

The Trump Administration's Budget Will Undermine ATF's Efforts To Prevent Violent Crime

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The U.S. Capitol is seen in Washington, D.C., on July 3, 2025. (Getty/Hu Yousong)

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) plays a crucial role in protecting the public from violent crime. Every day, ATF special agents conduct criminal investigations, undercover operations, and high-risk tactical responses to arrest some of the most violent criminals across the country.^{[1](#)} ATF's world-leading experts in firearms, arson, and explosives provide crucial support to local, state, Tribal, and international law enforcement agencies.^{[2](#)}

Yet despite its vital role in keeping local communities safe, ATF is often expected to accomplish more with less. After many years of the budget remaining largely flat, ATF has recently faced budget cuts, including a 2.8 percent reduction in fiscal year (FY) 2024.^{[3](#)} These cuts were sustained the following year when the federal government operated under a full-year continuing resolution.^{[4](#)} The Trump administration's FY 2026 proposed budget, released on May 30, 2025, includes \$468 million in additional cuts to the agency, bringing its budget to \$1.157 billion—a 29 percent reduction.^{[5](#)}

While ATF's budget has stagnated over the past two decades, budgets for other federal law enforcement agencies have steadily increased. Comparing FY 2010's enacted budget with the proposed FY 2026 budget, spending plans have increased for U.S. Border Patrol by 153 percent, U.S. Customs and Border Protection by 87 percent, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) by 97 percent, the U.S. Marshals Service by 50 percent, and the FBI by 27 percent.⁶ The One Big Beautiful Bill Act recently signed by President Trump provides an additional nearly \$30 billion to ICE to expand deportation operations, tripling its 2024 annual budget.⁷ In contrast, based on the Trump administration's proposed budget, the ATF would be funded at virtually the same level in 2026 as it was in 2010. When adjusted for inflation and population growth, this amounts to a 46 percent decrease.⁸

Congress should prioritize ensuring ATF has the resources and independent leadership necessary to partner with local and state law enforcement to combat violent crime and keep communities safe. ATF contributed to last year's historic reductions in murders and improved clearance rates for violent crimes despite Congress cutting its FY 2024 budget by nearly \$50 million.⁹ If Congress approves the drastic funding cuts included in the Trump administration's proposed FY 2026 budget, the net effect will be fewer ATF agents than the agency had 25 years ago. Fewer investigators and experts will be available to partner with local law enforcement to keep an increasing number of illegal guns out of communities and to hold repeat violent offenders accountable.

Preventing violent crime and stopping illegal gun trafficking

Firearm trafficking makes local communities less safe by supplying weapons that are later used in crimes, intensifying the nation's gun violence epidemic.¹⁰ Local police require ATF's partnership to stop trafficking because the illegal gun market extends across state lines and traffickers move guns from less regulated states to states with stricter gun laws. For example, Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City are all cities in states with strong gun laws. The majority of guns recovered by police at crime scenes in these cities originated in states with weaker gun regulations.¹¹ Since the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act established federal criminal offenses for straw purchasing and gun trafficking, the ATF has led most of the investigations, resulting in more than 1,000 people charged for illegal firearm trafficking.¹² ATF focuses its investigative efforts on the most violent repeat offenders: For the cases ATF recommended for prosecution in FY 2023, defendants had an average of 7.3 prior arrests and 2.2 prior convictions.¹³

Straw purchasing is a major contributor to gun trafficking

Straw purchasing is the illegal act of buying a firearm on behalf of another individual. A straw purchase commonly involves a prohibited purchaser, such as a person with a felony conviction record or subject to a restraining order, using individuals with clean criminal records who can pass a background check to purchase firearms on their behalf. Another reason people use a straw

purchaser is to remain anonymous and avoid creating a paper trail connecting them to the weapon. Straw purchases are one of the primary ways guns are diverted into illegal gun markets, undermining both federal and state gun laws.¹⁴

ATF also provides crime gun intelligence tools at no cost to local and state law enforcement to empower them to arrest repeat violent offenders and cut off the supply of illicit firearms.¹⁵ In 2024, ATF's National Tracing Center processed more than 639,000 crime gun traces, aiding local law enforcement in identifying the last known buyer of guns recovered at crime scenes.¹⁶ ATF's National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) has transformed crime solving by connecting multiple crimes to a single firearm.¹⁷ The nation's only automatic and interstate ballistics imaging network can turn bullet casings into timely and actionable leads within hours.¹⁸

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ATF's ballistic imaging technology has supported nearly 15,000 law enforcement agencies and produced more than 1 million investigative leads to help solve gun crimes.¹⁹ Firearm arrests increased 150 percent when Tulsa, Oklahoma, increased NIBIN use.²⁰ Officials in Mississippi also find the tool invaluable. “This technology is absolutely amazing and a game changer in our fight against gun violence here in the city of Jackson,” said Jackson, Mississippi, Police Chief Joseph Wade after the city was awarded a federal grant in 2024 to increase access to NIBIN.²¹

Using real-time data to solve crimes

Crime gun intelligence centers (CGIC) are centralized law enforcement hubs focused on investigating and preventing gun violence in local communities.²² CGICs provide real-time data to prevent and solve crimes by bringing together ATF's crime gun intelligence tools, including NIBIN, NIBIN Enforcement Support System (NESS), online firearms tracing system eTrace, DNA testing of cartridge casings, and collective data sharing.²³ Combining these technologies under one roof allows law enforcement to identify gun traffickers and straw purchasers, connect shootings by linking ballistic evidence, and develop investigative leads to improve clearance rates for gun crimes.²⁴ By improving collaboration between local, state, and federal law enforcement—including detectives, prosecutors, special agents, forensic scientists, and analysts—CGICs can help identify and build cases against repeatedly violent offenders.²⁵

