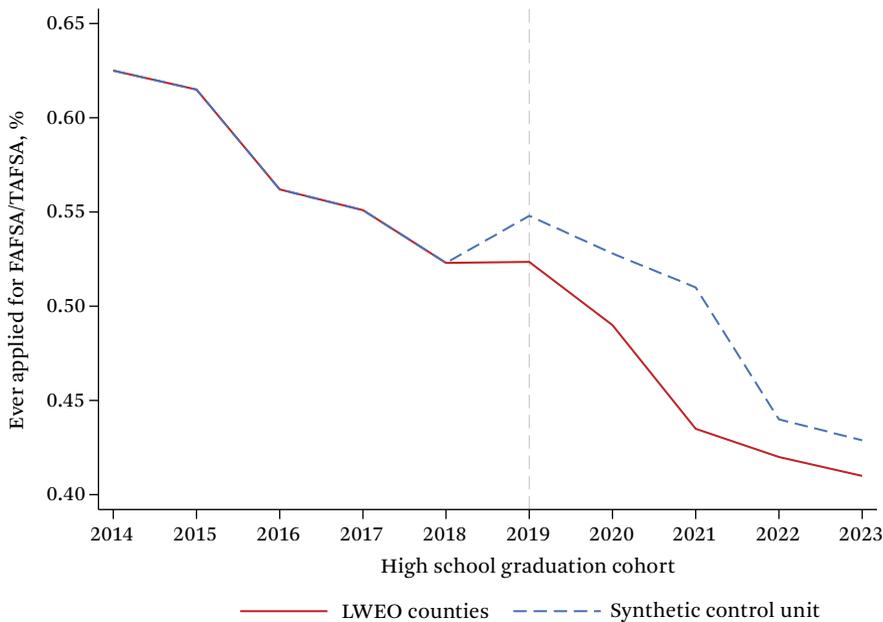
education, appear to have been disproportionately affected by the LWEO with respect to four-year college direct enrollment.

Figure 3 shows a noticeable reduction in college readiness, as measured by a decline in the percentage of students achieving high scores on readiness indicators and completing advanced academic coursework after the LWEO. The affected counties exhibited a sustained decrease, diverging notably from the stable or improving trend observed in the synthetic control group. This could imply that the stress and disruption caused by the LWEO may have diverted student focus away from academic achievements, adversely affecting their preparation for college. The reduction in college readiness, particularly pronounced in the achievement of high school course completion based on readiness indicators, underscores a significant educational setback that was even starker among Latinx and English-learner populations.

Figure 4 illustrates a large decline in applications for financial aid, including FAFSA and TAFSA, starting in 2019. This sharp drop reflects either increased financial uncertainty or decreased intent to pursue higher education

among students in LWEO-affected areas. The decline in financial aid applications could also be indicative of broader economic impacts on families affected by the LWEO, possibly resulting in reduced financial resources and increased economic responsibilities for students. The decline in FAFSA and TAFSA applications is particularly concerning for Latinx and English-learner students, who often come from backgrounds where financial aid is crucial for accessing higher education. The drop in applications from these groups could reflect an amplified sense of vulnerability about revealing their family's immigration status or a fatalistic view toward their educational prospects in a heightened enforcement environment. This reduction highlights a critical barrier to education for Latinx and English-learner students, potentially leading to lower college enrollment and completion rates, thus perpetuating cycles of poverty and limited economic mobility.

Figure 5 shows an increase in the likelihood of students working during high school in the affected counties. This rise contrasts with the steady or declining trend in the synthetic control, suggesting that economic pressures or

Figure 4. LWEO Effect on FAFSA and TAFSA Application Rates

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: The dashed vertical line indicates the year of the LWEO (2019).

shifts in priorities might be driving more students into the workforce earlier. This increase in employment among high school students might not only reflect economic necessity but also a shift in long-term educational and career aspirations, influenced by the uncertainties brought about by the LWEO. The increased likelihood of working during high school, though significant across the board, was particularly impactful for Latinx and English-learner students. For many in these communities, working while in school is often a necessity rather than a choice, and the pressures of the LWEO may have forced more students into the workforce earlier than anticipated. This shift not only affects their immediate academic performance by limiting study time and increasing stress but also has long-term effects by potentially curtailing their aspirations for higher education.

