

SMALL BUSINESS VOICES **CONDITIONS DURING THE PEAK OF** **OPERATION METRO SURGE, JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2026**

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Photographer Dymanh Chhoun, Sahan Journal



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About the Small Business Voices Project

Operation Metro Surge significantly impacted the wellbeing of main street business owners and staff region-wide. Businesses, neighbors, and trusted community organizations united to protect residents and livelihoods as government entities struggled to respond. This research project concentrates on the voices of small businesses in these areas and begins a two-year effort to help inform local and regional entities supporting Imagine 2050's goal of a dynamic and resilient region.

The Metropolitan Council is conducting on-the-ground interviews and ethnographic analysis in eight economic nodes across the region to better understand ways to support ongoing recovery and future resilience. These defined economic areas contain a variety of retail and offer services that meet local residents' daily needs.

Met Council staff completed 265 semi-structured interviews with 173 unique businesses at the time of publication. This brief focuses on the conditions businesses faced during the peak of Operation Metro Surge.

Staff will continue to observe and talk to these businesses in selected areas

through 2028. Future brief topics include business strategies for recovery and resilience, the contributions of immigrant-owned small businesses, barriers to resiliency, and how businesses are doing six months after the peak of Operation Metro Surge.

Summary of Findings

Immediate economic impacts

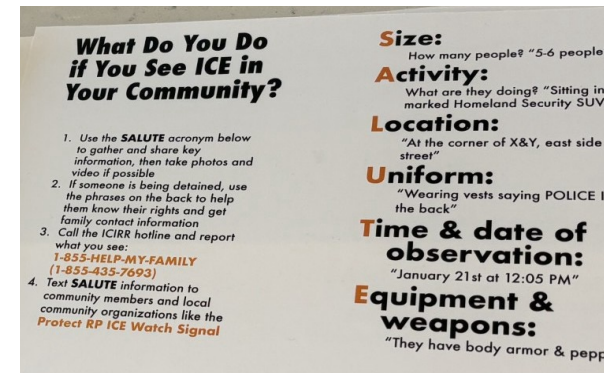
- Operation Metro Surge triggered an immediate, drastic loss of revenue.
- Revenue losses forced businesses to reduce staff and adapt operations.

Social and emotional impacts

- Fear and hypervigilance reshaped daily business operations and customer behavior.
- Ongoing fear and economic instability created significant emotional strain.

Community response and collective care

- Businesses felt gratitude for neighbors who patrolled, spent money, delivered food, and distributed safety information.
- Small businesses were essential to regional resiliency during Operation Metro Surge.



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IMMEDIATE ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Operation Metro Surge triggered an immediate, drastic loss of revenue.

On-the street chaos surrounding businesses forced them to close and decimated customer traffic during Operation Metro Surge. The customers that the businesses depended on were afraid to leave their homes or visit businesses because of the fear of immigration enforcement. This significantly altered the purchasing patterns and reduced foot traffic. These reports from small business owners correspond with survey responses collected from Saint Paul and Minneapolis. Additionally, suburban locations reported similar customer fear and unstable operational conditions.

As revenue dropped, business owners struggled to cover operating expenses and maintain normal business operations. The disruption of holiday sales from Christmas and Ramadan amplified financial pressures and created uncertainty about how long businesses could sustain ongoing revenue loss.

To sustain their businesses, owners took actions including second jobs, borrowed money from family and community members, incurred credit card debt, and drawn down personal savings.

Small Business Voices: Immediate and drastic revenue loss

“Sales have been down. Workers can’t work, and workers have left. Customers stopped coming. ICE came in, and they also stood outside my restaurant, asking people for their documentation.”

- restaurant, Burnsville (March 2026)

“We had to reopen again after being closed for a full month. We closed because of lack of clients. We reopened in February to very few clients. We are trying to recover.”

- restaurant, Eden Prairie (March 2026)

“Things are very slow. We had no earnings between November and February. We lost the entire Christmas season. We were only open on Saturday and Sunday for three months.”

- jewelry store, Payne Avenue in Saint Paul (April 2026)

“During ICE, I had to find another job [because revenue was down.]” *The interviewee is wearing scrubs from her other work. She points to them to show us what she’s wearing.* “These are from my other job. I had to get another job to pay bills.”

- hair salon, Payne Avenue in Saint Paul (April 2026)

“Anxious, customers sheltering in place; can’t reassure people because it’s still going on. I carried my passport. One of the patients was detained for a couple months.”

- health service, East Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis (March 2026)

IMMEDIATE ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Revenue losses forced businesses to reduce staff and adapt operations.

