



BAY AREA IMMIGRATION BRIEFING



Closing the Golden Gate

As of March 2026, San Francisco's Immigration Court is nearing closure, with only two full-time judges remaining after three more are set to leave. Cases have been pushed to Concord or beyond, with hearings delayed further. This report examines how these shifts are reshaping access to asylum, courtroom outcomes, and enforcement in Northern California.

Recent Findings

Are We Nearing the End of Asylum?

Asylum Applications Granted in Bay Area 2025-26

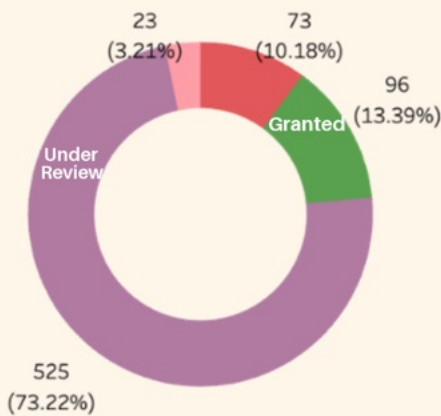


Withdrawals are still climbing, reaching 17% of total cases, double last year's share. More asylum seekers are ending proceedings, possibly to pursue alternatives such as relief with USCIS.
Source: Asylum Navigator

After aggressive adjudication, immigration courts in San Francisco, Concord, and Sacramento **appear to be reaching their limits**, with the volume of cases nearly halving in 2026. **Grant rates have dropped to a record low of 4%, while abandonment now accounts half of all decisions** (January 2026), often triggering removal due to missed notices, incomplete paperwork, or new fees. Combined with sweeping work permit restrictions, higher asylum and appeal fees, expanded detention, and faster deportations, these trends suggest an asylum system increasingly out of reach.

DHS Orders Halt to Third-Country Deportations

Concord 2026 Prepermit Decisions



Concord is in the lead with 73% of prepermit motions still under review. Of decided cases, a quarter were filed orally by DHS, leaving respondents with no prior notice.
Source: EOIR Motions

Our data on "third-country" deportations fomented growing public and legal pressure on prepermit motions (requests to end hearings before they begin). **The AP, citing our data, reports that DHS has ordered a stop** to these deportations; advocates are hesitant to confirm this stoppage as it is based on an unclear email. Deportations to "safe third countries" in the Bay Area rose sharply between 2025 and 2026, increasing 84%. These deportations are often tied to once rare motions to prepermit, which spiked in late 2025 and have now fallen under heavy review.

The Shrinking Path to Protection in Courts

Unrepresented Immigrants Missing Court



No-show rates have surged most for non-asylum cases, including administrative hearings and cancellation of removal.

Source: In Absentia Dashboard

Northern California’s immigration courts are seeing a sharp rise in “no show” deportations, with Concord far outpacing other courts. By Jan 2026, in absentia removal orders accounted for 60% of unrepresented cases in Concord, with more than half of cases decided this way since May 2025. Sacramento follows close behind at about 40%, while San Francisco has kept the share near 25%, likely reflecting stronger access to legal representation.

Changing the Bench, Tightening the Grip



The judges remaining on the bench averaged an 18% grant rate.

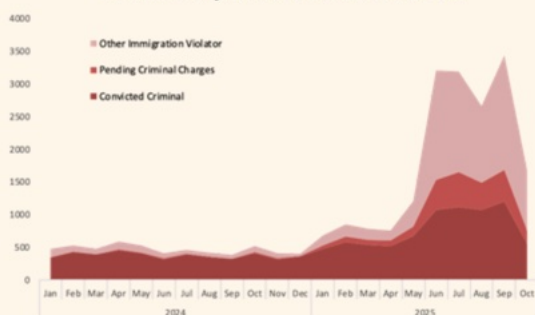
Source: Asylum Navigator, Judge Profile

Since the start of the Trump administration, 31 judges have left or been removed from San Francisco, Concord, and Sacramento’s immigration courts, dramatically reshaping the bench. With more departures expected, ACIJs Nelson and Hitesman make an outsized impact with grant rates just under 11%.

