

Under President Trump, an agency intended to keep Americans safe has diverted resources from combating child abuse, trafficking and terrorism.



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By Nicholas Nehamas, Michael H. Keller, Alexandra Berzon, Hamed Aleaziz and Zolan Kanno-Youngs

The reporters spent months reviewing documents and interviewing dozens of current and former federal officials about how President Trump's immigration crackdown is disrupting the Department of Homeland Security.

Nov. 16, 2025

The Department of Homeland Security has diverted thousands of federal agents from their normal duties to focus on arresting undocumented immigrants, undermining a wide range of law enforcement operations in response to mounting pressure from President Trump, a New York Times investigation has found.

Homeland security agents investigating sexual crimes against children, for instance, have been redeployed to the immigrant crackdown for weeks at a time, hampering their pursuit of child predators.

A national security probe into the black market for Iranian oil sold to finance terrorism has been slowed down for months because of the shift to immigration work, allowing tanker ships and money to disappear.

And federal efforts to combat human smuggling and sex trafficking have languished with investigators reassigned to help staff deportation efforts.

The changes have extended deep into D.H.S.'s public-safety mission, as the Coast Guard has diverted aircraft to transport immigrants between detention centers and the department's law enforcement academy has delayed training for many agencies to prioritize new immigration officers.

The Times investigation is based on previously undisclosed internal documents from D.H.S. — including statistical reports about department workloads, search warrants and arrests — obtained through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit.

The Times also spoke with more than 65 officials who have worked in the federal government during the current Trump administration, in addition to local authorities and others who collaborate with the department. Most of them spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters and out of fear of retribution.

The overhaul represents a striking departure for the behemoth agency that Congress created in response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The Homeland Security Department was tasked with preventing terrorism, protecting the president, investigating transnational crime and responding to natural disasters, among other duties. Immigration enforcement was one of many responsibilities, but it was not envisioned as D.H.S.'s singular function.

Today, the Trump administration has remade the agency into a veritable Department of Deportation.

The shift has had consequences.

Homeland security investigators worked approximately 33 percent fewer hours on child exploitation cases from February through April compared to their average in prior years, according to a Times analysis of data obtained through the F.O.I.A. lawsuit.

“It’s heartbreaking,” said Hany Farid, a computer scientist who helped create software used by law enforcement and technology companies to detect child sexual abuse material. “You can’t say you care about kids when you’re diverting actual resources that are protecting children.”



An agent with Homeland Security Investigations, D.H.S.'s criminal investigations arm, patrolled a traffic stop in Washington in August. The division typically focuses on

transnational criminal organizations and other high-level lawbreakers. Kenny
Holston/The New York Times

Administration officials defended Mr. Trump's approach, saying the immigration crackdown was paramount to protecting public safety and national security. They also disputed that the intensified focus on immigration had undermined D.H.S.'s work.

"Child exploitation, human trafficking, terrorism, financial scams and smuggling all have a nexus to illegal immigration," Tricia McLaughlin, a spokeswoman for the department, said in a statement. "D.H.S. is mobilizing federal and state law enforcement to find, arrest and deport illegal aliens. We are prioritizing the worst of the worst and aliens with final removal orders. Nearly every day we are arresting pedophiles, known or suspected terrorists, kidnappers, child smugglers and sex traffickers, including those who entered our country illegally."

Abigail Jackson, a White House spokeswoman, said that "any insinuation that the Trump administration isn't successfully combating dangerous crime is false and uninformed."

In fact, federal data shows that many immigrants being arrested do not have criminal records in the United States. Fewer than 40 percent of people detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement — the D.H.S. law enforcement agency leading the administration's crackdown — have a criminal conviction, according to a Times analysis. Roughly 8 percent of those arrested had been convicted of a violent crime, while about 9 percent had a traffic conviction, the analysis found.

The pressure to deport more people began almost as soon as Mr. Trump took office.

Stephen Miller, the White House deputy chief of staff and architect of Mr. Trump's deportation agenda, holds a regular morning conference call with top government officials to plan and execute the massive operation, according to officials briefed on the sessions and a calendar invitation viewed by The Times.

