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Exclusive: Thousands of agents diverted to Trump immigration crackdown

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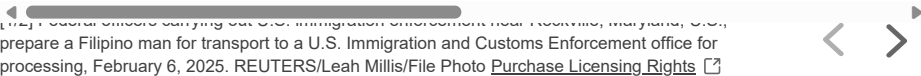
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 The Wider Image: Inside Trump's immigration crackdown as net widens



Summary

- Federal agents diverted from crime-fighting to immigration enforcement
- Critics argue crackdown diverts resources from other crimes, making America less safe
- Trump administration defends shift, citing immigration as a national security threat

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Reuters) - Federal agents who usually hunt down child abusers are now cracking down on immigrants who live in the U.S. illegally.

Homeland Security investigators who specialize in money laundering are raiding restaurants and other small businesses looking for immigrants who aren't authorized to work.

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Agents who pursue drug traffickers and tax fraud are being reassigned to enforce immigration law.

As U.S. President Donald Trump pledges to deport “millions and millions” of “criminal aliens,” thousands of federal law enforcement officials from multiple agencies are being enlisted to take on new work as immigration enforcers, pulling crime-fighting resources away on other areas -- from drug trafficking and terrorism to sexual abuse and fraud.

This account of Trump's push to reorganize federal law enforcement – the most significant since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks – is based on interviews with more than 20 current and former federal agents, attorneys and other federal officials. Most had first-hand knowledge of the changes. Nearly all spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss their work.

"I do not recall ever seeing this wide a spectrum of federal government resources all being turned toward immigration enforcement," said Theresa Cardinal Brown, a former Homeland Security official who has served in both Republican and Democratic administrations. "When you're telling agencies to stop what you've been doing and do this now, whatever else they were doing takes a back seat."

In response to questions from Reuters, Homeland Security Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said the U.S. government is “mobilizing federal and state law enforcement to find, arrest, and deport illegal aliens.” The Federal Bureau of Investigation declined to respond to questions about its staffing. In a statement, the FBI said it is “protecting the U.S. from many threats.” The White House did not respond to requests for comment.

The Trump administration has offered no comprehensive accounting of the revamp. But it echoes the aftermath of the 2001 attacks, when Congress created the Department of Homeland Security that pulled together 169,000 federal employees from other agencies and refocused the FBI on battling terrorism.

Trump's hardline approach to deporting immigrants has intensified America's already-stark partisan divide. The U.S. Senate's No. 2 Democrat, Dick Durbin, described the crackdown as a “wasteful, misguided diversion of resources.” In a statement to Reuters, he said it was “making America less safe” by drawing agents and officials away from fighting corporate fraud, terrorism, child sexual exploitation and other crimes.

U.S. Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche, in an interview with Reuters, denied the changes across federal law enforcement were hindering other important criminal investigations. “I completely reject the idea that because we're prioritizing immigration that we are not simultaneously full-force going after violent crime.”

He said the crackdown was warranted. “President Trump views what has happened over the last couple years truly as an invasion, so that's how we're trying to remedy that.”

On January 20, his first day back in office, Trump signed [an executive order](#) directing federal agencies to team up to fight “an invasion” of illegal immigrants. He cast the nation's estimated 11 million immigrants in the U.S. illegally as the driving factor behind crime, gang violence and drug trafficking – assertions not supported by government [statistics](#) – and accused immigrants of draining U.S. government resources and depriving citizens of jobs.

Almost immediately, federal law enforcement started posting photos of the crackdown to social media: agents wore body armor and jackets emblazoned with names of multiple agencies – including the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, known as ATF – during raids on immigrants without proper legal status.

Before this year, ATF had played almost no role in immigration enforcement. It typically investigated firearms offenses, bombings, arson and illicit shipments of alcohol and tobacco.

But since Trump's inauguration, about 80% of its roughly 2,500 agents have been ordered to take on at least some immigration enforcement tasks, two officials familiar with ATF's operations said. The ATF agents are being used largely as "fugitive hunters" to find migrants living in the U.S. illegally, one of the officials said.

The DEA, whose roughly 10,000 staff have led the nation's efforts to battle drug cartels, has shifted about a quarter of its work to immigration operations, said a former official briefed by current DEA leaders on the changes. Two other former officials described the commitment as "substantial" but did not know precisely how much work shifted.

Many of the reassigned federal officials have had little training or experience in immigration law, the sources said. The State Department's 2,500 Security Service agents, for instance, typically protect diplomats and root out visa and passport fraud. They've been authorized to assist with "investigating, determining the location of, and apprehending, any alien" in the U.S. unlawfully, according to a February 18 memo from DHS Secretary Kristi Noem to the U.S. Secretary of State.

