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Gun crime cases fall as agents shift to immigration crackdown

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Federal agents have shifted attention away from serious gun crimes and shady weapons dealers to focus on President Donald Trump's crackdown on undocumented immigrants and deployments to patrol cities, according to current and former officials and data reviewed by CNN.

As part of a surge of 23,000 federal officers from a slew of agencies sent to work on Trump's deportation efforts, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives has reassigned 80% of special agents to immigration cases, according to a former senior official at the agency. Other agents have been assigned to surges Trump has ordered to Washington, DC, Los Angeles and other cities.

ATF is just one of several federal law enforcement agencies that have felt a notable impact on normal duties while assisting with the immigration mission, a CNN review has found.



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ATF has lost one in every seven firearms license investigators to job reductions and retirements this year – and stands to lose 550 of the remaining 600 under Trump's new proposed budget. The agency also has adopted onerous new rules that make it nearly impossible to revoke licenses from firearms dealers who fail to do mandated background checks or who break other laws, according to former and current ATF officials.

have and drive significant crime nationally.

Critics say the effects at ATF reflect the broader costs of Trump's relentless immigration focus and his push to cut down agency staffing – a trend reflected in a drop in criminal referrals to the Department of Justice from other agencies, including an 8.6% decrease in Drug Enforcement Administration cases through July compared with a year ago, according to records obtained by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse. ATF has seen a 2% decline, that data show.

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But the drop in drug and gun cases is likely steeper than those statistics show, current and former agency officials said. The statistics don't indicate what kind of criminal charge each agency has filed with the DOJ – meaning that referrals from arrests made by ATF agents working immigration raids or city patrols, rather than gun cases, could be included in the data, TRAC said.

At the FBI, 23% of agents have been detailed to focus on immigration, according to statistics shared with CNN by Virginia Sen. Mark Warner's office – including about 45% of agents in the 25 biggest field offices. Similarly, about three-fourths of DEA agents, a third of US deputy marshals, and nearly all Homeland Security Investigations agents have been diverted to work on immigration, according to ICE documents detailing assignments through the end of August that were first obtained by the Cato Institute.

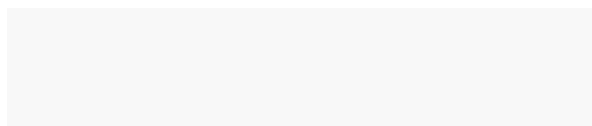
crackdown on crime. In a statement, the White House said its efforts using federal officers have led to the capture of gang members and a renewed focus on law enforcement.



Border Patrol Chief Greg Bovino with agents confronting demonstrators outside of an immigrant processing center on September 27 in Broadview, Illinois. *(Scott Olson/Getty Images)*

“Despite fake news narratives, the Administration is holding all criminals accountable whether they’re illegal aliens or American citizens,” White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson told CNN.

The DOJ, in a statement, also disputed that the immigration push was affecting other criminal enforcement.



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“Our mission is to prosecute criminals, get illegal guns off our streets, and protect all Americans from violent crime, which can be done while simultaneously assisting our partners with immigration enforcement efforts,” a DOJ spokesperson said in a statement.


The DOJ statement also said ATF agents have charged more than 4,000 suspects since January and seized more than 22,000 weapons. It isn’t clear how these numbers compare to a year earlier.

However, a former senior ATF official said the vast majority of suspects arrested by the agency this year came in immigration cases – not gun investigations.

“It’s what they’re not doing,” said Scott Shuchart, a former ICE assistant director for regulatory affairs and policy. “They are harming the country by undermining federal law enforcement... They are going to get Americans killed so they can deport foreigners.”

