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Trump's Rash Immigration Actions Place Cruelty and Spectacle Above Security

Rather than adopting commonsense measures to fix the United States' badly broken immigration system to benefit all Americans, President Trump's indiscriminate immigration actions follow a pattern of cruelty, ripping apart families and communities and jeopardizing Americans' security.

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U.S. President Donald Trump delivers remarks during a Cabinet meeting at the White House in Washington, D.C., on February 26, 2025. (Getty/Andrew Harnik)

Introduction and summary

The Trump administration's theatrical boasts about securing the border and deporting immigrants who have committed serious crimes tell a very incomplete story. Although framed under the banner of security, President Donald Trump's rash actions harm public safety and national security while providing no actual solutions to fix the broken U.S. immigration system. These are not isolated actions; they follow a pattern of cruelty, as indiscriminate proposed spending cuts from the White House and congressional Republicans have forced Head Start facilities to temporarily close, prevented community health centers from accessing funds to serve patients, targeted Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and shut down lifesaving health programs across the globe. The administration's immigration agenda is just as indiscriminate, ripping apart families and communities while jeopardizing national security and public safety.

There are many actions that the administration and Congress could take to secure the border, improve public safety, and modernize the antiquated immigration system. However, rather than taking these commonsense steps to address immigration, the administration's "shock-and-awe" showmanship—driven by a dogmatic, ideological pursuit against immigration—elevates optics above protecting Americans' public safety, national security, and economic well-being.

The Trump administration's indiscriminate mass deportation agenda threatens public safety and rips apart families and communities

President Trump would have Americans believe that immigration enforcement did not occur prior to his return to the White House and that it is only now—because of him—that unauthorized immigrants who have committed serious crimes are being held accountable. In reality, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has aggressively enforced the law since the agency began operations in 2003. Just last fiscal year, during the Biden administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) carried out tens of thousands of removals of immigrants with criminal histories, including for serious crimes such as sexual assault and homicide. In Congress, Democrats and Republicans have consistently supported billions of dollars in DHS enforcement funding through annual appropriations and multiple standalone reform attempts, including last year's robust bipartisan Senate border security deal, which Trump himself tanked for political gain.

Nobody should be fooled by the pretense that enforcing immigration laws is a unique feature of President Trump and his administration. Focusing on the removal of immigrants who have committed violent crimes, or who otherwise pose a threat to public safety or national security, is a position leaders of both parties have supported. Under former presidents Joe Biden and Barack Obama, DHS adopted clearly articulated enforcement priorities focused on safeguarding national security, public safety, and border security while deploying prosecutorial discretion to avoid an indiscriminate approach.

By contrast, President Trump is wrongly criminalizing anyone his administration suspects lacks legal status, leaving them susceptible to arrest by law enforcement. These cruel immigration enforcement actions have already resulted in reports of veterans and U.S. citizens being detained, Native American Tribal members' identities being questioned, deportations of pregnant women

and children, and the detention of a father of U.S. citizen children who may now lose their home, to give just a few examples. The Trump administration's approach rejects a commonsense prioritization of enforcement resources, directing the time and resources of law enforcement away from public safety threats to instead carry out "collateral arrests" of hardworking people who pose no danger to American communities. This ineffective immigration enforcement strategy is tearing families apart while making the country less safe.

The Trump administration's actions force federal law enforcement to prioritize immigration enforcement over combating serious crimes

Another detrimental feature of the Trump administration's immigration enforcement approach is the misguided effort to redirect law enforcement away from stopping violent crime, drug smuggling, and gun trafficking to fulfill mass deportation agenda. Put simply, the Trump administration's actions prioritize immigration enforcement—including toward people with no criminal history—over tackling true public safety threats.