Mr. Miller, who comes to the 30-minute calls deeply versed in deportation and arrest data, has at times berated ICE leaders for not arresting enough people, the officials said. And his questions and directives regularly ripple out across the vast

D.H.S. bureaucracy.

Agency policy experts who specialize in other issues have been told to analyze immigration data to prepare for and respond to the calls. Special agents at Homeland Security Investigations — which is D.H.S.'s criminal investigations arm and a part of ICE — have been abruptly issued new orders.

The H.S.I. reassignments have occurred in rotations with thousands of agents being redirected to immigration duties for stints ranging from days to months, according to two officials. H.S.I. has about 7,000 agents in total, who normally investigate transnational criminal organizations and other high-level lawbreakers.

Their new duties have included compiling addresses of undocumented immigrants, producing reports on student protesters, driving detainees to lockups and making arrests at traffic stops, big-box store parking lots and immigration courts.

Even highly trained specialists have been pulled into immigration work, such as analysts who assist in money laundering and counterterrorism cases and agents who investigate the multibillion-dollar black market for looted antiquities, a source of income for organized crime and terrorist groups.



Stephen Miller, the White House deputy chief of staff, developed President Trump's deportation strategy and keeps a close watch on its execution. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Other top officials have also felt pressure. In late May, as deportation numbers lagged well below Mr. Trump's goals, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, joined by Mr. Miller, tried to turbocharge the effort with a warning at the department's headquarters. Speaking to ICE officials who run the agency's field offices and had traveled to Washington, Ms. Noem promised that no job at the department would be safe, including her own, if deportations did not pick up, according to people with knowledge of her remarks.

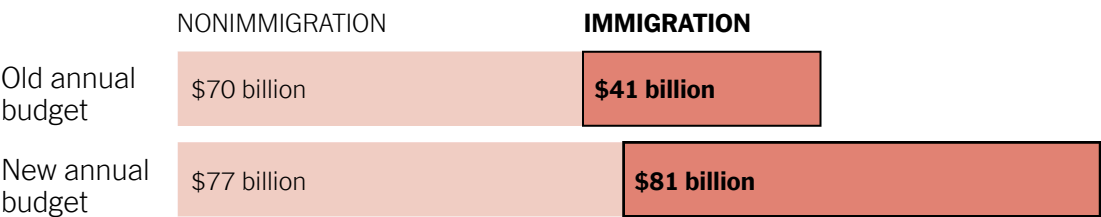
Since then, the number of people in immigration detention has soared past 60,000, a record tally. The Homeland Security Department says it has deported more than 550,000 people, with the daily pace of removals reaching levels not seen since the Obama administration. Illegal border crossings have fallen to their lowest point in decades.

The Republican policy bill enacted this summer made the administration’s priorities clear, with about \$162 billion in new D.H.S. funding for border security and immigration enforcement, significantly shifting the department’s focus. More than half of the department’s annual budget is projected to fund immigration activities over the next few years, up from 37 percent during the last fiscal year, according to a Times analysis.

