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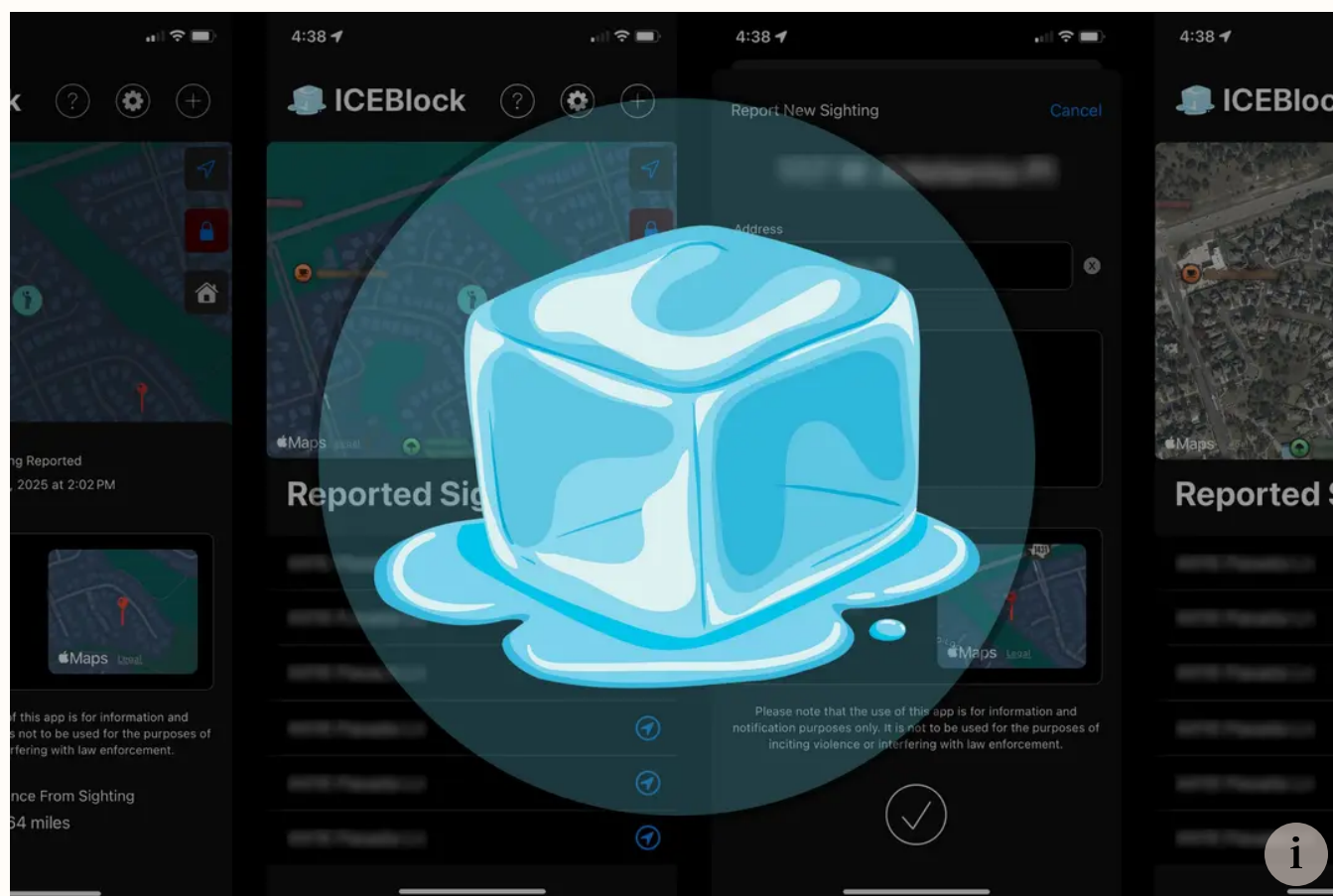
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ICEBlock, an iPhone App Intended to Alert Users of Nearby ICE Sightings, Comes Under Fire

POLITICS

IMMIGRATION



Screenshots and logo courtesy of Joshua Aaron

by [Callum Sutherland](#)

REPORTER

An iPhone app that alerts users about nearby sightings of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity is gaining traction amid President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown. And it's proving to be a controversial platform, with ICE speaking out against it on Monday.