President Trump's executive order (EO) Protecting the American People Against Invasion states that the primary mission of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), a division of ICE whose mission includes conducting federal criminal investigations into cases of drug smuggling and human trafficking, should be enforcing laws related to unauthorized entry and unlawful presence of migrants. Yet by shifting HSI's resources toward prosecuting immigrants—many of whom have been in the country for extended periods of time—for their manner of entry or lack of current valid immigration status, the EO undermines efforts to combat more serious public safety threats, ultimately making communities less safe.

In addition, a DHS directive would co-opt personnel and resources from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Bureau of Prisons, and the U.S. Marshalls Service to assist in immigration enforcement, even against individuals without criminal records. While these agencies have previously collaborated with ICE to target criminal activity, this new directive and related Department of Justice (DOJ) guidance redirects drug and terrorism task forces toward immigration-related efforts. In doing so, the administration is weakening public safety by pulling resources from critical missions, as ATF and DEA work to hold criminal organizations accountable for crimes such as drug trafficking, murder, and firearms offenses. "Every FBI agent or ATF agent or DEA agent standing along the perimeter of a scene while ICE knocks on doors is an agent being taken away from other duties," explained Colorado Public Radio earlier this month following predawn raids by federal agencies in Denver. Forcing ATF and DEA to instead prioritize immigration cases undermines their ability to address crises such as drug trafficking and gun violence that threaten Americans' safety and security daily, and these crises will only worsen if federal law enforcement agencies are forced to abandon their core missions to become de facto extensions of ICE. Democratic House Judiciary Committee leaders have highlighted the dangers of this approach to the American people and sought additional information from the Justice Department.

Americans have witnessed the harms of President Trump’s previous diversions of federal law enforcement resources away from public safety priorities. During his first term, Trump’s zero-tolerance family separation policy consumed federal resources that should have been spent prosecuting drug smuggling and other crimes. A federal judge interviewed by the DOJ inspector general noted that federal “felony cases involving other types of crimes dropped [in the Southern District of California] during this time.” In the Western District of Texas, another federal judge observed that “individuals with significant criminal histories were falling through the cracks because DHS and DOJ were trying to move the [immigration] cases through the system so quickly.”

Having failed to heed the lessons of the first Trump administration’s failed zero-tolerance policy, Emil Bove, President Trump’s chosen acting deputy attorney general, has directed all 93 federal U.S. attorneys to select line prosecutors from their own offices to deploy to border districts for immigration prosecutions. Rather than prosecuting more serious crimes in their own jurisdictions around the country, federal prosecutors are now being diverted to prosecute nonviolent, low-level immigration violations.

Directing federal law enforcement agencies and federal prosecutors to prioritize nonviolent immigration offenses comes at the expense of their intended missions and makes the country less safe because these agencies are less able to focus on holding people accountable for serious violence and the trafficking of guns and drugs into U.S. communities.

The Trump administration is threatening public safety by targeting states and cities, blocking funding for law enforcement and crime victims, and diverting police from their mission

In addition to seeking to turn federal law enforcement into immigration police, the Trump administration is also bullying states and cities to adopt its agenda by filing lawsuits, issuing baseless legal threats against public officials, and punishing cities and states by withholding federal funding for public safety and transportation initiatives.

For example, the Justice Department has targeted Illinois and the city of Chicago in a lawsuit contesting the state’s bipartisan sanctuary law, which was signed by a Republican governor, and has also targeted New York for its law providing undocumented immigrants access to driver’s licenses. Trump has also shut off DOJ funding and even sought to restrict Department of Transportation funds to sanctuary jurisdictions. Instead of helping cities and states reduce crime, the Trump administration is issuing baseless legal threats against public officials and shutting off funding that supports law enforcement and victims of crime—such as DOJ’s COPS grant hiring program, which funded 50 police officers for the city of Chicago in 2024. President Trump’s ill-advised attempt to deprive Chicago and other sanctuary jurisdictions of crime-fighting resources under the mantle of reducing crime and increasing public safety will instead reduce the number of police officers on the job.

