

Exclusive: Federal drug prosecutions fall to lowest level in decades as Trump shifts focus to deportations

 www.reuters.com/legal/government/federal-drug-prosecutions-fall-lowest-level-decades-trump-shifts-focus-2025-09-29/

By Brad Heath





Federal agents whose jobs had almost nothing to do with immigration until this year fan out every day to assist ICE in arresting people who can be deported. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst/File Photo [Purchase Licensing Rights, opens new tab](#)

Summary

- Federal drug prosecutions drop 10% in 2025 as agents focus on immigration
- Number of new cases being filed is lowest in decades, according to Reuters analysis
- High-priority drug investigations have stalled, officials say

WASHINGTON, Sept 29 (Reuters) - The number of people charged with breaking federal drug laws dropped to the lowest level in decades this year after the Trump administration ordered enforcement agencies to focus on deporting immigrants, a Reuters review of nearly 2 million federal court records found.

So far this year, about 10% fewer people have been prosecuted for drug violations compared to the same period of 2024, court records show, a drop of about 1,200 cases and the slowest rate since at least the late 1990s. The pullback was more dramatic for the types of conspiracy and money-laundering cases often used to pursue higher-level traffickers. The number of people charged with money-laundering dropped by 24%, according to Reuters' analysis.

Sign up [here](#).

Shortly after taking office in January, U.S. President Donald Trump launched the broadest overhaul of U.S. law enforcement since the attacks of September 11, 2001. He ordered [thousands of federal agents](#) to focus on fending off what he described as an “invasion” of illegal immigration.

The shift has produced a coast-to-coast slowdown in the types of investigations and prosecutions that the government had long viewed as central to taking on criminal networks, including the [drug cartels whose products killed](#) more than 80,000 people last year, as agents focused instead on quick-hit immigration raids, interviews and court documents show. “We’re seeing a reduced amount of time on long-term investigations so agents can go out in their raid gear and be seen supporting immigration raids,” said a senior Justice Department official involved in those investigations, who, like others, asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Chart showing the decline in the number of people charged with federal drug offenses.

Despite Trump's promises to take a tougher approach to drug enforcement, even high-priority cases have stalled as a result, four officials familiar with the cases told Reuters. One prosecutor said a fentanyl investigation he supervised was at a standstill because the agents who were leading it had been ordered to focus on deportations instead. Another official said investigations of drug rings have been delayed.

White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said that Trump's "highly successful efforts at closing the border and removing dangerous criminal illegal aliens from our communities, along with prosecuting violent drug traffickers and targeting transnational cartels, means less illegal drugs are circulating in American communities."

"Focusing on the number of charges does not accurately reflect the great work our attorneys are doing to hold the most serious offenders accountable," said Justice Department spokesperson Natalie Baldassarre. She said efforts to pursue organized crime are long-term and that "our focus has been to eliminate transnational drug cartels, prosecute violent drug traffickers," and help with immigration enforcement.

DRUG PROSECUTIONS AT HISTORIC LOW

To measure the effect of law enforcement's new marching orders, Reuters gathered the dockets for every publicly available case filed in federal court since 1998 from Westlaw, an online legal research service that is a division of Thomson Reuters. Reuters compared the number of cases filed between January 1 and September 15 to the same period in previous years.

In some cases, Reuters used artificial intelligence to classify the charges people faced. A review of a random set of records showed the methodology to be 98% accurate.

Reuters also interviewed more than 15 current and former law enforcement officials, nearly all of whom spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations or for fear of retaliation. Together, they offered the most comprehensive picture to date of the impact of Trump's overhaul.

Their accounts show drug enforcement has bogged down at almost every stage. Investigators have been slower to develop new cases and less available to work on existing ones. And prosecutors, too, have shifted their focus to work on criminal violations of immigration laws, leaving them less time to pursue other cases, the sources said.

Although overdose deaths in the United States [have been dropping since 2023](#)



[opens new tab](#), driven at least in part by widespread availability of the overdose antidote [naloxone](#), there is little sign that the drug trade itself is drying up. The total amount of drugs

seized by U.S. Customs and Border Protection so far this year [was up about 6%](#)



[, opens new tab](#) from last year.

But the number of people charged with importing drugs into the United States dropped about 6% this year to the lowest point in at least 25 years, according to court records. The number of people charged in drug conspiracies fell about 15%.