ICEBlock allows its users—of which there are over 30,000, according to the app's developer—to upload sightings of ICE activity. They can pinpoint the location on a map, and offer additional information about what they witnessed. Other users, within a five-mile radius, should then receive a push alert notifying them of the sighting. “See something, tap something,” ICEBlock's slogan instructs.

There are also measures in place to prevent spamming activity. Users can only post a sighting within a five-mile radius of their location once every five minutes, and the alerts are automatically deleted after five hours.

“In recent years, ICE has faced criticism for alleged civil rights abuses and failures to adhere to constitutional principles and due process, making it crucial for communities to stay informed about its operations,” reads a statement on the app's website.

Joshua Aaron, ICEBlock's developer, describes the app as a grassroots, community-driven initiative in a conversation with TIME conducted over Signal.

“When I saw what was going on in this country, I just really felt like I had to do something,” Aaron says, referencing the ICE raids that have taken place following Trump's return to the White House. As of June, over 100,000 people have reportedly been arrested by ICE during Trump's second term.

Growing up in a Jewish household, Aaron says he has had the opportunity to speak to Holocaust survivors and learn about the history of Nazi Germany, he argues that the current political climate, noting instances of “authoritarianism” and “fascism,” is akin to watching “history repeat itself.”

“The app is 100% anonymous and free for anybody who wants to use it. We don't collect user data. We don't even *capture* user data. That's extremely important,” Aaron says, recognizing the privacy concerns people may have. As such, the app is not available on Android because it “requires a device ID in order to send push notifications, which requires a user account and a password.”

But ICE is concerned about the potential safety implications for its agents.

In response to a request for comment, ICE referred TIME to a statement from acting director Todd Lyons, who called the app "sickening," saying it "paints a target on federal law enforcement officers' backs" and "incites violence."

Aaron says he hopes the app, which became available to iPhone users in April, is used as a tool to avoid interactions with ICE agents, rather than users directly involving themselves in potential altercations.

"The app is to inform, not obstruct. This is to have people avoid having that confrontation in the first place," Aaron says, responding to concerns that people might use the app in order to locate and confront ICE agents.

This sentiment is also supported by a warning issued to ICEBlock users, which reads: "Please note that the use of this app is for information and notification purposes only. It is not to be used for the purposes of inciting violence or interfering with law enforcement."

Since returning to the White House, Trump has remade the country's immigration policies, including through ICE raids in major cities. Recent raids in Los Angeles sparked mass protests. Trump responded by deploying the California National Guard, and later the Marines, without the request of state Gov. Gavin Newsom, prompting much criticism and a legal battle. A court ultimately ruled that Trump was allowed to keep control of the National Guard in L.A.

Aaron noticed a dramatic spike in users during the recent upset in L.A.

"Before [the protests started], there were around 2,500 users, and I was thrilled. Then I logged on two days later, and there were over 20,000 users, and the app went to number 32 for 'Social Networking' in the App Store," he says.

Protests opposing ICE raids rapidly spread across the U.S., with people talking to the streets in cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Antonio. Aaron says he has not kept a record of where users downloaded the app or registered the sightings, in order to protect user privacy.

The app is available in 14 languages, including Arabic, Spanish, Hindi, and Nepali, each

added after the development team conducted research on immigrant communities, seeking out the most commonly used languages aside from English.

Amid the upset over ICEBlock, Aaron says his ultimate goal is to look out for the community. "When I see things like ICE outside of elementary schools, that's what we are trying to push back against, because you need to do more. You need to protect your neighbors," he says.

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