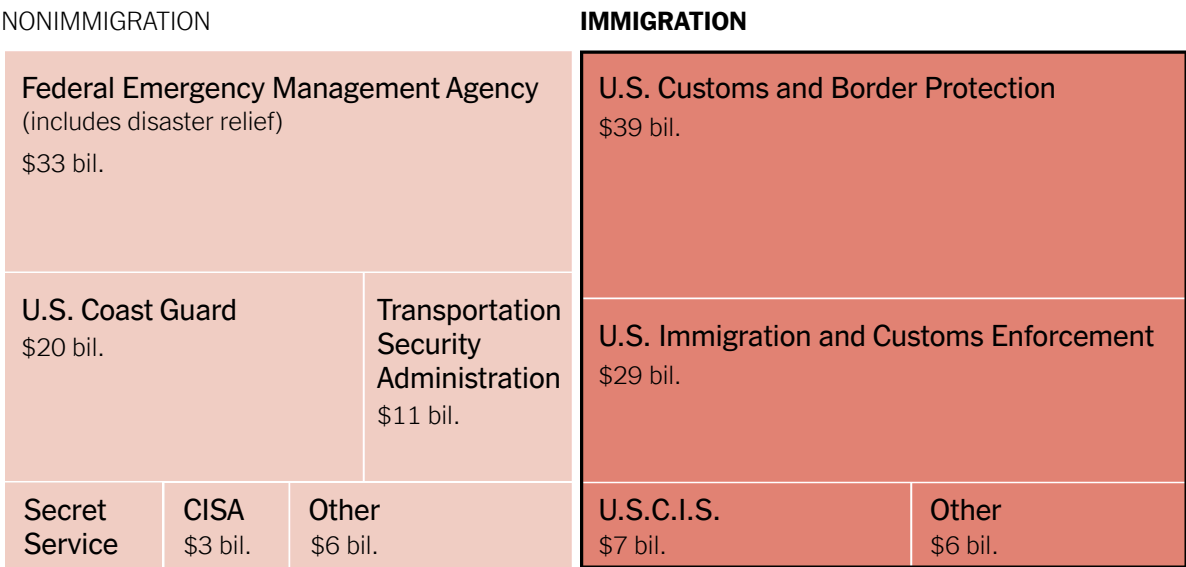
ICE’s budget is expected to nearly triple and its staff to grow by 66 percent, an investment that will make it the nation’s highest-funded law enforcement agency.

The Department of Homeland Security’s New Budget

After a funding boost, immigration programs now make up more than half of the D.H.S. budget, according to a New York Times analysis.



How the new budget breaks down



Notes: Figures are rounded. Immigration categories are approximate, and budget figures assume 2025 levels remain constant and new funding is spread over four years. The effects of new immigration fees are not included. U.S.C.I.S. refers to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and CISA refers to Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Source: New York Times analysis of D.H.S. budget data. Alicia Parlapiano/The New York Times

There are no indications the White House pressure will relent.

On his conference call, Mr. Miller has recently pushed ICE leaders to arrest even more people, pointing to the ongoing hiring spree that will see the agency bring on more than 14,000 new employees, according to the people familiar with his comments.

The immigration operation has also pulled in thousands of agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation; Drug Enforcement Administration; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; and at least four other federal law enforcement agencies, documents show. In addition, agents from D.H.S. and many of those other agencies have been diverted to Mr. Trump's anti-crime crackdown in Washington, which has functioned as a shadow immigration operation.

Every incoming administration prioritizes its own policy goals, and homeland security officials often describe a sense of whiplash when a new president takes power. Under President Joseph R. Biden Jr., some agents were pulled off investigations and sent to help process migrants coming over the southern border.

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But Mr. Trump's overhaul surpasses previous efforts, according to current and former officials.

"D.H.S. keeps being pulled further away from its core missions in protecting the homeland," said David Lapan, who served as the department's press secretary during the first Trump administration. "These distractions could have deadly consequences."

Allies of Mr. Trump including Kenneth T. Cuccinelli II — an acting deputy secretary of homeland security in Mr. Trump's first term — said such changes were long overdue.

As one of the authors of Project 2025, the conservative policy blueprint, Mr. Cuccinelli had conceived of dismantling D.H.S. and setting up a separate agency for immigration enforcement because, he wrote, the department as designed by Congress was too “disjointed.”

But rather than wait for Congress to enact changes, Mr. Trump has been essentially acting on his own.

“President Trump is effectively changing the permanent course of D.H.S.,” Mr. Cuccinelli told The Times.