Notably, this coercive overreach to commandeer cities and states to do the federal government’s job is likely unconstitutional. During his first term, when Trump sought to block sanctuary jurisdictions from receiving federal grants that provided critical funding for local law enforcement and other core public functions, most federal courts—including conservative judges—rejected

attempts to force immigration enforcement-related conditions on state and local governments as a precondition to receiving federal grants.

DHS has always had to navigate cooperation with local jurisdictions and, under both Republican and Democratic presidents, has favored enhanced law enforcement cooperation between state and local jurisdictions and ICE. For example, Biden administration DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, Obama administration DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson, and Bush administration DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff urged greater cooperation between local jurisdictions and ICE. Secretary Johnson, in particular, led a specific compromise solution intended to address constitutional and resource concerns that state and local jurisdictions had with detaining people on ICE's behalf. At the same time, state and local jurisdictions with sanctuary policies have their own public safety reasoning—shared by some law enforcement officials—in favor of these policies, including that they help build trust between law enforcement and communities and make it more likely that immigrant victims or witnesses report crimes and will seek support from local police if they are in need.

Sanctuary policies have been lawfully adopted by democratically elected state and local governments. It is important to note that sanctuary policies do not prevent enforcement of criminal laws. As the Major Cities Chiefs Association—which represents the largest cities in the United States, including prominent cities targeted by the Trump administration—explains, their police departments routinely support and cooperate with DHS and ICE to enforce criminal laws and protect the public across many areas of partnership.



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President Trump is also seeking to shift the responsibilities of state and local law enforcement by requiring that DHS authorize them to perform the functions of immigration officers to the maximum extent permitted by law, under Section 287(g) agreements or via other unspecified avenues. While his executive order does not provide a justification for other legal authorities that would permit such agreements, the history of the 287(g) program reveals the impacts on public safety when local law enforcement adds the function of immigration policing to their budgets and responsibilities. State and local governments must bear significant costs to participate in this program, which takes away from already stretched police departments and may divert officers away from addressing local crime.

Multiple studies have also found that the 287(g) program may harm state and local law enforcement's relationship with immigrants. The Major Cities Chiefs note that "[e]nforcement of routine civil immigration by police would undermine the trust and cooperation with immigrant communities which are essential elements of community oriented policing." Indeed, President Trump's plan to turn as many state and local law enforcement agencies as he can into an arm of ICE risks diminishing trust in law enforcement and making immigrant communities less likely to report crimes or seek protection when needed.

The administration's overreach into local priorities regarding public safety and immigration enforcement will therefore intimidate state and local government

officials, threaten harm to Americans by withholding vital community resources, and be ineffective at improving public safety.

Militarizing immigration enforcement and declaring an “invasion” at the border jeopardizes national security

On top of actions that divert law enforcement officials from their core mission, the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant actions use specious national security justifications that distract from legitimate security threats by malign foreign actors. President Trump’s executive order declaring a national emergency at the border calls for the use of military resources to construct the border wall and other security features as well as increased deployments of active duty troops to assist DHS with border security. According to military experts, expanded deployments to the southwest border may cause units to miss out on the essential training needed to effectively defend the country from adversaries.

Additionally, President Trump issued a separate executive order that would require the U.S. Northern Command to take on additional border enforcement missions, potentially shifting responsibility for border security from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to the Department of Defense (DOD). CBP has the training, authorities, and experience to facilitate legitimate trade and travel; to process migrants; and to interdict human trafficking, drug smuggling, and national security threats. The U.S. military, meanwhile, is trained to defend and win the nation’s wars against foreign military forces. Tasking the military with immigration enforcement undermines the United States’ ability to counter legitimate threats to U.S. national security from malign actors, as these deployments harm readiness and take troops away from critical training and exercises designed to protect America’s interests around the world. These actions increase the risk to the military and would put service members at the center of a mission they are neither trained nor equipped for. Border security is not a military mission, and DOD should continue to remain in a supporting role to DHS, rather than take on any civilian law enforcement functions.