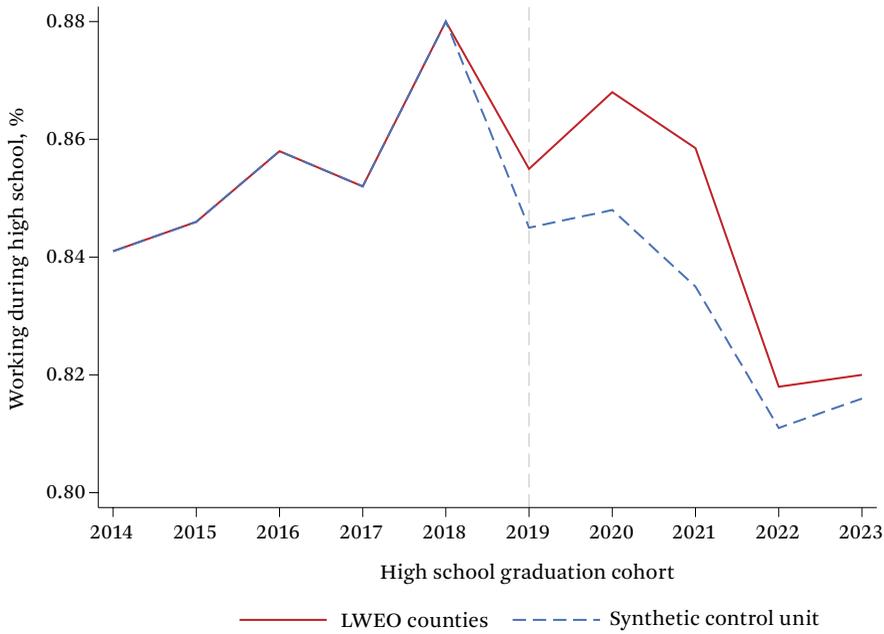
Notably, we found mixed results in students' direct enrollment in two-year colleges. As shown in figure 6, while the synthetic control group modeled trends in enrollment rates prior to the raid, the trends following the LWEO are not consistent. These null results suggest a nu-

anced impact of the LWEO on different aspects of students' academic and professional lives. This absence of impact could suggest that two-year institutions may serve as a more resilient educational pathway amidst community disruptions caused by immigration enforcement. These colleges have lower barriers to entry, and they often provide more flexible, accessible, and financially feasible options for students, particularly those facing increased economic and social instability. The stability in enrollment rates at these institutions, despite the LWEO, underscores their role as critical educational resources in communities affected by enforcement actions.

Tests of Robustness

In both appendix table A.1 and figure 2, we observe increases in four-year direct enrollment rates for the LWEO counties post-raid. While the SCM results suggest that the LWEO had a net negative effect—since the increase in LWEO counties' enrollment rates is not as large as that of the donor counties—there remains a concern that the effect we observe from the raid is confounded by other unobserved fac-

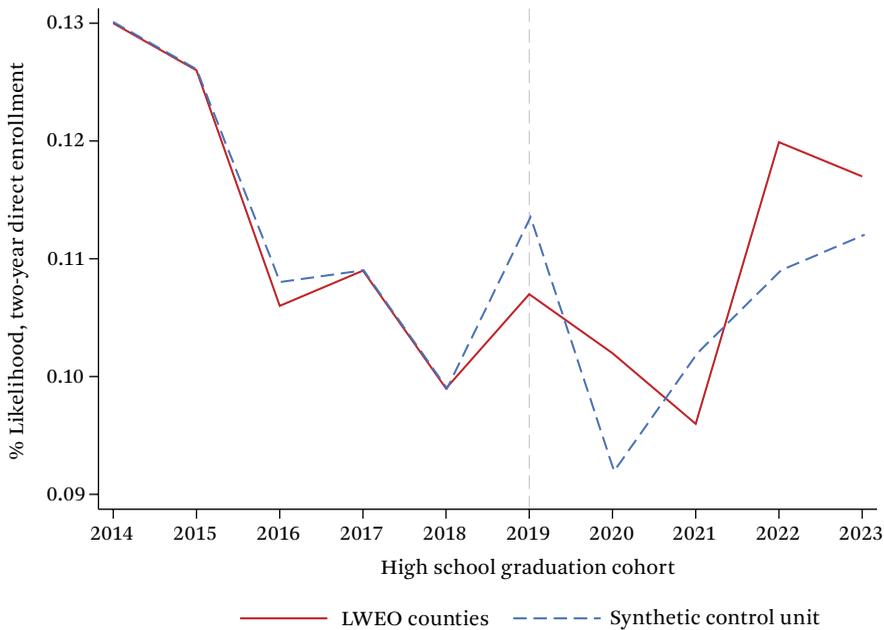
Figure 5. LWEO Effect on Likelihood of Working During High School



Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: The dashed vertical line indicates the year of the LWEO (2019).

Figure 6. LWEO Effect on Two-Year College Direct Enrollment Rate



Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: The dashed vertical line indicates the year of the LWEO (2019).

tors. To address this, we implement a placebo test (Abadie et al. 2010). The placebo test helps determine whether the observed effect is unique to the LWEO counties by applying the SCM to a set of pseudo-treated counties, none of which were exposed to the LWEO. This robustness check simulates the LWEO in the donor counties to check for spurious effects due to preexisting trends in those counties, which ensures effects attributed to the LWEO are not merely coincidental. Appendix figure A.1 displays the results from the placebo test of LWEO's impact on four-year direct enrollment rates. The bold line represents the four-year direct enrollment rate for the LWEO counties, and the lighter lines represent individual placebo counties within the donor pool. The placebo test results show that the observed increase in four-year direct enrollment rates for the LWEO counties post-raid is notably smaller than most of the placebo effects. While some fluctuation is observed in the placebo counties, the LWEO counties demonstrate a clear difference in enrollment rates post-raid, suggesting that the impact seen in the LWEO counties is unlikely to be driven by random variation. Additionally, we conducted another placebo test by shifting the intervention start year to one year prior to the actual LWEO, treating it as the baseline. This did not result in statistically significant changes. Lastly, we employed a leave-one-out sensitivity analysis, sequentially removing donor counties with large weights (> 0.1) to ensure that no individual county disproportionately influenced the synthetic control. While this slightly affected the estimated magnitude of the LWEO's impact, the divergence between the affected counties and the synthetic control group remained consistent across outcomes and analyses.

Another potential concern with our analysis is that the observed negative effects of the LWEO immigration raid on student outcomes could be confounded by disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which began shortly after the LWEO event. While we cannot rule out possible confounding effects attributable to the pandemic, we conducted additional analyses using a difference-in-differences framework, comparing our original estimates (based on the full cohort range, 2014–2023) with

estimates derived from a narrower analytic window tightly centered around the LWEO event year (± 2 years: 2017–2021). Our results remain robust under this narrower window. For example, when examining declines in enrollment in four-year colleges, these models produce similar, statistically significant declines in college enrollment of roughly 1 percentage point. Moreover, our baseline synthetic control analysis indicates that enrollment gaps persist and notably widen to approximately 2 percentage points in subsequent cohorts, strongly suggesting that the negative enrollment impacts we attribute to the LWEO event extend beyond, and are distinct from, pandemic-related disruptions alone.

DISCUSSION

Our work builds on our current understanding of how legal vulnerability intersects with immigration enforcement by highlighting outcomes tied to postsecondary pathways that are impacted by an extreme enforcement episode—the Load Trail workplace raid. Although our data limit our ability to directly test specific underlying mechanisms, our prior research (Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2023) provides clear empirical support for how these mechanisms likely operate. In that study, we found significant declines in school attendance and student achievement following the same immigration enforcement event examined here, outcomes consistent with the pathways hypothesized in the current analysis. Thus, our present findings align closely with these previously documented mechanisms, underscoring how immigration enforcement negatively shapes students' educational trajectories. By conceiving of the LWEO as a community-wide shock whose effects can be observed at aggregate levels, we extend conceptualizations of legal vulnerability beyond an individual state of being.