One new judge, Stephen Keane, joined through the government’s expanded JAG program. Although he has issued relatively few decisions so far, 73% were denials.

From Check-Ins to Expulsions: Expanded ICE Enforcement

Criminality in Arrests 2024-2025

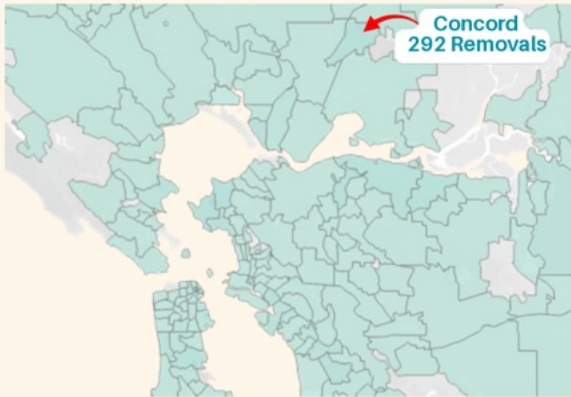


ICE arrests jumped 8x for noncriminals, and 21x for those with pending criminal charges.

Source: Deportation Data Project

ICE arrests in California nearly quadrupled in 2025, compared to the prior year. Many now believe appearing in court could get them detained, so they stay home. Fear itself has become an effective enforcement weapon. Yet, the odds of being arrested in immigration court are low, roughly 1 in 100 nationally, while missing a hearing carries about a 99% chance of deportation. [Read more here.](#)

Deportation Hotspots: Concord and Contra Costa



San Francisco removal orders rose nearly 70%.
Source: US Deportations by ZIP Code

Concord (94520) and Contra Costa County are emerging as major deportation hubs in Northern California. Since the start of the Trump administration, 292 individuals have been removed from Concord, followed by Fairfield (94533), Hayward (94544), and Oakland (94601). **Despite sanctuary protections, most arrests targeted immigrants with no criminal records or only pending charges**, and often occurred at homes, courts, and during routine check-ins.

Pressured to Leave: Voluntary Departures Spike



In 2026, San Francisco saw the **highest number of voluntary departures on record**, with 78% of requests granted.
Source: EOIR Motions

The consequence: immigrant requests for voluntary departure more than quadrupled in 2025, compared to the prior year. Faced with court backlogs, aggressive enforcement, and severely limited options once detained, many respondents are opting to forgo hearings and leave the U.S., raising serious concerns about due process and the future of asylum in the United States.

About Us

Mobile Pathways is a technology nonprofit that uses data, and AI to advance fair access to justice and economic opportunity for immigrants. Our **Pathfinder** platform aggregates 300M+ rows of federal immigration data to quickly surface immigration trends. Trusted by thousands of organizations and covered widely in the press, it highlights real-time patterns like these in San Francisco.

Further Reading

The Pressure Valve: Federal Courts as Immigration's Front Line



How Habeas petitions are bypassing the bond hearing bottleneck.

The Quiet Cruelty of America's Third-Country Removals



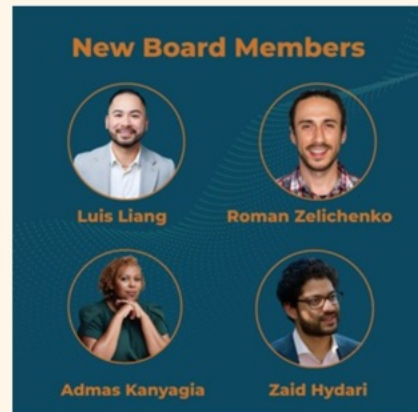
Deportations to "third country" countries are skyrocketing nationwide. Here's what it means.

What Are The Odds of Being Arrested in Court?



We explore the chances of being arrested in court against the harsh outcomes of missing your hearing.

Welcoming the Next Generation of Leadership



Meet the four new directors bringing strategic expertise to strengthen Mobile Pathways' mission.





Learn More
mobilepathways.org