

# *Frustration Grows Inside the White House Over Pace of Deportations*

President Trump's promise to launch the largest deportation operation in U.S. history is colliding with the practical difficulties of detaining people and transporting them across the globe.



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**By Hamed Aleaziz and Zolan Kanno-Youngs**

Reporting from Washington

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Just about every week since taking office, President Trump has called Thomas D. Homan, the enforcer of his immigration agenda, looking for an update on mass deportations.

How is it going at the border? What do the arrest numbers look like? Are sanctuary cities still standing in the way of the crackdown?

Mr. Homan's typical response serves as something of a reality check for the president, whose campaign promise to deport millions of people is colliding with the practical difficulties of detaining immigrants and then transporting them across the globe.

"We need to increase the arrests," Mr. Homan said he has told Mr. Trump, recounting their conversations in an interview with The New York Times. "They're not high enough."

Inside the administration, there is growing frustration about the pace of arrests and deportations, even as Mr. Trump mobilizes the full weight of the federal government behind his mission to carry out the largest deportation operation in U.S. history.

Mr. Homan acknowledged he could not predict the number of people the administration would deport this year, citing financial shortfalls at Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

“The more money you have, the more successful we’re going to be,” he said. “So people always ask me, ‘How many you think you can arrest?’ I say I have no idea.”

So far, federal data shows that the administration has made nearly 23,000 arrests in the past month, up sharply compared with the Biden administration. But daily arrests have fallen since immigration agents exploded out of the gates in the opening days of Mr. Trump’s term. And deportations have not kept pace with the number of arrests, which means that the number of people waiting in ICE detention has surged, straining resources.

Mr. Trump has so far been happy with the progress in driving down the number of border crossings to historic lows, people familiar with his thinking say. But the pace of deportations has been a source of vexation in particular for Mr. Homan and Stephen Miller, the architect of the president’s aggressive immigration policies, who know that the clock is ticking to make good on the president’s plan.

# A public relations blitz

Thomas D. Homan, the White House border czar, left, and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth visited the southern border in early February. Paul Ratje for The New York Times

Bipartisan frustration with immigration helped propel Mr. Trump back to the White House in November, and his advisers have made sure to promote his crackdown.

Trump aides allowed Dr. Phil McGraw, the celebrity talk show host, to ride along during deportation raids in Chicago. The White House posted what it labeled an “ASMR” video of ICE agents preparing shackles while people were led onto a deportation flight. And the administration has enlisted agents from the F.B.I. and other federal agencies to help detain people and send them off to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, on military flights.

Kush Desai, a White House spokesman, said in a statement that “after four years of the Biden administration’s outright incompetence, the Trump administration has re-established no-nonsense enforcement of the immigration laws of the United States.”

But the immigration raids and roundups do not always go as planned.

In February, Mr. Homan stood before ICE agents with a television news crew on hand before a deportation operation targeting gang members in Aurora, Colo. Mr. Trump said during the presidential campaign that Aurora had been taken over by throngs of criminals, even though officials there said his characterization was not based on reality.

The operation was a dud. Hundreds of agents in the town ended up arresting around 30 people, according to Mr. Homan. And it was not just Aurora. In San Diego, some F.B.I. agents who were directed to assist ICE have grown frustrated over being redirected from their duties every day for the past month only to produce a handful of arrests, according to officials familiar with the matter. F.B.I. agents also have been asked to help identify the locations of immigrants who are in the country illegally, officials say.

And in the field office in Washington, D.C., F.B.I. agents and analysts have expressed frustration about doing immigration work rather than pursuing threats to national security, including monitoring Russian intelligence officers operating in the United States, a former U.S. official familiar with the matter said.

ICE arrests in communities take up enormous time and resources. Officers spend weeks researching immigrants on their target lists, mapping out their locations and habits. Each target requires several officers and agents and often hours of waiting.