Operation Metro Surge enforcement created difficult conditions for small business staffing. Most owners reported that their staff were afraid to leave their home to come to work. Some staff reported feeling emotionally overwhelmed by Operation Metro Surge, which has taken a significant toll on their wellbeing. Some employees stopped coming to work altogether. Some moved to other states. In some cases, business owners laid off staff due to reduced demand. Layoffs were described not as strategic decisions, but as a necessary measure to keep businesses operating during a period of severe financial contraction.

Small Business Voices: Loss of staff and disrupted operations

“Some staff left they left for good and haven’t come back since. Some went to other states. Still have anxiety, but I’m still giving rides to my staff.”

- grocery store and deli, Eden Prairie (March 2026)

“We would pick up some of the staff. A lot of the staff were scared to come, so we, family members who owned the business, had to take over. Staff stayed home. People who had documents were even scared and stayed home.”

- grocery store, Lake Street in Minneapolis (March 2026)

“It’s been bad. Very bad. People are scared to come in. They are scared to walk on the street. We lost employees and customers during [Operation] Metro Surge. Employees took time off because of fear. They were stopped by ICE agents. I had employee who lived across the street, and he was afraid to walk over here to work.”

- grocery store, Columbia Heights (March 2026)

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACTS

Fear and hypervigilance reshaped daily business operations and customer behavior.

Fear shaped how business owners, employees, and community members navigated everyday activities and business operations throughout the period of peak enforcement activity. Routine tasks, including taking out the garbage, commuting to work, and opening and closing a business became sources of anxiety.

Businesses found themselves needing to take responsibility for customer safety from potential ICE violence. Customers asked staff to look out windows and doors for signs of ICE presence. Stores fielded phone calls from customers who wanted to know about ICE activities before leaving home to shop. Others expressed concerns for elders who could not read and struggled to access legal or safety information as they shared resources with them. These conditions created an atmosphere of hypervigilance that altered daily routines.

Small Business Voices: Emotional impacts reshaped operations

“People who have documents were even scared and stayed home. Some customers would be like ‘look out the window for us, please’.”

- grocery store, Lake Street in Minneapolis (March 2026)

“I have brought and taken home my employees for the past three months. I’m still doing it. They don’t feel safe.”

- restaurant, Payne Avenue in Saint Paul (April 2026)

“I closed in December when I saw how violent ICE was. I bring my kids with me to work (*gestures behind a curtain where her child was sleeping*). I didn’t want to be stopped on the street with my kids. I heard how you could be grabbed from your car. Sometimes the children would just be left there abandoned in the car. I was afraid. My husband came on weekends to open, just to let people know we were still here, but it was low sales.”

- retail clothing, Payne Avenue in Saint Paul (April 2026)

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACTS

The combination of revenue loss, operational disruptions, and ongoing uncertainty created substantial emotional and psychological strain for many business owners and employees.

Key emotional impacts reported by business owners and their employees included:

- Feeling emotionally overwhelmed.
- Living with constant fear and anxiety.
- Experiencing sadness and grief.
- Worrying about long-term business sustainability.
- Carrying emotional responsibility for employees, customers, family and community members.

Business owners expressed concern about the long-term sustainability of their businesses and the broader impacts on employees, customers, and immigrant communities. Several reported that fear and uncertainty continued even as some customers slowly began to return. Emotional strain was not described as a temporary reaction but as an ongoing condition that affected decision-making, wellbeing, and daily operations.

Small Business Voices: Fear and instability created emotional strain

“They were very scared. Customers weren’t coming out, and they were afraid of ICE. They [ICE] were in the parking lot. For those three months, it was very bad. Even if people were citizens, they were afraid to come out; they didn’t want to risk their lives... Everybody was feeling down. It was surreal to witness.

As a Black woman in my 50s, I was only told stories about injustices that happened to Black folks. To watch it, to see it being done to others because they’re different nationalities, I never thought I would see that for myself. People were afraid of coming to work. Witnessing it was unbelievable.”

- hair salon, Lake Street in Minneapolis (May 2026)

“We know clients feel many things. When it was very tense, no one wanted to go out. They were depressed, fearful, and couldn’t work. Any money available, they pay rent. There’s no money to eat or anything. You carry the stress. Now people feel, ‘They took my family,’ or ‘a coworker died in detention’.”

- restaurant, West Side of Saint Paul (March 2026)

Businesses felt gratitude for neighbors who patrolled, spent money, delivered food, and distributed safety information.

Neighbors, customers, and local community members came together to support small businesses financially, emotionally, and through community-based efforts.

Interviews and research observations identified the following community response during Operation Metro Surge:

- Neighbor-organized patrols.
- Community member participation in organized support efforts, including intentionally dining and shopping at local businesses to help sustain the small business.
- Posted educational and protective signage at businesses.
- Distribution of whistles and know-your-rights information.