Inside one agency’s turmoil

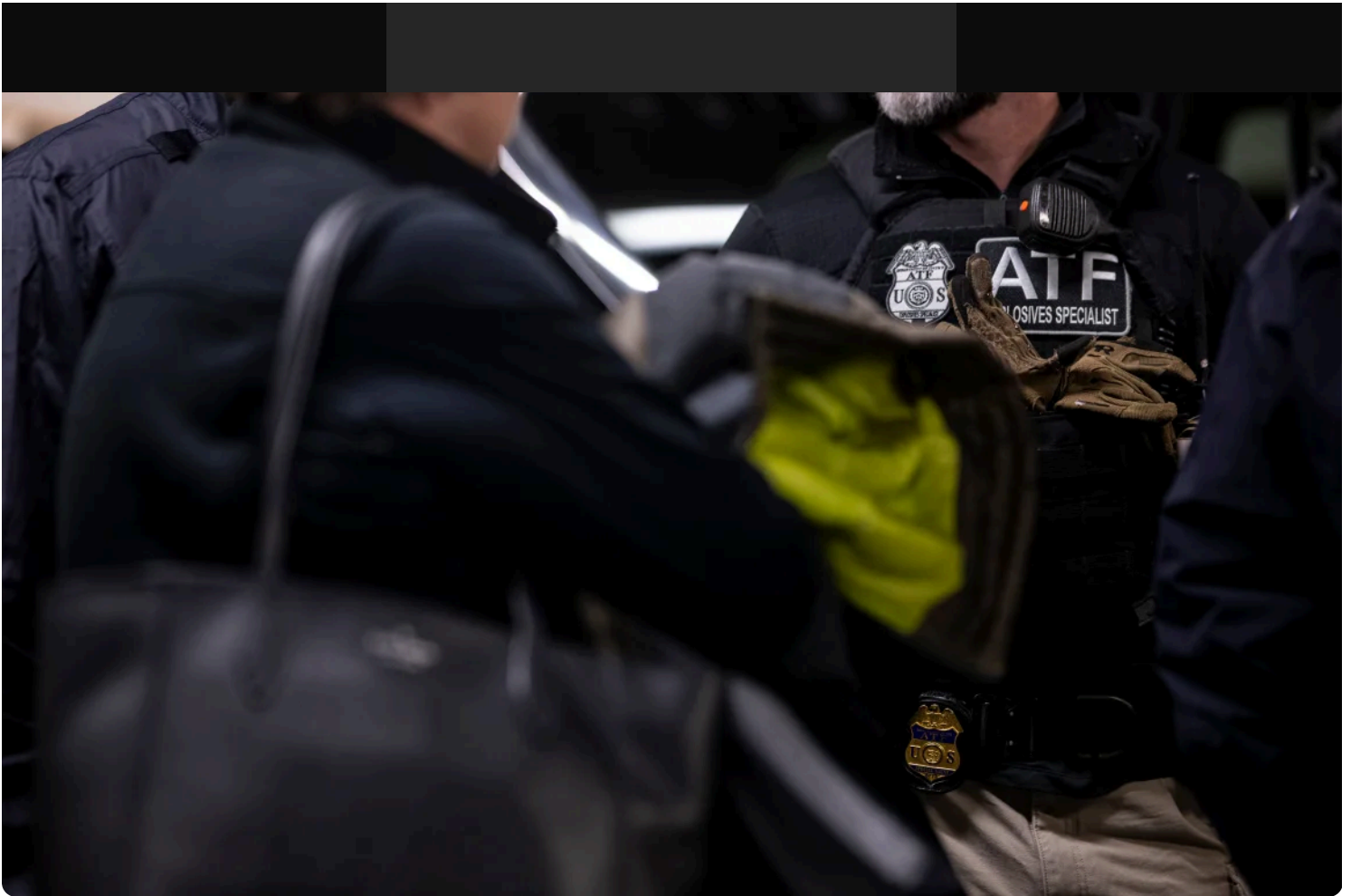
The ATF has been one of the hardest hit agencies by the White House’s diversion of federal officers.



The agency's roughly 5,000 employees include about 600 investigators, who conduct thousands of inspections annually of gun sellers and federal explosives licensees, and about 2,500 special agents, who investigate arson, bombings, the illegal use and trafficking of firearms or explosives, and incidents of terrorism, among other crimes.

Work in both those sections has slowed sharply, current and former ATF employees who spoke to CNN said, with agents moved to help with immigration enforcement and crime prevention in DC and elsewhere.

“The number of criminal investigations has bottomed out,” said a former senior ATF executive, who asked not to be named. “ATF agents essentially aren’t opening cases solely based on domestic firearms trafficking.”




Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) agents, along with other federal law enforcement agencies, attend a pre-enforcement meeting in Chicago, Illinois, on January 26.

(Christopher Dilts/Bloomberg/Getty Images)

While ATF officials expect those agents to return to their normal work at some point, the agency also faces a more than \$400 million cut in the Trump administration's proposed budget for the new fiscal year beginning October 1 – roughly a quarter of its full budget.

Former ATF officials said the bureau already has lost more than 100 inspectors and supervisors to attrition and reductions-in-force this year.

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The Trump administration’s policy choices also have deeply affected the agency – particularly around gun regulations.

In early April, the ATF **repealed** the Biden administration’s “Zero Tolerance Policy,” which allowed inspectors to recommend expedited revocation of firearms licenses for certain serious violations. That Biden policy had resulted in an increase in revocations, up to 195 in 2024.

