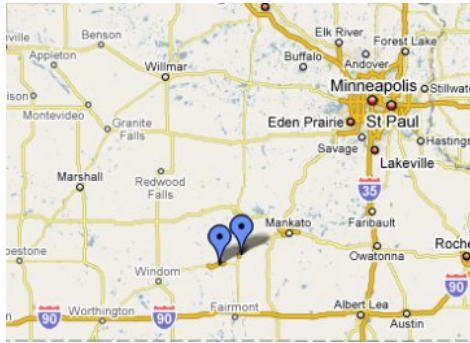


## Immigration agents descend on small towns in southwestern Minnesota



Blue markers show location of St. James and Madelia. Map by Google maps.

By Mary Turck , [TC Daily Planet](#)

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On October 21-23, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents raided homes in small southwestern Minnesota towns, including St. James and Madelia. Early reports were highly colored by fear and rumors, and overstated the numbers of arrests. By the end of the week it appeared that only 19 persons had been detained by ICE. According to an ICE press release, 10 people were arrested in Madelia, five in St. James, two in Windom, and one each in Butterfield and Lewisville. Those arrested were from Mexico (11), Honduras (6), Guatemala (1) and El Salvador (1).

The ICE press release said that two Fugitive Operations Teams sought specific persons who had failed to appear for their immigration hearings or failed to leave the country after being ordered to do so. Six of the 19 people who were arrested were specifically targeted by the teams. The other 13 were characterized by ICE as "immigration violators encountered by ICE officers during their targeted arrests."

St. James and Madelia, both small towns in southwestern Minnesota, have sizable Latino populations, with many families who have lived in the area since the late 1980s or early 1990s. St. James, with a population of 4695 according to the [city's web site](#), is the county seat of Watonwan County. Madelia, a dozen or so miles up the road, is about half that size.

At least 30 percent of the people who live in St. James are Latino, according to Watonwan Sheriff Gary Messen. Mario Hernandez, a former resident of St. James, says that many of the families came to the area in the late 1980s and early 1990s, moving to the string of small towns along Highway 60 west of Mankato. Many work in meat processing plants, which include Tony Downs plants in both St. James and Madelia and an Armour Eckrich plant in St. James.

Unlike earlier ICE raids in Postville and Worthington, this week's operations did not focus on workplaces. ICE spokesperson Tim Counts said that in workplace raids, the agency obtained civil and criminal search warrants, but that no such warrants were sought for this week's operations.

"It is extremely understandable that rumors will pop up and people are frightened," said John Keller, director of the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota. "We have this image of people with lights turned off, waiting in fear as ICE comes to the door. ... We want to encourage people to seek legal advice before there's a crisis. If you as an immigrant or someone you know has a prior deportation order or has had a run-in with the law, the most important thing you can do is to seek out competent immigration counsel to advise you before ICE is at your door.

"Complicated cases can take months and years to work through. It's very difficult [for an immigration attorney] to drop everything to take on an emergency case. You are putting yourself in a position to be more successful if you do it proactively."

Mary Turck is the editor of the Twin Cities Daily Planet. E-mail [editor@tcdailyplanet.net](mailto:editor@tcdailyplanet.net)