

Trump administration

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Revealed: Trump administration retreats on combating human trafficking and child exploitation

Experts say decades of progress are under threat; Trump officials say administration remains committed to fighting trafficking and sex abuse



📷 The Department of Homeland Security seal. Photograph: Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

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The **Trump administration** has aggressively rolled back efforts across the federal government to combat human trafficking, a Guardian investigation has found.

The sweeping retreat threatens to negate decades of progress in the drive to prevent sexual slavery, forced labor and child sexual exploitation, according to legal experts, former government officials and anti-trafficking advocates. They say the administration's moves are impeding efforts to prosecute perpetrators and protect survivors in the United States and around the world.

“It's been a widespread and multi-pronged attack on survivors that leaves all of us less safe and leaves survivors with few options,” said Jean Bruggeman, executive director of Freedom Network USA, a **national coalition** of service providers, researchers and trafficking survivors.

Under Trump, key initiatives for fighting human trafficking have been cut back at the US Department of State, Department of Justice, Department of Labor, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Guardian found. Senior officials and other staffers have been forced out, workers shifted to other priorities and grants delayed or cancelled.

At DHS, Trump has ordered agents formerly dedicated to investigating and arresting human traffickers to focus on deporting immigrants. Current and former DHS staffers interviewed by the Guardian confirmed that these investigators' day-to-day work has been broadly shifted toward deportations and away from investigating “major crimes” with “real victims”.

At the state department, the Trump administration slashed **more than 70%** of the workforce at the agency's office to monitor and combat trafficking in persons (Tip office), which is responsible for leading anti-trafficking efforts across the US government. The department has also held up grants for nonprofit organizations fighting trafficking around the world, putting their operations and services at risk.

In addition, the administration has also delayed release of an annual report that documents human trafficking across the US and more than 185 other countries. Federal law requires that the report - which charts global trends in human trafficking and provides a country-by-country assessment of efforts to combat it - be provided to Congress no later than 30 June. Multiple sources told the Guardian that the report has been completed but had not been provided to Congress.

Anti-trafficking advocates say the federal government's retreat will allow many human traffickers to operate with increased impunity.

“The reality is that perpetrators will go free” and “international crimes will continue”, said Beth Van Schaack, ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice during the Biden administration. “It will take years to rebuild the expertise in our law enforcement and diplomatic corps.”



📷 Beth Van Schaack testifies before the Senate foreign relations committee on Capitol Hill on 31 May 2023. Photograph: Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

The Guardian sent the White House 23 questions and details of the issues examined in this story. Trump spokesperson Taylor Rogers did not answer the questions. She instead provided a three-sentence response that called the Guardian’s findings “total nonsense” and accused Joe Biden of “coddling and apologizing for criminals and sexual predators”.

The statement added that “President Trump has totally secured our border to stop the trafficking of children” and “implemented tough-on-crime policies” that go after human traffickers and “hold these disgusting monsters accountable to the fullest extent of the law”.

In public statements, Trump administration officials have highlighted its deportation drive as a signature strategy in its fight against trafficking. The administration says this approach has led to the arrest or removal of hundreds of “**criminal illegals**”, including gang-related traffickers.

A state department spokesperson said that “human trafficking is an issue which the Trump administration takes very seriously.” The DHS assistant

secretary, Tricia McLaughlin, told the Guardian that under President Trump and homeland security secretary Kristi Noem, “we are dismantling sex trafficking networks and saving children from sexual exploitation and abuse.”

Advocates say the focus on detention and deportation leaves victims trapped.

“Traffickers exploit the fear of immigration enforcement and the police so they don’t come forward,” said Stephanie Richard, director of the Sunita Jain Anti-Trafficking Initiative at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. “That’s how they end up being forced to provide labor or sexual services.”

Richard said the federal government’s rollback of support to victims of trafficking has become so severe that she has stopped collaborating closely with federal agencies and instead now works only with state and local officials, who are less likely to put survivors at risk.

Reversing course

The fight against human trafficking has been a rare bipartisan issue in recent American history.

Republicans and Democrats worked together to pass the landmark Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and over the last quarter century have approved numerous reauthorizations and enhancements. Evangelical Christians and other faith-based groups have been a powerful force among the network of advocacy groups fighting human trafficking and child sexual exploitation.