Here are six aspects of the Homeland Security Department’s mission that have been acutely disrupted by the immigration crackdown:

Child exploitation

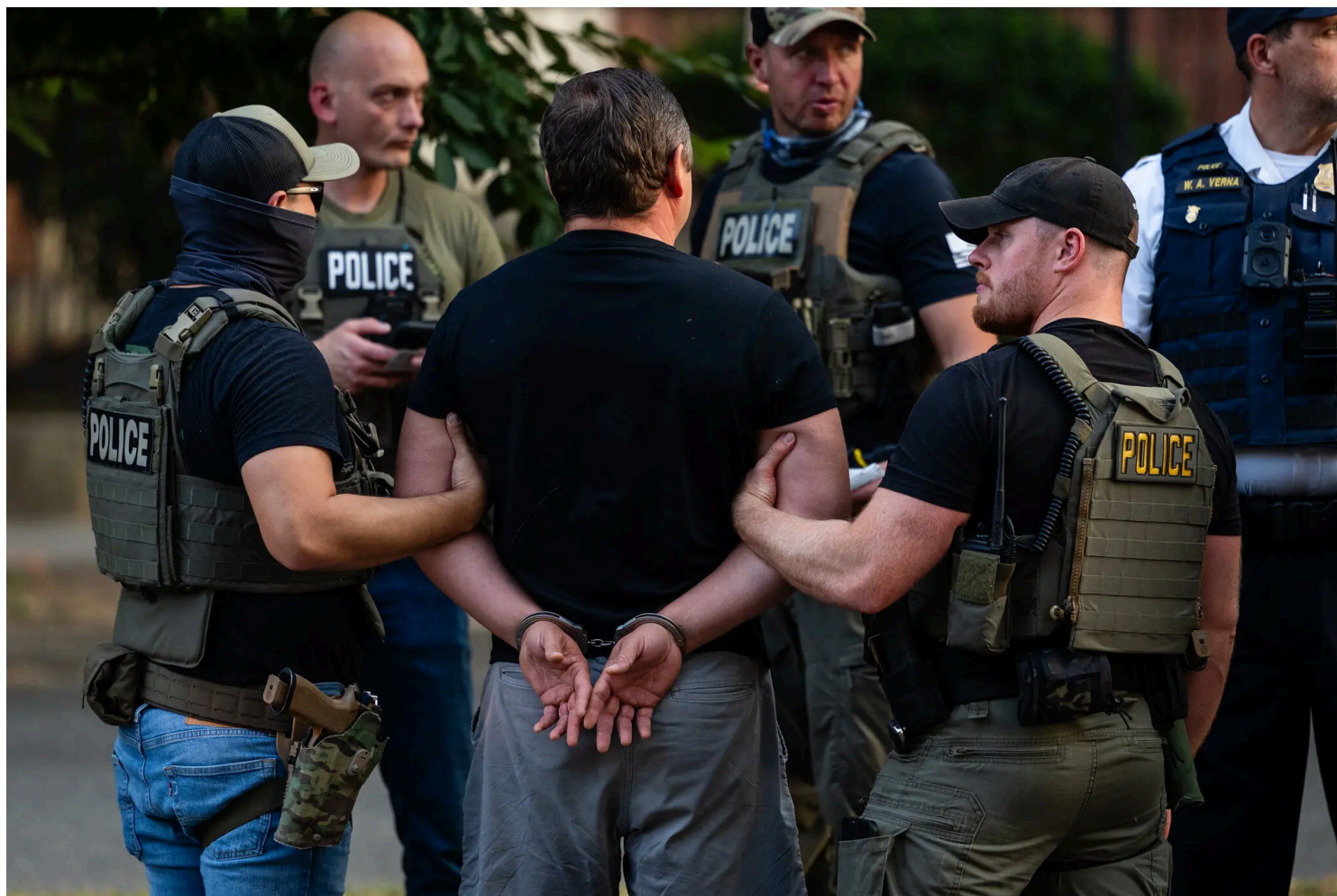
Earlier this year, special agents at Homeland Security Investigations found online videos showing violent sexual abuse of an unidentified young child.

Trained to hunt down pedophiles who use the internet to distribute illegal imagery, the H.S.I. agents spent weeks analyzing the footage to try to identify the child and infiltrate the online networks that had shared and may have directed the abuse, according to a person with knowledge of the investigation.

But the agents working the case have since been asked to go out in the field and help arrest undocumented immigrants. The reassignment has hindered progress toward identifying and rescuing the child, said this person, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive investigation. The person said that the agents, no longer able to spend as much time undercover online, had lost contact with a key source they had cultivated over years in the online world of abusers.