Small Business Voices: Community response and collective care

“Protect us! They came to take us and the government didn’t do anything. I am so grateful to the gringos who loved us so much. They loved all of us and took care of us.

During the time in January and February, we were in groups helping each other.”

- retail, Lake Street in Minneapolis (May 2026)

“ICE was outside often. A white lady brought documents because ICE would show up a lot, she posted it. I’m a citizen, but I was scared myself.”

- retail, Burnsville (March 2026)

Small Businesses were essential to regional resiliency during Operation Metro Surge.

Small businesses filled important gaps in community support. In reviewing media accounts of the effects of Operation Metro Surge, the central role of small businesses in protecting and supporting residents received less reporting compared with the support efforts of non-immigrant Minnesotans. Small businesses supplied security services, information, hubs for neighborhood mutual aid, and storage areas of aid and supplies.

Our interviews and observations identified the following efforts by businesses to support others during Operation Metro Surge:

- Informing clients of on the ground conditions to protect client safety.
- Organizing and providing deliveries for families who were afraid to leave their homes.
- Extending credit to customers.
- Buying gas and supplying food for patrollers.
- Providing shelter to residents during violence and severe cold.
- Distributing whistles and know-your-rights information.
- Coming together to discuss what was happening in their communities and offering emotional and financial support.

Small Business Voices: Businesses provided essential protection

“I did deliveries for food. I was giving out whistles. I paid for gas to help patrollers. I did deliveries of the products sold in my store. I saw that so many people didn’t feel safe and couldn’t leave their house. And so between all of us, we all helped. Immigration was invading the city, but so many people were helping.”

- retail, Lake Street in Minneapolis (May 2026)

“For the first time, we have extended credit to customers, because customers are unable to pay.” The store owner shows the researchers two pages of customers who had purchased on credit. “27 people have made purchases on credit and are unable to pay.”

- grocery store, Columbia Heights (March 2026)

“We had to work harder to stay open and protect our customers. ICE was here constantly. We were hiding people from outside in the back of the store. People were afraid, people with passports, people who were legal.”

- liquor store, Columbia Heights (March 2026)

“On January 24, Alex Pretti was murdered. On Saturday, the 24th, we were getting ready to open. But then the whole neighborhood closed because of the murder. It was so violent; it was so scary. There was tear gas and pepper spray everywhere.

Everybody went home, all the employees. We shut down. I sent everyone home because I wanted everyone to be safe. My family asked me to come home. But I wanted to stay to see and help everyone. I’m here to help people. The protesters came in for shelter. They got tear gas on me. It was 10 below 0.”

- restaurant, Eat Street in Minneapolis (March 2026)

Appendix: Data Collection Process

This mixed-method study focuses on the voices of small businesses and documenting on-the-ground conditions. Research staff document conditions and interview small business owners and workers. Economic nodes contain main street businesses, a variety of retail and services that meet local residents' daily needs. The two-block economic areas were selected to be representative of commercial areas containing customer-serving, locally owned small businesses. Some nodes also contain national and local chain businesses. Data collection focuses on areas known to be heavily impacted by Operation Metro Surge as well as areas outside of Minneapolis and Saint Paul with a concentration of immigrant-owned businesses.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and researchers obtain consent before beginning interviews. While we expected that many businesses would refuse to talk to Met Council researchers, few businesses refused, which they attributed to a lack of time or manager present. Instead, we found that owners, managers, and staff were eager to share experiences, necessitating us to sometimes spend up to 45 minutes talking to staff at a single location.

This analysis includes data collection at eight geographies between February 26, 2026 and April 1, 2026:

- Columbia Heights shopping area/strip mall
- Two block area of Payne Avenue in Saint Paul
- Two block area of East Franklin Ave in Minneapolis
- Eden Prairie shopping area/strip mall
- Two block area of the West Side of Saint Paul
- Two block area of East Street in Minneapolis
- Two block area of Lake Street in Minneapolis
- Burnsville shopping area/strip mall

In addition to semi-structured interviews, researchers completed ethnographic observation, including business operating hours, clients and customers present, staff present, presence of patrollers, protective security measures (covered windows, locked doors), and signage including efforts to articulate the rights of people inside (4th amendment protections), solidarity with immigrants, and opposition to ICE and ICE tactics.

After obtaining consent, researchers interviewed one person working at each store canvassed, preferably an owner or manager. Store representatives were asked about general sentiment, general sales trends compared with last year, current challenges, conditions in January and February, staffing issues, and support received. They were invited to comment about what they wanted decision makers to know about conditions at their small business, including topics not related to Operation Metro Surge.

More interviews and observations are ongoing. A third round of interviews has happened at all economic nodes. More about effects will be known as researchers return to these geographies over time.

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