Our findings highlight the profound disruption that immigration enforcement episodes like the Load Trail LWEO, and the large number of detentions and deportations that ensue, can produce for students' educational trajectories. The marked decline in direct enrollment in four-year colleges for Latinx and English-learner students attending school in the four counties nearest the plant demonstrates the

link between legal vulnerability—in this case, exposure to immigration enforcement activity—and educational opportunities and decisions that can be measured at the aggregate level. Relatedly, the lower rate of four-year college readiness among students in affected schools shows an additional consequence and potentially helps explain the depressed four-year college enrollment pattern among this subgroup. In contrast to the decline in four-year direct enrollment, we do not find any changes in direct enrollment rates for two-year colleges. This suggests that while the LWEO influences certain postsecondary educational decisions, its impact does not uniformly extend to all forms of higher education—especially those that may be perceived as lower cost, easily accessible, and more compatible with full- or part-time work (Hsin and Ortega 2018).

Without data on students' or their families' immigration status, we can only confidently point to exposure as the dimension of legal vulnerability that these affected students experience. At the same time, the fact that the negative effects on students' academic performance and pathways were concentrated among the Latinx and English-learner students, with no evidence of effects for White students in the affected schools, indicates the possibility of multiple forms of vulnerability and more intense consequences for students who may be more likely to live in immigrant families or with undocumented family members. Thus, our findings signal the importance of knowing more about the sources and degree of individual- and group-level legal vulnerability to determine the most appropriate, effective, and tailored responses. Our findings also highlight potential economic consequences associated with students' exposure to the LWEO, and these results demonstrate the interconnectedness of economic and educational decisions, especially for legally vulnerable people. We observe an increase in the percentage of students undertaking work during their high school years, which we understand as a possible shift in household priorities following a sudden loss of earnings due to detention or deportation—a shift in which students begin prioritizing economic contributions over educational pursuits.

Our study contributes to the growing body

of research on the profound and often detrimental effects of immigration enforcement on communities and, more specifically, on the educational and economic opportunities of legally vulnerable students in affected areas. While we are limited in our ability to determine which sources of legal vulnerability beyond exposure to an enforcement episode or act of community violence are present among the affected student population, we find convincing evidence that students who are more likely to have immigrant origins or live with immigrant family members (as measured by racial-ethnic background and English-learner designation) suffer meaningful consequences in terms of educational engagement and postsecondary opportunities. Furthermore, our results demonstrate the lasting and wide reach of these consequences, spreading to a large swath of the student population and persisting across multiple years. These educational outcomes represent one tangible set of indicators that reflect the vast and wide-ranging spillover effects produced by the current deportation system; similarly troubling patterns may be observed in housing data, earnings and employment, and indicators of mental and physical health and well-being among the legally vulnerable residents of communities that have experienced such acts of violence.

The findings of our study into some of the short- and medium-term educational disruptions caused by an LWEO underscore the need for empirical evidence that captures the diverse range of consequences associated with immigration enforcement and their impacts over time for individuals and communities. Furthermore, by centering community-level legal vulnerability as the primary unit of analysis, we show the value of attending to group-level outcomes while simultaneously capturing internal heterogeneity to understand variation in experience and response to community violence. This study represents a first step in understanding how exposure to immigration enforcement activity as one source of legal vulnerability may shape students' educational behaviors, aspirations, and decision-making over their life course. It also highlights the importance of considering such episodes as potentially powerful predictors or explanatory fac-

tors of individuals' and groups' earnings, career trajectories, upward mobility, and overall well-being.

The absence of findings on two-year enrollment should inform targeted interventions. Policymakers and educators should consider these results as indicative of potential areas of resilience that warrant further investigation. Strengthening the supports that maintain stable enrollment rates, even in the face of disruptive events like LWEOs, is an important consideration. These null findings emphasize the importance of nuanced approaches to policymaking and educational practice that recognize the varied impacts of immigration enforcement. They highlight the need for continued research to dissect the conditions under which educational outcomes are shielded from, or susceptible to, the consequences of immigration enforcement.