📷 Homeland security secretary Kristi Noem. Photograph: Shutterstock

Advocates of varying political views praised many aspects of the **first Trump administration's work** on these issues from 2017 to 2021. But things have changed as Trump and his appointees have shifted course after his re-election - and as many progressives and conservatives have blasted his administration for refusing to release the full investigative files related to the late Jeffrey Epstein, currently the world's most infamous sex trafficker.

On Tuesday the top Democrat on the US House judiciary committee, Representative Jamie Raskin of Maryland, released **a memo** accusing the Trump administration of “systematically dismantling the offices and programs we rely on to combat human trafficking and prosecute sex crimes”. Raskin said the administration’s “sympathetic alignment with powerful sex traffickers and rapists goes far beyond its efforts to suppress the truth of what happened in one explosive case”.

The second Trump administration's retreat from the fight against human trafficking began on the first day of his second term, when he signed an **executive order** that changed the mission of DHS's homeland security investigations (HSI) unit, which had long operated under a **mandate** to pursue crimes with an international nexus - including child sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

In his order, Trump declared that investigating “illegal entry” and addressing the “unlawful presence of aliens” would now be HSI’s “primary mission”.

By March, **Reuters reported** that “scores of agents” who specialize in child sexual exploitation investigations had been reassigned to immigration enforcement.

Special agents who previously investigated human trafficking and child sex crimes were offered training on how to lure immigrants out of their homes for interrogation in so-called “knock and talk” visits, the news agency reported.

The Guardian interviewed more than a dozen current and former DHS agents, analysts and officials - including some who experienced the agency’s shifting focus first-hand in early 2025. Though some have accepted the new mission, the Guardian found that for many, morale has cratered. Some opted to depart.

“We were hired to stop major crimes,” said Eric Balliet, a former HSI official who worked for the agency under four different presidents and retired last year as the chief of the integrity investigations division at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice). “These are cases where there are real victims - child sexual exploitation and human trafficking victims. And then to now have to go out and basically comb the streets and look for folks [through immigration raids], it’s a bad use of resources.”

McLaughlin, the DHS assistant secretary, told the Guardian that “after four years of not being allowed to do their jobs,” Ice and HSI agents “are excited to be able to do their jobs again”.

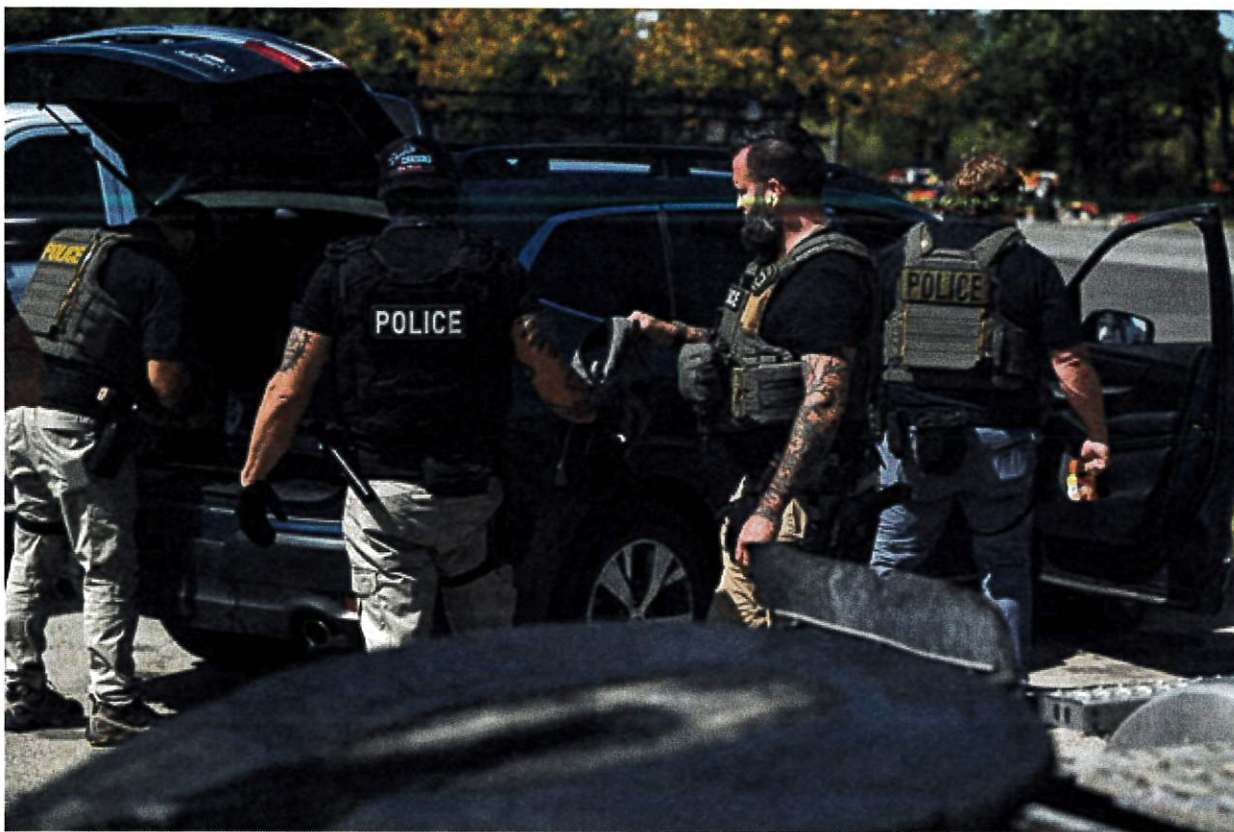
John Tobon, who retired from HSI as the assistant director of the division for countering transnational organized crime in January 2025, said human trafficking cases are hard enough to prosecute and diverting HSI agents away from investigating major crimes makes it “easier for exploiters and traffickers to get away with their crimes”. “It’s impunity for traffickers,” he said.