The disruption of that case reflects a broader pattern, the Times investigation found.

H.S.I. teams that investigate sex crimes against children in cities including Newark and Los Angeles have had significant numbers of special agents dragooned into immigration work, according to people with knowledge of the changes. At one point, an entire unit of roughly five people investigating child exploitation in Los Angeles was working immigration duty, with agents trying to advance their cases on nights and weekends, one of those people said.



Agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement arresting a man at a safety checkpoint in Washington in August. Eric Lee for The New York Times

From February through April of this year, H.S.I. agents nationwide worked the fewest hours on child exploitation that they have during that period in more than a decade, according to The Times's data analysis.

During that same period, H.S.I. agents spent at least five times as many hours working immigration cases as they did on average during Mr. Trump's first term. More recent data was not available because of the government shutdown.

The number of hours agents spent on child exploitation cases likely decreased even further over the summer and fall, as D.H.S. increased its focus on immigration enforcement during that period, according to people interviewed by The Times. The data also suggested a likely drop in the number of arrests and child victims identified, but appeared too provisional to support a reliable estimate.

Ms. McLaughlin, the D.H.S. spokeswoman, said that under the Trump administration "law enforcement has continued to rescue children from sex offenders and traffickers." She added that H.S.I. is "not slowing down and remains committed to all aspects of its mission, leveraging a whole-of-government approach to address threats to public safety and national security."

A shift has been noticed at some of Silicon Valley's largest tech companies, which report tens of millions of photographs and videos showing suspected child abuse each year to the authorities.

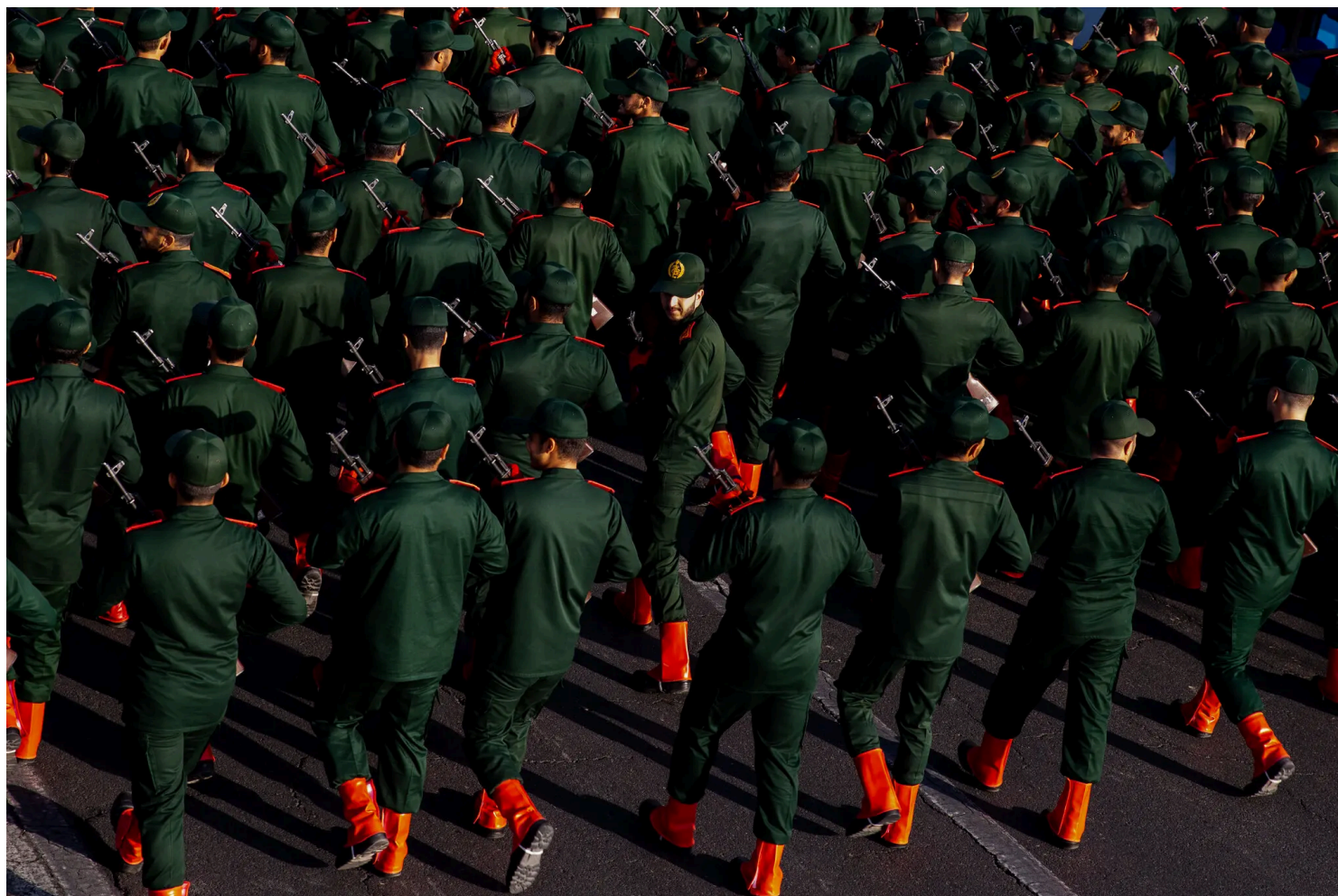
Engineers who work on child safety issues at Google, Meta, Microsoft and other companies told The Times that there had been a noticeable drop in follow-up from federal officials regarding the materials they had flagged. Some of them had heard from law enforcement contacts that resources were being shifted to immigration cases.

