

Capstone Research Seminar

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## Context/Description Paper

### **Introduction**

My research object for this project is the “Know Your Rights” red information cards that have circulated within Latine and immigrant communities across the United States. These small, wallet-sized cards list basic constitutional rights intended to use during encounters with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or other law enforcement agencies. They are often printed in bright red and distributed for free. These cards are commonly shared at community events, legal clinics, schools, churches, protests, and throughout social media platforms. In recent years, especially during periods of heightened immigration enforcement and political hostility toward immigrants, the cards have circulated widely as practical resources meant to be kept on hand and used in moments of uncertainty or fear.

This project aims to explain what these cards are, where they come from, who produces and circulates them, and the social and political conditions that shape their use. The discussion situates the cards within current immigration enforcement practices, media coverage of ICE, and longer histories of immigrant rights organizing. The paper will start with a description of the cards and their circulation, followed by a broader contextual background, and conclude with initial observations about why this research object is worth studying further.

### **Description & Context**

Know Your Rights cards are small, wallet-sized informational cards designed to inform individuals of their constitutional rights during encounters with ICE or other law enforcement

agencies. Most prominently produced and distributed by organizations such as the Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC), the cards typically contain brief statements asserting the right to remain silent, the right to refuse consent to a search, and the right to speak with a lawyer. Many versions are bilingual or multilingual and are written in clear, direct language intended to be understood quickly.

The idea of educating immigrants about their legal rights is not something new. Know Your Rights campaigns date back to the 1970s, when Latino labor organizers Bert Corona and Soledad Alatorre founded El Centro de Acción Social Autónomo (CASA) in Los Angeles. CASA developed educational efforts to fight back against deportations and racial profiling of Latino workers, emphasizing silence, refusal to sign documents, and access to legal counsel (Global Boston, n.d.). These early campaigns framed rights education as a collective strategy for resisting abusive enforcement practices rather than as an individual legal resource.

Throughout the following decades, Know Your Rights workshops and materials expanded as deportations increased and immigration enforcement intensified. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, immigration enforcement became more closely tied to national security, leading to new fears and vulnerabilities within immigrant communities. In cities such as Boston, organizations including the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition and Centro Presente began offering Know Your Rights workshops in the mid-2000s in response to rising arrests and stalled immigration reform efforts. Similar workshops re-emerged after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, when Muslim and Arab communities faced heightened surveillance and profiling.

The resurgence of Know Your Rights materials during both Trump administrations reflects a broader pattern: periods of intensified enforcement and hostile political rhetoric are

often accompanied by renewed grassroots education efforts. The red cards distributed today are part of this longer lineage of activist communication responding to state power.

Understanding the significance of Know Your Rights red cards requires situating them within the institutional and political context of ICE. ICE was created in 2003 as part of the Department of Homeland Security following the September 11 attacks, consolidating immigration enforcement and customs investigations under a national security framework (Boone, 2025). Its mandate includes identifying, detaining, and deporting undocumented immigrants, as well as investigating cross-border crime.

Over time, ICE has become one of the most visible and controversial symbols of U.S. immigration enforcement. While the agency has existed across multiple administrations, its practices gained particular attention during the Trump presidencies, when deportations expanded and enforcement priorities broadened to include nearly anyone without legal status regardless of criminal history. Media coverage of workplace raids, home arrests, and family separations contributed to widespread fear, particularly within Latine communities. Critics have argued that ICE's practices blur the line between immigration enforcement and criminal policing, producing conditions of racial profiling and legal precarity (Sanchez & Vargas, 2025).

As enforcement increasingly takes place in the interior of the country rather than solely at the border, everyday spaces such as homes, workplaces, schools, and courthouses have become sites of potential encounters with ICE. Know Your Rights red cards emerge directly from this reality, addressing the uncertainty and fear produced by unpredictable enforcement practices.

Know Your Rights red cards are primarily produced by immigrant advocacy organizations, legal aid groups, and grassroots networks. The Immigrant Legal Resource Center is one of the most well-known producers, reporting that millions of cards have been distributed

nationwide. Local organizations often adapt or translate the cards to meet the needs of specific communities, adding language access or contextual guidance.

The cards circulate through both physical and digital platforms. They are handed out at community meetings, legal clinics, protests, and schools, and they are also shared widely on social media, where printable versions can be downloaded. This hybrid circulation allows the cards to move quickly during moments of crisis, such as rumors of raids or high-profile deportation cases.

People typically encounter the cards not through mass media but through trusted community networks. This mode of circulation distinguishes the cards from mainstream news coverage and situates them as a form of counter-media: communication produced for communities directly impacted by state power and circulated outside institutional media systems. Rather than aiming for neutrality or broad public persuasion, counter-media often prioritizes usability, safety, and collective knowledge in contexts where trust in state institutions and mainstream media is limited (Canella, 2021). The portability of the cards allows them to remain present in everyday life and accessible even in moments when digital communication may feel unsafe, surveilled, or unavailable.

In popular media, Know Your Rights red cards are often mentioned in news stories about immigration raids, protests, or community responses to enforcement. Journalistic coverage tends to frame the cards as practical legal tools or as symbols of resistance to aggressive immigration policies. Social media platforms also play a role in amplifying the visibility of the cards, especially during periods of heightened fear.

Culturally, the cards reflect broader practices of mutual aid and community care among marginalized groups facing surveillance and state violence. Similar strategies appear in other

movements, such as Black Lives Matter, where activists use communication tools to document, warn, and resist policing. Research on hybrid activism shows that when communities anticipate surveillance, they often rely on forms of communication that prioritize safety, discretion, and shared knowledge over visibility or mass attention (Canella, 2021). While Know Your Rights red cards do not depend on visual documentation in the way video activism does, they reflect a similar emphasis on preparedness and collective understanding as responses to ongoing policing and enforcement.

The cards are also shaped by the emotional landscape in which they circulate. Rather than attempting to calm fear entirely, they acknowledge it as a condition of everyday life under immigration enforcement. This acknowledgment contributes to their perceived usefulness and trustworthiness within immigrant communities.

### **Initial Conclusions**

At this stage, several key features of Know Your Rights red cards stand out based on their history, circulation, and use. The cards consistently emerge during moments of heightened immigration enforcement and political hostility toward immigrants, suggesting a close relationship between state action and grassroots communication practices. Their portability, simplicity, and reliance on trusted community networks shape how people encounter and understand them in everyday life.

The red cards also appear alongside other forms of immigrant advocacy, including workshops, legal clinics, protests, and digital resources. Rather than functioning as standalone objects, they are part of a broader ecosystem of community-based responses to immigration enforcement. At the same time, their widespread use raises questions that circulate within activist and scholarly conversations about the limits of rights-based

strategies. While the cards are designed to offer protection and clarity, they operate within systems of enforcement that remain largely unchanged, and some critics have noted that repeated reliance on such tools can risk normalizing surveillance, raids, and the expectation of state violence as routine conditions of life.

These observations help establish Know Your Rights red cards as a meaningful site for future analysis. By situating them historically and culturally, this paper lays the groundwork for later stages of the project that will examine how the cards communicate authority, audience, and responsibility within conditions shaped by surveillance and enforcement.

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