Attorney General Pam Bondi said the rule had “unfairly targeted law-abiding gun owners.”

ATF, which previously made revocations data and notices of revocations public, hasn’t published that data since Trump took office.



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But as one result of the policy change, those inspectors still on the job are taking away far fewer licenses from gun sellers who break the law, agents said. Now, regardless of the severity of the violation, any license revocations must be approved by a string of senior leaders, internal ATF emails obtained by CNN show.

ATF investigator, who asked not to be named because they were speaking without authorization. “As soon as the new administration was in, we got directed from leadership to put a full stop on all revocations of federal firearms licenses.”

The investigator added, “We can’t revoke someone’s license; at most what we can do is issue a warning letter or have a warning conference. Even that is just a slap on the wrist. It isn’t anything that would put these guys out of business.”



Members of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives assist the Metropolitan Police at a traffic stop in Washington, DC, on August 16. *(Alex Kent/Reuters)*

ATF, in a statement on its website, said that the bureau is “ushering in a new chapter – marked by transparency, accountability, and partnership with the firearms industry.”

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a former senior bureau official who asked not to be named. Previously, about a third of ATF's criminal firearm trafficking investigations stemmed from leads that came via inspections, the official said.

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“Without that information, there will be a drastic decline in the number of traffickers that are identified and investigated. So, this has the potential to not only crush law enforcement’s ability to obtain any investigative lead through (gun) trace(s), but also, it’s going to completely hamper ATF’s ability to investigate firearms trafficking,” the official said.

Pam Hicks, former ATF chief counsel, said that cutting inspections “makes it less likely a crime gun can be completely traced next time. It undermines the entire system of how firearms laws work, of how the system is designed to work.”

Fewer inspections may also make it easier for traffickers who sell guns to cartels in Mexico.

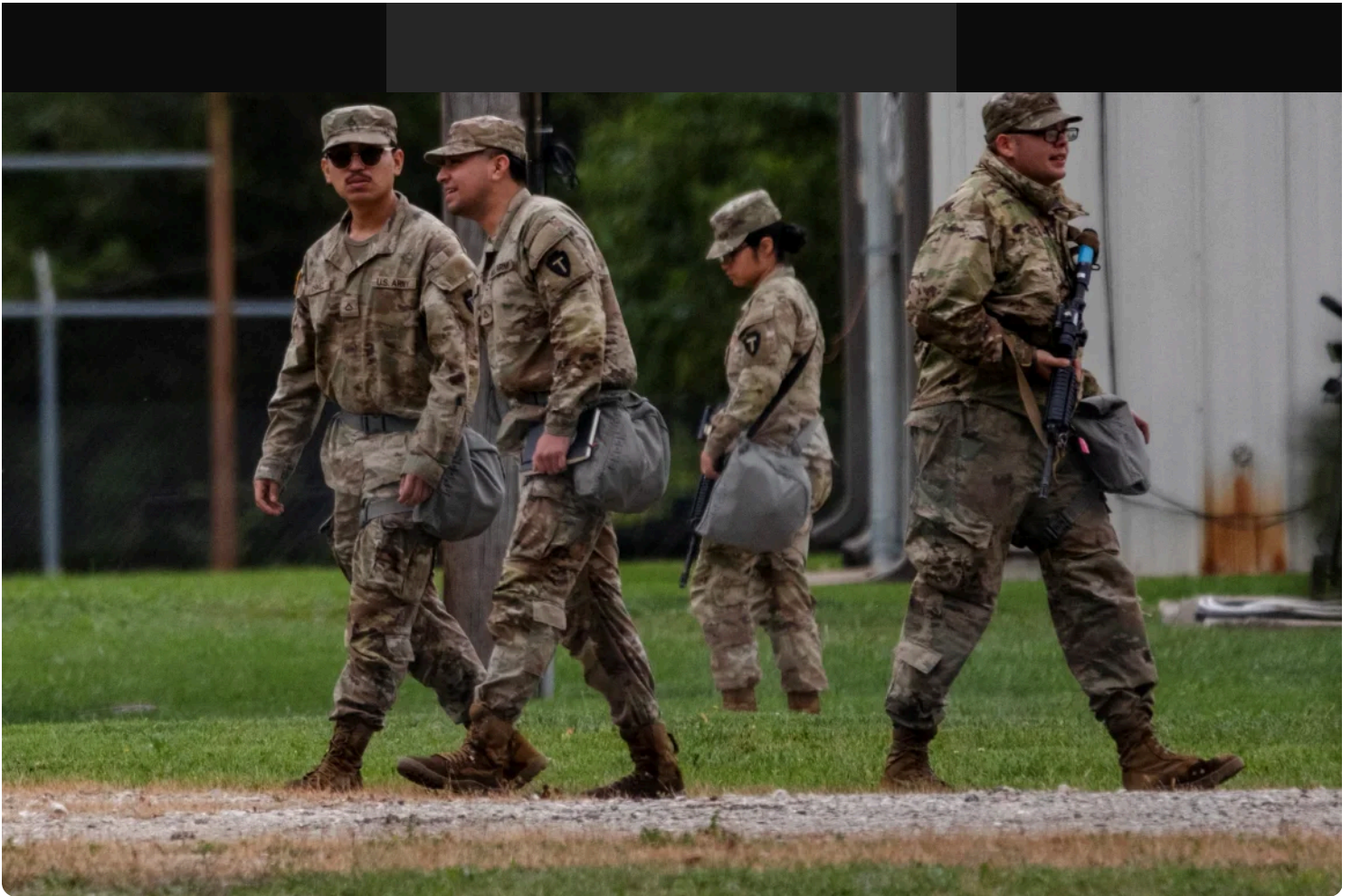
“Seventy percent of weapons recovered in Mexico trace back to the US,” said Topher McDougal, a professor at the University of San Diego who has studied gun trafficking. He and a colleague used gun-tracing data that the US government doesn’t release to the public but does provide to the Mexican government that was leaked in a hack of Mexican military records last year.