The impact of diverting so many agents has rippled beyond drugs: Prosecutions for violating laws that prohibit criminals and others from owning guns or from using them during drug crimes fell about 5% this year.

The drop in gun cases is likely to grow because investigations opened now might not reach a courtroom for a year or more. Sidelining so many agents "is going to have a huge effect," said Jeff Cohen, who was a top lawyer for the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms

and Explosives, the agency in charge of enforcing gun laws, before he retired in July.

“You cannot conduct thorough, multi-agency drug investigations if you’re running around doing this other stuff,” said a former U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration official who supervised its shift to immigration enforcement.

The change has been dramatic: For the first time in decades, nearly half of the people charged with federal crimes this year were accused of immigration violations, court dockets show. About 700 more federal prosecutors have been assigned to work on at least some immigration matters, more than one of every 10 prosecutors, those records show.

DIVERTED AGENTS, NEW PRIORITIES

The Trump administration has promised repeatedly to take a tougher approach to drug enforcement. Trump has often [suggested](#) drug dealers should face the death penalty. [Attorney General Pam Bondi said](#)



[opens new tab](#) this year that anyone dealing drugs is “a violent criminal, and we will prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law.”

This month, the administration escalated that effort when Trump ordered the military to destroy two suspected drug smuggling boats off the coast of Venezuela, killing their crews. In the past, authorities would have stopped the boats and charged the crews with smuggling. Venezuela denies they were drug traffickers.

At the same time, the administration has ordered the shutdown of the DOJ's Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, the office that handles the most complex organized crime cases, by the end of the month.

Prosecutions for drug and gun violations “a priority during Trump’s first term” started dropping under former President Joe Biden, when officials said they were grappling

with a shortage of attorneys while also trying to focus on more complex investigations. But they reached new lows in almost every category this year after Trump returned to office, as the [DEA shifted a quarter of its resources](#) to immigration work.

Buyouts and purges of Trump's perceived political opponents thinned the ranks at some enforcement agencies. The administration has [proposed more budget cuts](#)



[opens new tab](#) for federal law enforcement next year.

Trump's appointees at the Justice Department told officials from almost their first day that virtually everything would take a back seat to immigration, two former DOJ officials said.

A chart showing the drop in the number of federal money laundering prosecutions

Now, agents whose jobs had almost nothing to do with immigration until this year, fan out every day to assist U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement teams in arresting people who can be deported.

That work initially focused on immigrants with extensive criminal records, but former officials from the DEA and ATF said agents increasingly are voicing frustration that they are being pulled from their casework to pursue people who have not committed crimes. Because most federal agents still aren't well versed in immigration law, they spend most of the time on the periphery, handling transportation or keeping the public away, the former officials said.

'CASES ARE JUST GOING STAGNANT'

Those deployments have come with another request from his bosses: photos. A former ATF agent who supervised some of the immigration details said he was ordered to get pictures showcasing jackets or body armor with the agency's logo because managers thought the White House wanted them for social media. And the agencies themselves have posted scores of photos showing their agents participating in immigration raids.

The effect, the former ATF agent said, is "a lot of good cases are just going stagnant for some photo-op bullshit."

The ATF and DEA did not respond to questions about agents' focus on immigration work.

Those tradeoffs have been compounded as agents have been pulled into still other missions. This summer, Trump ordered hundreds of [federal agents to patrol Washington, D.C.](#), to combat what he described as a crisis of violent crime in the capital. Trump said he would deploy still more agents to Chicago, Memphis, and possibly other major cities.

In Washington, police reports show agents from the DEA and ATF started doing foot patrols alongside local police officers, searching for everyday violations like people drinking alcohol in public. In one instance, DEA agents participated in an operation that sent officers undercover to buy \$25 worth of marijuana, according to a police report. In Washington, possession of small amounts of marijuana is legal, but selling it is not. Authorities charged two men with misdemeanor drug offenses in the city's local court.

Editing by Michael Learmonth

Our Standards: [The Thomson Reuters Trust Principles.](#)



[, opens new tab](#)

- Suggested Topics:
- [Government](#)
- [White Collar Crime](#)
- [Public Policy](#)
- [Immigration](#)

[Brad Heath](#)

Thomson Reuters

Brad Heath is an enterprise reporter in Washington. He focuses on law enforcement, criminal justice and using data to find out what the government is doing. He is a graduate of Georgetown University Law Center and is a member of the Virginia bar.