“Fighting human trafficking used to be a bipartisan issue,” said Helen Stiver, who was once forced into sex work and now serves as a consultant to organizations that combat trafficking. “But now the climate has changed. It’s part of the immigration agenda because there are some people who were trafficked who are immigrants here.”

In some cases, immigrants cooperating with human trafficking investigations have been arrested, locked up or deported. In May, at a routine immigration court hearing in Orange county, California, Ice agents detained two workers who were assisting law enforcement after reporting they had been trafficked.

“Upon walking out into the hallway, they were apprehended, cuffed and taken away,” their attorney, Panida Rzonca of the Thai Community Development Center, said.

Rzonca said she told the Ice agents that the two were victims of human trafficking but agents’ response was “that’s not up to us, we’ll sort it out later.” Soon after, the two migrants were transported to Texas and deported to Venezuela, she said.



📷 Federal agents stand around after arresting an individual in Chicago on 9 September 2025. Photograph: Joshua Lott/The Washington Post via Getty Images

McLaughlin, Trump’s DHS assistant secretary, declined to comment on the arrest and deportation.

Federal law allows victims of human trafficking to apply for a special “T visa”, allowing them to stay in the country legally and work. The second Trump administration has issued **guidance** that makes it easier for Ice to arrest and deport people who say they are victims of crime, including human

trafficking. A separate [policy memo](#) makes it clear that the administration will seek to deport anyone who is denied a T visa.

Between January and March, DHS denied more T visa applications than it approved for the first time in the agency's history.

At the same time, the number of trafficking victims waiting for a decision on a T visa application has swollen to 26,000 people - three times the number of just two years ago.

McLaughlin said the T visa program was intended to help a limited number of crime victims and aid law enforcement investigations, but had become a "free for all" under Biden.

"Nearly every day Ice arrests pedophiles, kidnappers, child smugglers and sex traffickers, including those who entered our country illegally," she said.

DHS is also the lead agency on a global effort to fight online child exploitation and abuse, which can involve human trafficking. Kristen Best helmed this effort as coordinator for countering crimes of exploitation and protecting victims. In this role, she convened tech companies and law enforcement and worked with parents, children, teachers and advocates.

On 3 September, however, Best was placed on leave along with five other staffers with DHS's central policy staff and office of international affairs - with their badges, facility access, email and network access disabled.

No explanation was given in the dismissal email. Three individuals who worked closely with Best told the Guardian they worried what her ouster would mean for the administration's efforts to fight online child exploitation, but asked that their names not be used for fear of retaliation.

The department declined to answer questions about Best and her colleagues. Best could not be reached for comment.

'Amidst a global crisis'

Another sign of the Trump administration's retreat on human trafficking emerged on 30 June. That day - as required by the landmark federal anti-trafficking law - the state department was supposed to submit its annual Trafficking in Persons (Tip) report to Congress.

The Tip report was not released that day and has not been released since. Four former and current state department officials told the Guardian that the

report had already been drafted and received high-level department approvals.

A release event for the report - scheduled at the department on 30 June, featuring Secretary of State Marco Rubio and worldwide “heroes” who combat human trafficking - was canceled and has not been rescheduled.