Limitations and Further Research

While the LWEO appears to correspond to a measurable negative influence on students' postsecondary outcomes, we acknowledge several limitations of our study. Foremost among these is the potential confounding role of the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with our post-raid observational period. The pandemic created unprecedented disruptions to schooling through shifts to remote learning, widespread school closures, and substantial changes in education policies and programs. These disruptions disproportionately affected economically disadvantaged communities, and it is plausible that pandemic-related impacts on school policies, resource allocation, and family circumstances may have compounded or interacted with the effects of the LWEO. Many students and families experienced significant instability during this period, potentially further diminishing their capacity to engage with college preparation, readiness, and enrollment processes. Although our inclusion of data

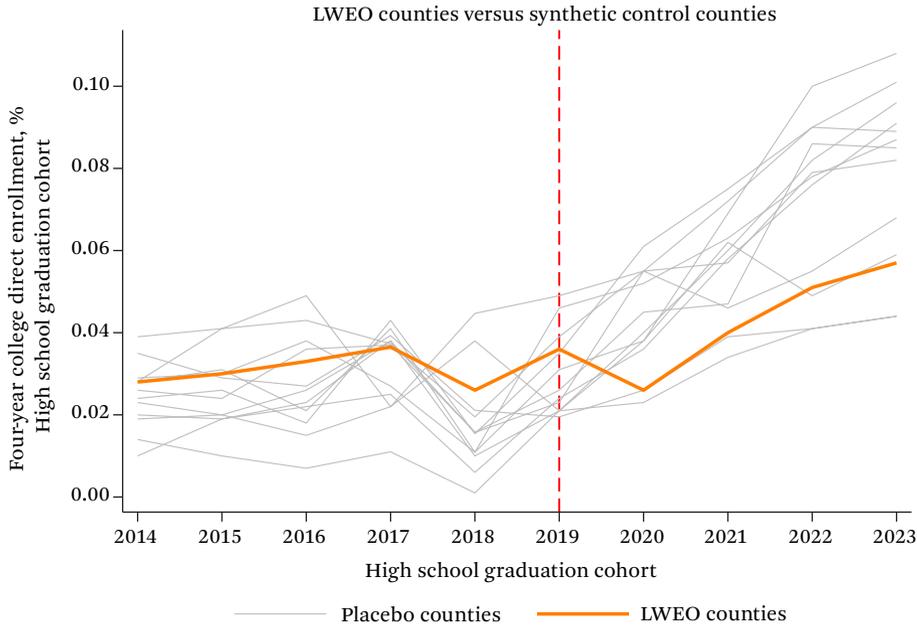
through 2023 extends the observational window beyond the peak of pandemic disruptions, we cannot fully disentangle the observed LWEO effects from broader systemic educational disruptions that arose during the COVID-19 period.

Another limitation concerns our reliance on administrative, district-reported data, which does not allow us to identify specific students or families directly affected by the raid or their precise sources of legal vulnerability. Without individual-level data on immigration status or personal experiences of the raid, our findings necessarily reflect broader community-level impacts rather than direct causal effects at the individual level. Furthermore, while we employed rigorous methods—such as the synthetic control method and short-window difference-in-differences analyses—to mitigate potential confounding factors, these approaches depend heavily on the assumption that our control groups accurately reflect the counterfactual scenario in the absence of the LWEO.

Future studies should also explore explicitly the interactions between immigration enforcement and public health crises to better disentangle these overlapping effects. Moreover, longitudinal analyses that track students over extended periods may capture delayed impacts not observable in shorter-term, immediate post-raid studies. Qualitative investigations could further enrich our understanding by illuminating student experiences and institutional practices that promote resilience in the face of legal vulnerabilities. Lastly, the absence of observed effects in certain domains, such as two-year college enrollment, underscores the importance of continuing research into conditions and contexts under which educational outcomes are either resilient or susceptible to immigration enforcement disruptions. Such insights would meaningfully inform targeted policy interventions and educational supports for legally vulnerable student populations.

APPENDIX

Figure A.1. Placebo Test for Four-Year Direct Enrollment Rates



Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: The dashed vertical line indicates the year of the LWEO (2019).

Table A.1. Mean Differences in Educational Outcomes for LWEO Counties Pre- and Post-Raid

Outcome	Pre-LWEO Mean (2014–2018), Percentage	Post-LWEO Mean (2019–2023), Percentage	Difference, Percentage Points	Significance
Four-year college direct enrollment	3.24	4.56	1.32	**
Four-year college readiness	4.42	3.22	-1.20	**
FAFSA and TAFSA application rate	57.84	46.06	-11.78	***
Working during high school	85.60	84.60	-1.00	*
Two-year college direct enrollment	11.56	10.96	-0.60	*

Source: Authors' calculations.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

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