The ATF and the State Department acknowledged in a statement they are helping with immigration enforcement, but declined to elaborate on specific staffing decisions.

The changes coincide with extraordinary immigration measures that have prompted dozens of lawsuits claiming that Trump's presidency is exceeding constitutional limits and other legal boundaries. These include deporting alleged members of a Venezuelan gang under an 18th-century wartime powers act and detaining a Columbia University student activist with legal permanent residency status over his role in pro-Palestinian protests.

The White House has said it is acting within the limits of the Constitution and that it was protecting the safety and jobs of U.S. citizens.

The results, so far, are mixed: the number of migrants seeking to cross the southern U.S. border in February was the lowest in decades and the number of people detained over immigration violations has surged. That hasn't yet led to an increase in deportations, but experts expect a jump in those numbers in coming months.

"STOP AND FRISK"

The focus on immigration is drawing significant resources away from other crime-fighting departments, according to the more than 20 sources who spoke to Reuters.

Until January, pursuing immigrants living in the country illegally was largely the job of just two agencies: Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, and Customs and Border Protection, with a combined staff of 80,000. Other departments spent little time on deportations.

That's changing.

At Homeland Security Investigations, the top investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security, scores of agents who specialize in child sexual exploitation have been reassigned to immigration enforcement, said Matthew Allen, a former senior HSI official who now leads the Association of Customs and HSI Special Agents, whose members include about 1,000 current and former agents.

Over the past two years, those HSI agents have helped more than 3,000 child victims, often after complex probes, DHS data shows. "There's a good argument that these changes will lead to some child victims continuing to be exploited," said Allen.

While HSI falls under the control of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, its team of 7,100 special agents typically play little part in routine immigration enforcement. They usually probe national security threats, terrorism, drug smuggling, human trafficking, illegal arms exports, financial crimes, child sex crimes and intellectual property theft. Immigration enforcement has been left to another ICE branch known as Enforcement and Removal Operations.

But on January 31, HSI staff received an internal email from a top official with a new mission of “protecting the American people against invasion.”

Going forward, the memo said, HSI special agents and other employees should be prepared to play an increasingly critical role in detaining and deporting immigrants, or barring their entry at U.S. borders.

Recently, HSI has been offering training to employees unfamiliar with immigration enforcement. This includes how to lure immigrants out of their homes for interrogation in so-called “knock and talk” visits, conduct stop and frisk operations, or carry out warrantless arrests, according to previously unreported internal documents shared with Reuters.

HSI's new work also includes checking if companies have hired unauthorized immigrants, surveillance outside of immigrant workers' homes, taking down license plates and distributing photos of “target” immigrants to detain, according to an employee and photos of the operations shared with Reuters.

At the IRS, criminal investigation agents, who typically probe a variety of tax and financial crimes, were being redirected into the immigration operations, Reuters previously reported.

IRS special agents are usually “out there following complex money trails; they break up drug deals, and they make people pay the taxes they owe,” said Elaine Maag, a senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, a Washington think tank that studies tax issues. “There are direct and indirect costs to pulling IRS criminal investigators out of the field.”

The IRS did not respond to a request for comment.

PROSECUTION WORK PILING UP

On the second day of Trump's administration, a top Justice Department official, Emil Bove, told federal prosecutors in a memo that they should “take all steps necessary” to prosecute illegal immigrants for crimes in the U.S.

In the memo, Bove called for increasing the number of immigration prosecutions, and said any cases that are declined must be urgently reported to the Justice Department.

As a result, federal prosecutors, who typically handle a variety of crimes, have been inundated with immigration cases, two of the sources said.

In San Diego, the number of people charged in federal court in February with felony immigration crimes more than quadrupled compared to the previous year, a Reuters examination of federal court records found. The number of people charged with felony drug crimes dropped slightly over the same period.

In Detroit – where immigration prosecutions have been rare – the number of people charged with immigration offenses rose from two in February 2024 to 19 last month, Reuters found.

Case management records from the Justice Department show that fewer than 1% of cases brought to prosecutors by the DEA and ATF over the past decade involved allegations that someone had violated an immigration law.

Since January, however, DEA agents have been ordered to reopen cases, involving arrests up to five years old, where prosecutors had declined to bring charges, two people involved in the work said.

Sometimes prosecutors rejected those cases because of problems with the evidence, they said. Now, if immigration authorities determine that the people were in the country illegally at the time of that case, agents are being dispatched to arrest them, the people said.

As Trump and billionaire Elon Musk slash the size of the federal bureaucracy, jobs that deal with immigration enforcement appear largely exempt.

In a January 31 email to ICE employees, a human resources official told them they wouldn't be eligible for the retirement buyouts offered to some 2.3 million federal workers. "All ICE positions are excluded," said the previously unreported email, shared with Reuters.


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