In the 14 years it has been produced, the release of the Tip report has never been delayed beyond July.



📷 Secretary of State Marco Rubio speaks to media at Ben Gurion international airport in Israel on Tuesday. Photograph: Nathan Howard/AP

The report is an exhaustive evaluation of global anti-trafficking efforts across more than 185 countries, grading foreign governments on their efforts to prevent and address the problem. The report is seen as a powerful diplomatic tool on human rights-related issues. Countries that get poor marks are ineligible for many forms of US foreign aid.

Olga Dunebabina, spokesperson for the human rights group La Strada-Ukraine, said the desire to avoid US sanctions has been critical to getting the Ukrainian government to focus on the issue. Last year’s Tip report found that Ukraine failed to meet minimum anti-trafficking standards and laid out a long list of **recommendations**, including urging Ukraine to step up efforts to screen for victims among vulnerable populations, such as those displaced by Russia’s invasion.

Without the Tip report, Dunebabina said, “the question of anti-trafficking has gone down” in her country - if the Ukrainian government believes the report will not be released in the future, that problem will only get worse.

The report is produced by the state department’s office to monitor and combat trafficking in persons, which plays a critical role in coordinating the US government’s domestic and international response to trafficking. But in July, that office was **guttled** - staffing is down by 71% to less than three dozen employees.

During a **July hearing** of the House committee on foreign affairs, Representative Sarah McBride of Delaware pushed for explanations from deputy secretary of state Michael Rigas. He told McBride that there had been staffing redundancies and most of the people fired “were actually writing reports. They were not actually engaging in the field as Foreign Service officers.”

“It boggles the mind and defies belief that 71% of this department was so dispensable amidst a global crisis of human trafficking,” McBride told Rigas. “I am not surprised that the Maga base is now questioning this administration’s commitment to human trafficking, globally and domestically.”

In its statement to the Guardian, the state department said “it is false to assume that more staff equates to better results. During the reorganization meticulous attention was paid to ensure the Tip office could continue to carry out its core functions and statutory requirements including its reports to Congress.”



📷 Michael Rigas testifies during a Senate foreign relations committee confirmation hearing in Washington on 4 March 2025. Photograph: Kent Nishimura/Bloomberg via Getty Images

State department grants for anti-trafficking work have also been pulled or stalled. The office has historically awarded approximately \$80m a year to support research, training and victim services. Some of these grants have been temporarily withdrawn, forcing groups to halt training and support for trafficking survivors. The department has not issued a call for new anti-trafficking grant opportunities since January 2025 and the availability of future funding remains uncertain.

A researcher whose grant was frozen said the funding blocks “are felt by so many in so many ways”, not to mention the “potential national security implications of unchecked human trafficking”. The researcher added: “You are taking away critical resources that protect survivors of trafficking and vulnerable communities across the world.”

The researcher declined to be named out of fear it would further jeopardize their organization’s ability to do its work.

The state department’s anti-trafficking office has been without a leader since Trump started his second term. The federal anti-trafficking law requires that the Tip office be directed by an “ambassador-at-large to monitor and combat trafficking in persons”.

Biden's appointee, Cindy Dyer, a federal prosecutor under George W Bush, stepped down in January. Trump has not nominated a successor.

While there are sometimes delays in naming the ambassador, a vacancy has never previously occurred at a time when advocates and government workers were as concerned about the president's commitment to fighting human trafficking.

Human rights advocates and current and former state department officials said that the lack of an ambassador sends a message to the world that the issue is not a priority and deprives the US of an official who can advance America's international anti-trafficking agenda.

'Worst case scenario'

Inside the US, the justice department's office for victims of crime has long supported a vast network of service providers who work to rescue survivors of human trafficking and provide emergency housing, mental healthcare and other help.

In Trump's second term, many of these providers are worried they may be forced to end programs or scale back services at the end of the month, because millions of dollars in grants approved by Congress have not been released - and funding appropriated in previous years is set to expire.

"We're planning for the worst case scenario," said Hailey Virusso, director of anti-trafficking services at Preble Street, a non-profit in Maine that relies on federal grants to support services for workers trafficked into massage parlors, teenage runaways and victims of forced labor in the state's seafood and agriculture industries.

Its latest grant, \$950,000 to provide emergency services to trafficking victims across the state, expires on 30 September. "We're still answering the phone," Virusso said. "We're trying to do our best, but we also believe in transparency. So we're letting people know services may look different."