Microsoft and Meta declined to comment. Google did not respond to questions.

Illicit Iranian oil

For nearly a decade, a team of roughly two dozen special agents from H.S.I. and F.B.I. offices in Washington, New York, Minneapolis and other cities have investigated Iran's efforts to evade international sanctions and sell oil on the black market. The cases often involve chasing a so-called ghost fleet of tankers carrying that oil to foreign ports.

Iran uses the profits to fund its military and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, which the United States has designated a terrorist entity, as well as Hamas and the Houthi government in Yemen, federal authorities have said.



Iran uses the profits from oil sales to fund its military and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, federal authorities have said. The United States considers the Revolutionary Guards a terrorist entity. Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

But since the immigration crackdown, cases where officials worked to seize tankers loaded with Iranian oil and bank accounts where profits are stored have languished for months, with agents too busy on immigration duty to interview sources or draft seizure affidavits, according to roughly half a dozen people with knowledge of the effort. In the meantime, ships and cash have disappeared before they could be seized, and arrests have been delayed, some of those people said.

A typical investigative task that normally takes a day “now takes two weeks,” one person said. Another said that “money and oil have gotten away.”

D.H.S. did not respond to a question about the status of its agents working on the Iranian oil cases. Natalie Baldassarre, a spokeswoman for the Justice Department, which plays a leading role in the probes, said it was “acutely focused” on protecting national security and stopping criminals.

“Assisting our partners with immigration enforcement has not deterred our ability to also successfully investigate and prosecute other types of crime,” Ms. Baldassare said.

Antiterrorism intelligence

One of D.H.S.’s major functions is distributing intelligence reports about terrorism, active shooter incidents and other threats across government, an attempt to fill the gap in information sharing exposed by the 2001 terrorist attacks.

But employees at D.H.S.’s intelligence office have been increasingly directed to focus more on supporting immigration enforcement than on other security issues, according to people familiar with its operations. That shift in emphasis has affected the daily intelligence briefings that go to top officials, according to these people.

And local law enforcement authorities are now receiving far fewer intelligence reports than they normally would, according to people familiar with the reports. One official said the decline in information sharing has amounted to “chipping away at everything that’s been built since Sept. 11.”

D.H.S. said that it had identified “redundant positions and noncritical programs” at the intelligence office and that it was returning the department “back to its core mission of prioritizing American safety and enforcing our laws.”