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President Trump’s executive orders also repeatedly use the inaccurate label of “invasion” to describe the entry of immigrants into the country. The language in these EOs, as well as that of Trump’s close advisers, attempts to frame an increase in the foreign-born population as an “invasion,” but this has no basis in fact. As multiple legal experts have pointed out, immigration is not an invasion under any lawful, historical understanding of the meaning of the word as included in the Constitution or as interpreted by its writers at the Constitutional Convention. Trump’s executive orders blatantly contradict this long-standing understanding of the invasion reference in the Constitution and wrongly attempt to portray immigrants as the equivalent of troops sent by a

foreign power to attack the U.S. militarily. The portrayal of immigrants as “invaders” parallels rhetoric that has been used to justify acts of violence across the country targeting immigrants and U.S. citizens.

In addition to this fallacious use of the word invasion, these actions could set the stage for President Trump to invoke the Alien Enemies Act, a much-maligned law from 1798 that has been used in past instances of wartime to conduct racist actions against immigrants, such as the detention of Japanese Americans during World War II. Reviving this law would allow Trump to potentially detain and deport immigrants based solely on their country of origin. Notably, Congress has previously declared that the Alien Enemies Act led to a fundamental injustice due to its historical use against Japanese Americans. Invoking the act would demonize huge swaths of the immigrant community in the United States with no history of criminal or foreign military activity, targeting them for incarceration and removal simply because of where they come from.

By perpetuating the baseless portrayal of immigrants as invaders, Trump’s EOs traffic in racist tropes and provide fertile ground for continued demonization of immigrants as hostile and unwelcome in the United States. This demonizing, inaccurate rhetoric, along with the militarization of immigration enforcement, demonstrates how Trump is utilizing the pretext of national security to advance an anti-immigrant agenda that detracts from the country’s ability to counter true foreign threats to Americans’ safety.

Mass deportation and the suspension of legal immigration pathways would hurt all Americans’ economic security

The Trump administration’s mass deportation agenda—if operationalized—would have a profound and far-reaching negative impact on the economic security of Americans from both a fiscal perspective and across various industries that are critical to the healthy functioning of the country’s economy.

From a fiscal standpoint, deporting all undocumented immigrants would result in a massive loss of state, local, and federal tax revenue. In 2022 alone, undocumented immigrants paid \$46.8 billion in federal taxes and \$29.3 billion in state and local taxes. The collective loss of this federal and state tax revenue would undermine essential services that Americans depend on, including funding for teacher salaries, road maintenance, and bridge repairs. Furthermore, Americans’ access to Social Security and Medicare is partly funded by undocumented immigrants, who contribute to these trust funds via payroll taxes without being eligible for the benefits they help sustain. In 2022, undocumented immigrants paid \$25.7 billion in Social Security taxes and \$6.4 billion in Medicare taxes.

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TRUMP’S ANTI-IMMIGRATION AGENDA

\$46.8B

Undocumented immigrants’ federal tax payments in 2022

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Undocumented immigrants’ Medicare tax contributions in 2022

Beyond the fiscal toll, mass deportation would shrink the U.S workforce and severely disrupt the economic security of Americans who depend on the work of undocumented workers in industries such as construction, agriculture, and hospitality to put a roof over their heads and food on their tables. Although the economic impact of the Trump administration's push for mass deportation will be even greater in the future, the impact is already being felt across several sectors. For example, small construction companies that rely on immigrants are noticing a chilling effect, with undocumented workers afraid to travel to certain work areas over fear of deportation; similarly, there are already reports of farm workers not showing up to work due to fear of deportation.