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That data showed that firearms license inspections significantly affect gun trafficking to Mexico, McDougal said. On average, a licensee who received a warning letter or notice of violation from the ATF was “90% less likely to have its weapons show up in Mexico the following year,” he said.

Even the trade association for the firearms industry expressed concern about the severity of the proposed ATF budget and staffing cuts, saying they “might be better done with a scalpel instead of a meat cleaver.”




Texas National Guard troops walk through the Joliet Army Reserve Training Center in Elwood, Illinois. *(Jim Vondruska/Reuters)*

Continued diversions

The Trump administration has not said how long it plans to keep federal law enforcement agents on immigration assignments. At Trump's direction, agents from 13 federal agencies, including ATF, FBI and DEA, recently deployed in Memphis, Tennessee.

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Federal law enforcement agencies are exempt from furloughs during the government shutdown that started October 1. With Office of Management and Budget Director Russ Vought telling Congress that layoffs, which started Friday, could target agencies that don't fit into the Trump administration's priorities, it is unclear how the shutdown will affect ATF, the FBI and some other agencies.

Other agencies beyond ATF are also feeling the strain.

At the FBI, "a lot of the field offices have been told a third of your agents need to work on immigration issues," a person familiar with the bureau's operations told CNN. "A lot of people, you're going to lose your sources, you're going to stop an investigation, to do street patrol in DC ... Obviously other things can't get done, if you're doing these patrols."

Christopher O'Leary, a former senior executive at the FBI who now works for The Soufan Group, an intelligence and security consultancy, said that pulling agents into immigration or policing city streets necessarily means dropping other cases.



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"The FBI has a finite amount of resources," he said. "You have to give something else up. They're not only giving up counterterrorism and counterespionage, but they've also turned away from white-collar crime, fraud and public corruption cases."

[REDACTED]

and leaders fired or forced to resign for their work investigating the January 6 insurrection or for being perceived as opposed to Trump's agenda. Further, a person familiar with the bureau told CNN that more than 300 additional agents stepped down at the end of September, taking the Trump administration's "fork in the road" retirements.

The White House's use of agents in immigration issues is driving agents to retire early or find other work, some former officials said.

"There's a real disturbance throughout the organization," said O'Leary, the former FBI executive, of his former agency. "If people are close to retirement they're counting down the days." As for those being fired or forced to take early retirement, he said, "When they're thrown out, the younger agents who look up to them are asking is this the right place."

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For agents who stay on the job, the diversions are driving a morale crisis that goes hand in hand with the drop in prosecutions.

"No one signs up to be an FBI agent to go into a kitchen and arrest someone washing dishes, or joins the DEA to stop a landscaping truck," said former Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Gil Kerlikowske. "They're all used to being deployed for significant issues."

Do you have direct knowledge of how the diversion to immigration enforcement is affecting the ability of federal law enforcement agents to do their usual criminal work? We'd like to hear from you. Please contact us at tips@cnn.com.



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