Law enforcement training

The federal government's main law enforcement training academy has suspended many of its programs for nonimmigration agents for the rest of the year, aiming to make room for the thousands of new deportation officers being hired by ICE. That has delayed classes for new recruits and experienced officers from other agencies.

Affected agencies include the Secret Service, the Army Criminal Investigative Division, the Air Force Office of Special Investigations and the Energy Department's Office of Secure Transportation, which is responsible for safely moving nuclear weapons and components, according to seven people with knowledge of the delays.

"We must focus our resources on surge-related training" for immigration enforcement, officials at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers wrote in a memo this summer. "As a result, training programs for agencies not directly involved in these efforts, originally scheduled between Sept. 9 and Dec. 31, 2025, will be rescheduled to later dates."

Heather J. Hagan, a U.S. Army spokeswoman, said that the Army's law enforcement arm lost 111 classroom spots at the academy after "numerous advanced courses" were canceled.

Two special agents at the Diplomatic Security Service, which provides protection for diplomats and U.S. embassies, said disruptions at the federal training academy had delayed the on-boarding of new recruits, raising the possibility of staffing shortages overseas.

D.H.S. said that the academy was "actively adjusting and rescheduling training schedules as needed." Spokespeople for agencies that have had training schedules altered told The Times that their core missions and recruitment efforts had not been hindered.



Local and federal law enforcement agents participating in an exercise at the Secret Service training center in Laurel, Md. Mark Schiefelbein/Associated Press

Coast Guard missions

In June, Coast Guard officials agreed to redeploy two C-27 planes from Clearwater, Fla., to Alexandria, La., where ICE maintains its busiest detention center, and another plane from Sacramento to Mesa, Ariz., according to documents reviewed by The Times and a person familiar with the arrangement. The planes are surveillance craft used in drug interdiction and other missions.

Search-and-rescue planes from Alaska and North Carolina were also put “on call,” the documents show.

The redeployment of the planes posed a “high risk to mission fail” for certain Coast Guard operations, one of the documents stated.

The Coast Guard also made plans to send dozens of staff members to support immigration enforcement. The initial cost, including the plane deployment, was estimated to be around \$7 million, according to the documents.

This month, the search-and-rescue leader for a Coast Guard regional command center was told he had to report within days to Texas for a monthslong border deployment, leaving other staff members to cover for him, according to a person familiar with the situation and documents viewed by The Times.

D.H.S. said that the Coast Guard had transported more than 7,300 immigrants so far this year. A Coast Guard spokesman said it “carefully balances all operations and mission requirements, including search and rescue, to ensure readiness is not compromised.”

Human trafficking

The pressure to ramp up low-level immigration enforcement has had negative impacts on more complex human smuggling and sex and labor trafficking cases, according to federal officials.

One federal prosecutor, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that such cases were stagnating as H.S.I. investigators were sidetracked with immigration roundups. Agents from H.S.I.’s Center for Countering Human Trafficking, which assists trafficking investigations, have been reassigned to Mr. Trump’s anti-crime crackdown in Washington, according to a federal law enforcement official.

And one former law enforcement official who now works in the travel industry said that after he tried to report sex trafficking at hotels to H.S.I., he was told that agents might not be able to investigate urgently because of immigration duty.

D.H.S. disputed that those investigations had been affected.

How The Times Analyzed D.H.S. Data

Through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, The New York Times obtained Department of Homeland Security statistical reports that indicate the monthly number of hours worked, arrests made, and search warrants executed by Homeland Security Investigations staff working on investigations into child exploitation,

immigration, and other crimes.

The Times received two responses, one generated in April and the other in June, with monthly figures going back to 2022 and 2007, respectively. The response created in June included some figures that were greater than those in the April report.

As a result, The Times took a cautious approach in quantifying trends. To estimate the hours worked during February, March and April, the first three full months of the administration, The Times took into account the percentage increase for a comparable period between the two reports. Because the revisions followed a less predictable pattern for arrests and victims, The Times decided against citing direct figures for those categories, although the provisional figures also showed declines.

D.H.S. did not respond to questions seeking clarity on the data.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Homeland's Core Missions Disrupted by Deportations