In recent years, immigrant rights activists have educated people that they do not, in fact, need to open the door to ICE officers. Instead, they can wait inside and ignore the requests. Mr. Homan has said the administration will seek more warrants signed by federal judges to be able to enter homes.

ICE would prefer to pick up undocumented immigrants from jails and prisons throughout the United States. But so-called sanctuary cities limit how much local law enforcement can cooperate with federal immigration agents, with the goal of ensuring that immigrant communities feel safe to talk to local law enforcement.

Deporting immigrants can also present diplomatic challenges. The United States has struggled to secure enough planes and deportation agreements with other nations to efficiently return people to their home countries.

## **Ramping up arrests**

The family detention center in Dilley, Texas, in 2019. Mr. Homan said in an interview the administration is considering reopening detention facilities in Dilley and Karnes City, Texas. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

Still, the Trump administration is focused on raising the number of arrests.

To that end, Mr. Trump's advisers have shaken up ICE leadership. They are considering deporting people who have been found to have a legitimate fear of torture in their home countries to third nations, according to documents obtained by The New York Times. And Mr. Homan said the administration could also reinstate the practice of detaining immigrant families — a tactic that has come under fire because of concerns that detaining children, even with their parents, can cause permanent developmental damage.

“We need family residential centers,” Mr. Homan said, adding that the administration is considering reopening detention facilities in Dilley and Karnes City, Texas. “It’s an option. We got a lot of options on the table.”

To address the shortage of detention beds, the administration is considering using military sites across the country — an extraordinary use of wartime resources.

The Department of Homeland Security is also pushing the Internal Revenue Service to turn over the addresses of hundreds of thousands of people it wants to deport in a request that could violate taxpayer privacy laws.

But without substantial help from Congress, former ICE officials say, Mr. Trump’s ambition for mass deportations is unlikely.

“Their hands are tied,” said William Figueroa, who was an ICE deportation officer for 35 years. “There’s not enough agents and there’s not enough opportunity to get these people.”

It’s not clear how much can be done legislatively. Even though Mr. Trump’s party controls the House and Senate, Republicans have disagreed over the best strategy.

Former and current officials with the Department of Homeland Security say the pressure to ramp up arrests is palpable and that some worry that the administration’s goals are out of line with reality. Others say a culture of fear has spread throughout the agency, with D.H.S. even threatening to give employees lie-detector tests to crack down on leaks.

Russell Hott, who was the leader of the deportation wing of ICE before he was reassigned last month, has acknowledged that the agency’s rank and file was strained.

“I know it has been a trying time, professionally and personally, for many of you particularly those in the field,” Mr. Hott said in an email informing agents that he was leaving his position. “Fatigue and stress are inherent to our work, especially as operations have intensified.”

Mr. Trump's advisers are now looking for additional groups of people to deport quickly.

The administration will soon revoke legal status for immigrants who enrolled in a Biden-era program that allowed migrants fleeing four troubled nations to remain in the country temporarily and legally, according to an official familiar with the matter. Immigrants in that program who did not apply for another form of protection would be subject to deportation.

“Trump’s desire to increase the number of people locked up in detention is in deep contrast with the demands of local communities where immigrants are welcomed and valued,” Marcela Hernandez, the organizing director at the advocacy organization Detention Watch Network, said in a statement this week. “It is clear that Trump will use every opportunity to demonize migrants while also undermining what communities want and need. This moment demands a national outcry.”

In a sign of the growing sense of urgency, the Trump administration is also considering measures with the hope that immigrants will simply decide to leave on their own. A multimillion-dollar advertising campaign by the Department of Homeland Security warns immigrants to leave the nation or else be “hunted down.”

Maggie Haberman, Allison McCann and Adam Goldman contributed reporting.

**Hamed Aleaziz** covers the Department of Homeland Security and immigration policy. More about Hamed Aleaziz

**Zolan Kanno-Youngs** is a White House correspondent, covering President Trump and his administration. More about Zolan Kanno-Youngs

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