

Trump's deportations divert FBI agents off child predator cases

Officials warn that President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown is leaving domestic terrorists, including online extremists who prey on children, unpoliced.



— President Donald Trump; FBI Director Kash Patel. Getty Images; AP

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By Ken Dilanian

[President Donald Trump's promise](#) to carry out the “largest deportation program in American history” has reshaped federal law enforcement priorities and diminished efforts to fight

domestic terrorism – including extremists who target children, according to sources and newly released federal data.

Roughly 20% of FBI agents – 2,840 out of around 13,800 – have been diverted to work on immigration enforcement, [according to data](#) obtained by the libertarian-oriented Cato Institute. That represents a significantly larger shift in FBI priorities than what happened after the 9/11 terrorism attacks, when 1,234 FBI criminal investigators [were reassigned](#) to counterterrorism efforts.

It's one of the many consequences of [FBI Director Kash Patel's push](#) to require agents to help round up undocumented immigrants, a mission not normally undertaken by the FBI.

FBI agents reassigned to round up immigrants have had to walk away from investigations into violent predators who target and exploit children online, MSNBC has learned.

The impacts have been significant. Nearly every agent on Baltimore's domestic terrorism squad was reassigned this year to work full time on immigration enforcement, forcing them to walk away from investigations of a network of violent predators that targets and exploits children online, according to two former FBI officials directly familiar with the matter.

That is consistent with a national de-emphasis of domestic terrorism investigations in the Trump Justice Department, current and former officials say.

“Agents aren’t out there recruiting sources. They are not maintaining trip wires. They are not able to keep their ear to the ground about what’s happening among extremist movements,” said Michael Feinberg, a former senior FBI executive who was fired over what [he says was a friendship](#) with someone whom the White House deemed an enemy. “As a result, the extremists have more latitude to do things that harm our society.”



FBI headquarters declined to comment for this story.

But the FBI's Baltimore field office issued a statement to MSNBC, saying, "Protecting the people of Maryland and Delaware is our top priority. The FBI continuously analyzes the threat landscape and allocates resources and personnel to address emerging threats and the investigative needs of the Bureau. We make adjustments and changes based on many factors and remain flexible as various needs arise. The FBI's role in and dedication to investigating terrorism, both domestically and internationally, has not changed."

A former FBI official who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation said: "If the bureau is not looking at domestic terrorism, nobody else is. We are now more susceptible to extremists because of these actions."

In recent years, some members of Baltimore's domestic terrorism squad had focused on hunting down people who attacked the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, while others had spent years [investigating a white supremacist group](#) that tried to destroy the electric grid in Maryland, the former officials said.

But with those cases over, members of the squad, which consists of around 10 agents, were focused on the [764 group](#), which the FBI describes as a "nihilistic violent extremist" group that seeks to blackmail children to perform vile acts on camera. The group seeks "to destroy civilized

society through the corruption and exploitation of vulnerable populations, which often include minors,” the Justice Department [said in a news release](#) in April.

In April, federal prosecutors charged three men who they say were key members of the group, accusing them of targeting children as young as 13. The group is alleged to entice children to post graphic sexual imagery of themselves and then blackmails them to post more imagery, including images of self-harm.

The group “methodically targeted vulnerable populations, including minor girls with mental health challenges, and attempted to socially engineer them, gain their trust, and then groom them to share private information and intimate visual depictions of themselves engaged in sexually explicit conduct,” a court document in the case says.

Members of the 764 network are alleged to coerce children into performing extreme and degrading acts, including setting themselves on fire, abusing their pets or siblings and even suicide.

“Armed with this private information and intimate images of their victims, 764 members would then use this material to coerce victims into providing more extreme and degrading content,” the document reads, “such as images of the victims cutting the names of 764 members into their bodies, setting themselves on fire, abusing their pets or siblings, and even suicide.”

In March, Baltimore domestic terrorism squad members were told they were being deployed full time to help the Department of Homeland Security round up undocumented immigrants, the sources told MSNBC. The 764 cases are still open, but many fewer agents are now assigned to work on them, they say.

The secure area in Baltimore where the domestic terrorism agents had been working their cases – known as a SCIF, for Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility – became a ghost town, a former official said.

Dozens of current and former FBI officials told MSNBC that domestic terrorism is not the only traditional FBI mission that is being neglected by Patel’s reallocation of bureau resources. They say public corruption, complex frauds, corporate misconduct and malign foreign influence are

no longer significant FBI priorities under Patel, who [has said violent crime](#) is the top bureau focus.

The FBI is still hunting foreign terrorists and spies working against the United States, the officials say, but fewer agents are available for those cases, given the new immigration and violent crime demands.

Rep. Dean slams FBI Director Patel for 'politicizing' the agency under Trump

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In a recent message to the workforce, Patel appeared to try to respond to internal critics of his new approach, arguing that the FBI's mission has not changed.

“Crushing violent crime and protecting national security are intertwined, and both are crucial components of safeguarding America,” he wrote in an internal message to staff reviewed by MSNBC. “Combating terrorism, thwarting counterintelligence efforts by hostile nations, and defending against cyber attacks remain integral priorities.”

Patel said special agents in charge, or SACs, have been empowered to decide best how to allocate resources in their districts, “prioritizing threats and personnel assignments based on the specific needs of the region.”

“Especially when we are surging towards special initiatives, SACs have the flexibility to shift resources to meet mission needs,” he added. “It may look differently in each field office, but ultimately, we are all working towards the same goal, defending the homeland.”

But current and former officials say every FBI field office across the country has been required to send agents out on immigration roundups, leaving them less time to work other cases. In February, FBI agents were given virtual training and empowered to make immigration-related arrests, current and former officials say.

The Cato Institute published a report this month showing that 28,000 federal law enforcement officers had been reassigned from other duties to immigration enforcement as of August. The report was based on Immigration and Customs Enforcement records.

“Diverting law enforcement away from their duties investigating terrorist threats, child trafficking, and violent crimes to arrest people for minor violations of civil law makes Americans less safe,” the report said.

FBI agents have been deployed to Washington, D.C., on street patrols to target violent crime, which Trump has suggested should happen elsewhere. And some agents warn Trump’s actions could backfire.

“My general fear is that the FBI and its personnel are not sufficiently trained to perform the type of work that they are being asked to perform,” a former agent said. “Somebody’s definitely going to get hurt.”

But those inclined to object are holding their tongues, current and former officials say, because Patel has squashed dissent within the bureau by [strategically firing](#) senior executives.

“Most agents are afraid for their jobs,” the second former official said.



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