The potential large-scale deportation of undocumented workers could lead to a more than 10 percent increase in food prices across the board over the next four years, according to one comprehensive study. The same study also indicates that similar price increases of 6 percent to nearly 12 percent could occur in a wide range of industries—including manufacturing, energy, and the service sector—as a result of the Trump administration's planned mass deportation efforts. These statistics contradict President Trump's frequent promises to lower food costs and help "defeat" inflation. In addition, businesses across the country are already feeling the negative effects of losing immigrant customers who are avoiding public places due to threats of deportation. On top of this, as the American economy contracts from losing the contributions of deported undocumented workers, businesses may find themselves once again having to lay off U.S. workers, and U.S. workers' wages may fall, as has occurred under previous deportation programs.

In addition to laying the groundwork for upending the U.S. labor market with his harmful mass deportation plans, Trump has also terminated lawful migration pathways to the United States, including indefinitely suspending refugee admissions under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Not only does this move fly in the face of America's long-standing, bipartisan tradition of welcoming people fleeing persecution and violence around the world, such actions shrinking the labor force also have damaging impacts on the U.S. economy. Refugees are significant contributors to the U.S. economy, generating more than \$60 billion in disposable income in 2019 alone. The Trump administration's plan to both carry out mass deportations and halt lawful pathways such as the refugee program would deplete the U.S. labor force and could result in significant losses in U.S. gross domestic product—and, in turn, higher prices and job losses that affect Americans across the country.

In contrast to the Trump administration's harmful mass deportation agenda, an earned path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants living in the United States—something a majority of Americans support—would boost economic growth, raise wages, and create new jobs for Americans.

Conclusion

Donald Trump has relentlessly seized on the political effectiveness of weaponizing immigration as an issue. It is one thing to use an issue as a campaign tactic, though, and quite another to operationalize dangerous campaign rhetoric as the core of U.S. national security and public safety policies. The Trump administration's elevation of immigration enforcement above other urgent national security and public safety challenges in a reckless attempt to fulfill a campaign promise risks Americans' security.

The Trump administration wants Americans to support this dangerous diversion of federal, state, and local law enforcement—and even the U.S. military—away

from their core public safety and national security mandates to instead carry out Trump's harmful mass deportation agenda. But shredding commonsense immigration enforcement priorities, turning law enforcement and soldiers into the immigration police, and bullying states and cities that do not go along with the Trump administration's approach will not make America safer. Furthermore, the administration's indiscriminate mass deportation plans—if operationalized as intended—would send shockwaves throughout the country and do nothing to increase Americans' security and prosperity as Trump has promised.

Americans need the White House to deliver policies that actually keep communities safe and produce a stronger, pro-growth economy. The hard work of immigrants—working side by side with U.S. born workers in every sector of the economy—helps fuel American prosperity. Americans deserve better than the rash actions of the first weeks of President Trump's second term. All Americans need safe communities and a working and fair immigration system. Their interests are poorly served by the early actions taken by the Trump White House to carry out an ideological, anti-immigrant agenda at the expense of security.



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Americans are very concerned about the country's badly broken immigration system and how it has affected their lives, including the resource challenges faced by local communities as a result of the federal government's failure to address long-standing issues. Instead of responsibly tackling these challenges, the Trump administration has exploited these concerns, putting on a show while ripping families apart, rather than actually working to fix the broken immigration system. In contrast to the Trump administration's cruel actions, the national interest would be better served by a commonsense prioritization of law enforcement resources to more effectively hold accountable those who would do us harm, while creating an earned pathway to legal status for undocumented immigrants who pose no threat and have deep roots in American communities.

Instead of creating a modern, orderly, humane, and workable immigration system that would strengthen the nation and grow the economy for all Americans, the Trump administration is threatening American states and cities. The administration should be working with Congress to adopt bipartisan solutions to meaningfully strengthen border security and public safety, modernize the immigration system and clear backlogs facing millions of immigrants waiting in line, better protect the most vulnerable immigrants seeking safety from persecution and violence, and create orderly, lawful migration pathways to the United States. The United States needs a strong and humane approach, not the cruelty, theatricality, and empty promises of the first weeks of Trump's second term.

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