

Written Testimony of Jason P. Houser, Former Chief of Staff, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Before the House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Oversight Hearing on the Protection of ICE Officers during Interior Enforcement Operations

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on a matter of critical importance—the safety and integrity of ICE officers tasked with interior immigration enforcement, particularly in the context of the Trump Administration’s aggressive and politicized immigration strategy.

I served as Chief of Staff at ICE during increasing operational demands and political pressure. I am proud of the brave men and women who serve in ICE and other law enforcement agencies. Their jobs are already complex, dangerous, and often thankless. We owe them our respect and the right policies to support and protect them as they perform their duties.

Unfortunately, current policy directives from the White House are making their jobs more complex and dangerous. The administration has not only re-expanded interior enforcement to target individuals with no criminal records. Still, it is actively rescinding legal pathways and revoking protections, which creates larger pools of non-criminals who can be arrested. These arrests without criminal histories, and in many accounts have had their status taken away, artificially inflate arrest numbers and fuel a narrative of action. These tactics put ICE officers at greater physical risk, weaken community trust, and undermine effective enforcement.

There is reporting confirming that more than 60% of those currently in ICE custody have no criminal convictions. Many are workers, caregivers, and individuals with pending asylum claims or other legal proceedings. They are increasingly being swept up in operations designed for media optics rather than public safety. The strategic direction from the White House driving this imbalance is keeping Americans less safe.

This shift is the beginning of what will be increased public backlash, which in turn will hamper ICE’s ability to target real threats to our communities. This erosion of trust not only endangers officers—it compromises their ability to identify and apprehend actual threats, including violent offenders and transnational criminals.

Moreover, the administration is mandating cooperation between ICE and other domestic law enforcement agencies, many of which have no training in immigration law or federal civil enforcement procedures. Deputizing untrained officers creates legal liabilities and operational confusion. It’s a formula for unnecessary escalation and real danger on the ground.

Equally concerning is the administration's redirection of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers, whose mission is to secure our nation’s borders, to conduct interior enforcement activities far removed from their statutory role. When CBP officers are pulled away from border

security to serve as backfill for ICE operations, we compromise our front-line defense against transnational threats. Ports of entry are understaffed. Border patrol sectors are stretched thin. Screening, inspection, and interdiction suffer, so CBP can be used to chase landscapers and line cooks 1,000 miles from the nearest border. This is not strategy—it's stunt work.

The consequences of this drift in enforcement priorities are not abstract. ICE detention space is finite. Every bed filled by a non-criminal working father of two is a bed unavailable for a cartel associate, a child predator, or a repeat violent offender. We overload the system when agents are told to arrest broadly and detain indiscriminately. This congestion slows processing times, burdens immigration courts, and leads to poor conditions that spark litigation and oversight failures.

Worse still, many of these individuals are not even removable. They may have pending claims for immigration benefits or relief from removal, be protected from removal under court rulings, or come from countries that refuse to accept deportees. The result is that agents arrest individuals who cannot be deported, detain them in already-overcrowded facilities, and are forced to release them days or weeks later, fueling a cycle of churn that frustrates the workforce and misleads the public. It's enforcement theater, not enforcement.

Detention and removal are not unlimited tools. They require legal predicates, court adjudication, and coordination with foreign governments. Arrests without strategic planning, resourcing, or final removal pathways do not demonstrate strength—they demonstrate disarray.

And the cost is not just measured in inefficiency. It is measured in lives and credibility. Every time ICE officers are sent to execute a policy that is unsupported by law or divorced from national priorities, they become the face of a broken system. They knock on the doors. They wear the vests. They're the ones caught on video. The public doesn't see failed legislative negotiations or politically motivated memos from the White House—they know the ICE badge. And when a mother is arrested in front of her children, or a worker is hauled from a jobsite without cause, that distrust falls squarely on the agents.

This dynamic erodes public confidence, officer morale, and safety. Agents bear the weight when ICE is used to fill the void left by congressional inaction and White House overreach. They are asked to carry out proliferated enforcement without updated laws, without community buy-in, without adequate resources, and with targets who are not threats. This is how agents get hurt. This is how we lose the ability to do real enforcement. This is how our immigration system collapses under its contradictions.

Enforcement must be precise and threat-focused. When resources are diverted toward the arrest of low-priority individuals, enforcement becomes a dragnet. That may generate high arrest numbers for press releases, but it pulls ICE personnel away from complex, high-risk cases that improve public safety. It creates a false sense of security while leaving human trafficking, narcotics operations, and violent criminal networks less disrupted.

This misalignment of mission isn't just inefficient—it's dangerous. When officers are used as blunt instruments of fear rather than precision tools of public safety, we create a more chaotic and combative environment for them to operate in. We reduce their ability to engage local partners, obtain reliable intelligence, and build cases that will stand up in court.

I support smart, strategic, and humane immigration enforcement. That means prioritizing those who pose real threats, not those who slipped a filing deadline. It means providing ICE with the necessary tools and training, not using it as a stage prop for political posturing.

Congress has a role to play here. Oversight isn't just about accountability—it's about responsibility. This Subcommittee should consider:

- Codifying priority-based enforcement standards ensures ICE focuses its time and resources on genuine security and public safety risks.
- Establishing clear training and operational guidelines for interagency cooperation.
- Mandate DHS to implement a comprehensive officer safety and privacy protection program—including the redaction of ICE officer personal information from public databases, legal support for officers who are doxxed, and criminal penalties for targeted harassment or threats against federal immigration personnel.
- Direct ICE to adopt transparency protocols consistent with national law enforcement standards, including body-worn cameras, uniform masking policies, and public reporting on operations that impact communities. These measures build public trust, protect officers from false accusations, and align ICE practices with those of professional policing agencies across the country.
- Supporting community-based case management programs that enable compliance with ICE check-ins and reduce the demands on detention and the need for at-large arrests.
- Prohibiting the use of untrained law enforcement from carrying out interior enforcement actions.
- Codify within ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) a dedicated mission set focused exclusively on arresting and removing individuals with significant criminal histories or public safety risk profiles, and prohibit Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) agents from being diverted away from complex investigations into sexual predators, human trafficking, and narcotics to perform lower-priority, non-criminal immigration enforcement.

In conclusion, the men and women of ICE deserve to operate in an environment where their mission is respected, their safety is protected, and their efforts are aligned with the rule of law and American values. They should not be caught between political theater and policy confusion. ICE officers should not be asked to paper over decades of legislative inaction or bear the burden of every bad-faith executive directive.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.