App that allows people to share ICE sightings gets boost in downloads after White House backlash

ICEBlock, launched in April, encourages users to "see something, tap something" when they see ICE agents nearby.

— An ICE officer's badge at the Jacob K. Javitz Federal Building on June 10, in New York City.

Michael M. Santiago / Getty Images file

July 2, 2025, 1:32 PM CDT

By Kalhan Rosenblatt

A new platform that encourages users to share information about sightings of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents nearby rose to the top of the Apple App Store this week, amid criticism from Trump administration officials who say the app could put agents at risk.

ICEBlock, which launched in April, made headlines after a CNN article about it was called out by White House

press secretary Karoline Leavitt and ICE acting Director Todd M. Lyons on Monday. Both cited concerns over agent safety in their statements about the app, stating that "agents are facing a 500% increase in assaults."

But Joshua Aaron, ICEBlock's Texas-based developer, called the administration's recent criticism "another right-wing fearmongering scare tactic," telling NBC News in a phone interview on Tuesday that his app was designed to be a resource for immigrants who are fearful they will get deported. He said he felt like he was "watching history repeat itself" when he saw things like "5-year-olds in courtrooms with no representation" and "college students being disappeared for their political opinions."

"When I saw what was happening in this country, I really just wanted to do something to help fight back," said Aaron, a onetime musician who spent several months working on the app. "I grew up in a Jewish household, and being part of the Jewish community, I had the chance to meet Holocaust survivors and learn the history of what happened in Nazi Germany, and the parallels that we can draw between what's happening right now in our country and Hitler's rise to power are undeniable."

Ben Goggin ✔
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ICEblock, which allows users to alert others to the geographical location of ICE officers, is the top social networking app in the App Store right now after Karoline Leavitt condemned it from the podium yesterday.

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1 **ICEBlock**
See Something, Tap Something — Get

2 **Threads**
Connect and share ideas — Update

3 **WhatsApp Messenger**
Simple. Reliable. Private. — Open

4 **Telegram Messenger**
Fast. Secure. Powerful. — Open

2:28 PM · Jul 1, 2025

The app, which is free and gives users the ability to anonymously report ICE sightings within a five-mile radius, had approximately 95,200 users as of Monday, Aaron said. He said he has not received updated figures from Apple since the White House and ICE issued their comments on the app.

ICEBlock is among several crowdsourcing platforms – including the website People Over Papers and the app ResistMap – that people across the U.S. have utilized to warn immigrants in their communities about ICE's whereabouts. Its popularity comes amid the Trump administration's crackdown on immigration. Raids – and subsequent protests in cities like Los Angeles – have become more widespread as ICE has ramped up its deportation of immigrants.

The White House has stood by its policies, stating last month that President Donald Trump "remains committed to enforcing federal immigration law – anyone present in the United States illegally is at risk of deportation."

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01:57

In Monday's White House briefing, Leavitt said she had not seen CNN's report about ICEBlock, but described the app as "encouraging violence against law enforcement officers who are trying to keep our country safe."

When asked for comment about ICEBlock, a spokesperson for ICE referred NBC News to Lyons' previous statement in which he called CNN's reporting "sickening," and said the app "basically paints a target on federal

law enforcement officers' backs." He also expressed concern that covering the app could invite "violence against them with a national megaphone."

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem also weighed in on Tuesday, saying, "We're working with the Department of Justice to see if we can prosecute them [CNN] for that."

"Because what they're doing is actively encouraging people to avoid law enforcement activities, operations," she said while speaking to reporters alongside President Trump in Florida. "And we're going to actually go after them and prosecute them with the partnership of Pam if we can. Because what they're doing, we believe, is illegal."

CNN did not immediately respond to NBC News' request for comment.

The network issued a statement on X in response to Noem and DHS, writing that ICEBlock "is an app that is publicly available to any iPhone user who wants to download it. There is nothing illegal about reporting the existence of this or any other app, or does such reporting constitute promotion or other endorsement of the app by CNN."

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Aaron, the developer, also disputed the administration's claims about ICEBlock causing harm.

"This app is for informational purposes only, and I always like to say it is to inform, not obstruct," he said. "We are looking for people to be safe, to protect themselves and their communities."

ICEBlock is currently available on Apple iOs devices; it's also available in multiple languages and for vision- and hearing-impaired people.

When users open the app, they are asked to allow notifications at all times so they can get real-time updates about their area. Once they agree, they are able to see a map of their location, and a list of any reported ICE sightings. If there are none, the app will say "No Sightings Reported." A person can report a sighting by pressing a plus sign and entering a specific address.

"Modeled after Waze but for ICE sightings, the app ensures user privacy by storing no personal data, making it impossible to trace reports back to individual users," ICEBlock states on its website.

Users can't make reports outside the five-mile radius where their phone is – a safeguard against false reporting – and all reports automatically expire after four hours. The app, which encourages users to "see something, tap something," doesn't track any data beyond the number of users, according to Aaron.

In the past week, ICEBlock has been promoted by many users on the social media platform BlueSky. Aaron said he's also seen some people post to X that the app has helped them avoid run-ins with ICE.

Since ICEBlock has picked up more attention, Aaron said he has faced online harassment, such as people posting antisemitic comments about him on social media. But he said helping other people feel safer outweighs any negative responses.

"I think if you can save one person's life, or help one person avoid a horrible situation, I've done my job," he said.

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