The organization's work has **won praise** from Maine Republican senator Susan Collins, the powerful chair of the Senate appropriations committee, who has in the past criticized the Trump administration for failing to spend funds as directed by Congress.

Collins declined comment for this story.



📷 Senator Susan Collins at the Capitol on 4 September 2025. Photograph: Graeme Sloan/EPA

In its response to a query from the Guardian, the justice department said money appropriated by Congress would be spent, but that organizations that received money in the past wouldn't necessarily do so in the future - as appropriations would be made in accordance with Trump administration priorities.

“The Department of Justice can remain focused on two critical priorities at the same time: prosecute criminals who exploit children and ensure the efficient use of taxpayer dollars,” a spokesperson said. The department said grants for organizations that fight human trafficking, which typically would have their applications posted in the spring, would be rolled out over the next few weeks.

Another group facing imminent loss of funding is the Los Angeles-based Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (Cast), which was founded in 1998 after 72 Thai workers were discovered living in modern-day slavery and debt bondage. Cast's \$950,000 justice department grant - supporting a 24/7 hotline, housing and other emergency help - is about to run out.

“Sometimes, when the call comes in, the survivor needs help escaping. They've somehow gotten away from their trafficker and are in a traditional hotel or in front of a 7-Eleven and we either send a ride-share or one of our

staff members to go pick them up and take them to a shelter,” said Kay Buck, Cast’s chief executive.

In addition to money, the justice department has also provided training for organizations that work to prevent trafficking and support survivors. An online library of training materials and other resources - including a [human trafficking action research toolkit](#) and a [human trafficking task force e-guide](#) - has disappeared from the justice department website.

A [post](#) on the website said the materials had been removed “in accordance with recent Executive Orders and related guidance”.

‘Political calculation’

Global workers rights programs aimed at fighting child labor and human trafficking have also been in the Trump administration’s crosshairs. In March, the Department of Labor slashed about [\\$500m in funding for 69 programs](#) that tackled everything from forced labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton industry to abuses on Mexico’s farms. Some organizations learned about cuts to the department’s international labor affairs bureau through social media posts from Elon Musk’s “department of government efficiency” (Doge).

Three grantees have filed a lawsuit demanding that the department reinstate the funds. The case is pending.

Courtney Parella, a spokesperson for the labor department, told the Guardian that “Americans don’t want their hard-earned tax dollars bankrolling an ‘America last’ agenda. That’s why we’re improving accountability, prioritizing investments in the American workforce, and bolstering protections for children and workers here at home.”

The Trump administration points to its work protecting minors who have migrated without their parents as [central to its fight against human trafficking](#). But it has simultaneously sought to cut Department of Health and Human Services funding for legal services that help protect unaccompanied migrant children.

Under federal law, HHS is required to protect and care for children who enter the US on their own. The anti-trafficking law specifically makes HHS responsible for screening the sponsors who will serve as their guardians and providing access to lawyers who can “protect them from mistreatment, exploitation and trafficking”.

The Trump administration has been critical of HHS's sponsor screening, which led to the unprecedented deployment of immigration agents, beginning in February, to conduct "welfare checks" at the homes and schools of unaccompanied minors - sometimes in tactical gear.

DHS's McLaughlin said its investigators conduct these checks to ensure these children "are safe and not being exploited".

Weeks after the administration began sending immigration agents to do welfare checks, it **terminated legal services funding**, putting more than 25,000 minors in limbo. Children as young as five were showing up in immigration court without lawyers. After a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction, the contract was restored. But it must be requested every three months with no guarantee it will be renewed.

Anti-trafficking advocates question the dissonance in Trump's approach to unaccompanied children. "If it was about trafficking and kids, they would have used someone other than law enforcement, someone who works with kids, to make sure they are okay," said Aparna Patrie, a lawyer with the immigrant rights group Roots Reborn. "And they would not be sending kids to court by themselves by cutting off funding for legal representation."

HHS did not respond to a request for comment.

Martina Vandenberg, founder of the Human Trafficking Legal Center, also questions the president's commitment to the cause.

"For Trump, trafficking is a bludgeon that's deployed to accomplish political ends," said Vandenberg, who has represented trafficking victims and trained more than 5,000 pro-bono attorneys. "It's not about survivors. It's not about justice. There is no conscience or policy behind this - there is only political calculation."

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At this unsettling time