Operating more than 60 CGICs in the United States, ATF is a vital partner in addressing emerging violent crime trends, dismantling firearms trafficking networks, combating organized crime, and removing shooters from the nation's streets.²⁶ Despite limited resources, ATF continues to innovate on its crime gun intelligence tools. For example, NESS is a web-based tool that combines NIBIN data with local law enforcement gun recovery and shooting data to provide investigators with near real-time information on interrelated gun crimes.²⁷ ATF provides this resource at no cost to local law enforcement, reducing time and money spent on manual data

entry so intelligence analysts can quickly identify and arrest repeat shooters.^{[28](#)} ATF's budget should be fully funded because otherwise it will not be able to provide state and local partners with the crime gun intelligence necessary to prevent violent crime from rising.^{[29](#)}

Partnering with local law enforcement

After the United States experienced a significant rise in violent crime during the COVID-19 pandemic—including a 44 percent increase in gun homicides between March 2020 and October 2021—ATF deployed all its resources to address the crisis.^{[30](#)} Since 2023, gun violence has fallen at historic rates, and clearance rates for murder and violent crimes improved in 2024, reversing a troubling trend of clearance rates for murder and violent crimes getting severely worse in 2020, 2021, and 2022.^{[31](#)} ATF's partnerships with local law enforcement agencies, along with increased investments in community violence intervention and prevention programs, contributed to this turnaround.^{[32](#)}

In addition to cutting off the supply of high-powered firearms to individuals causing violence in local communities and holding them accountable when they harm others, ATF helps local law enforcement investigate arson and explosives. For example, ATF responded to the Los Angeles region to identify the origin and cause of the Pacific Palisades fire.^{[33](#)} In FY 2024, ATF initiated 1,796 arson investigations and 961 explosives cases.^{[34](#)} Along with preventing crimes involving improvised explosive devices, ATF also conducts research for local law enforcement on sources of privately made firearms, assists in solving cold cases, and leads federal public safety and security responses to acts of terrorism and disasters.^{[35](#)} For example, ATF assembled law enforcement teams to protect and assist federal urban search and rescue operations during hurricanes Helene and Milton.^{[36](#)} Furthermore, domestic violence coordinators in the agency's 25 field divisions help communities prevent firearm-related domestic violence by leading investigations and supporting survivors.

In April 2025, Steve Lewis, police chief of Ellisville, Missouri, and vice president of the Missouri Law Enforcement Legislative Coalition, testified against a bill that would prohibit Missouri law enforcement from working with ATF. The bill's sponsor said the law is an affirmation of Missouri's commitment to the Second Amendment.^{[37](#)} Lewis, however, said the bill is "anti-law enforcement" and would make it harder for officers to do their jobs.^{[38](#)} "To take that tool out of the hands of local and state law enforcement is absolutely criminal," Lewis said about losing access to ATF resources such as the National Tracing Center. "You know who wins? The bad guys win. The guys who are out here committing crimes—they win because there's a lot less law enforcement officers out there chasing them, hunting them and bringing them to justice."^{[39](#)}

Dismantling drug cartels and protecting the southern border

ATF plays a vital role in holding criminal organizations accountable for smuggling drugs such as fentanyl into U.S. communities and using drug proceeds to traffic U.S. guns across the southern border.^{[40](#)} In January 2024, two men were sentenced to a combined 41 years in prison after ATF

helped apprehend them for trafficking U.S. firearms to Mexico and trading them to drug traffickers in exchange for hundreds of kilograms of methamphetamine to be smuggled to Texas.⁴¹ “[Y]ou can’t actually successfully dismantle the cartels without also dismantling the gun trafficking that goes southward that allows them to send the fentanyl trafficking northward,” said Rep. Dan Goldman (D-NY).⁴²

In 2020, ATF launched Operation Southbound to disrupt the estimated 200,000 firearms smuggled into Mexico from the United States each year.⁴³ The 12 interagency firearms trafficking task forces led by ATF resulted in the seizure of 86 percent more firearms being trafficked to Mexico and a 34 percent increase in ATF-led criminal cases involving U.S. guns being trafficked to Mexico in FY 2023 compared with FY 2022.⁴⁴ As part of Operation Southbound, five individuals were charged in March 2024 in connection with allegedly trafficking more than 100 high-powered firearms acquired in Texas from unlicensed dealers or through straw purchases to a drug cartel in Mexico.⁴⁵

“ATF needs additional funding to partner with local and federal law enforcement agencies to dismantle violent drug organizations and stop the steady flow of guns and drugs across the southern border.”

In May 2024, Sinaloa cartel members were sentenced to life in prison following an investigation led by the ATF Miami Field Division that resulted in the seizure of 70,000 fentanyl pills, 21 kilograms of fentanyl, and 24 firearms.⁴⁶ In 2023, the ATF launched the Southwest Border Initiative to send special agents and intelligence resources to areas near the southern border, including four cities in Texas, to increase law enforcement capabilities and combat violent crime.⁴⁷ ATF needs additional funding to partner with local and federal law enforcement agencies to dismantle violent drug organizations and stop the steady flow of guns and drugs across the southern border.

Budget cuts undermine ATF’s effectiveness

ATF has been expected to do more with less even as the estimated number of guns in the United States has exploded over the past 15 years. Between 2010 and 2024, the total number of guns in circulation is estimated to have increased 72 percent, from 240 million in 2010 to an estimated 414 million by the end of 2025.⁴⁸ Compared with ATF’s budget, this means that the agency will receive 54 percent less funding per gun in circulation in 2026 than it did in 2010, after adjusting for inflation and population growth.⁴⁹

Special agent staffing has decreased significantly in recent years. In 2024, ATF employed 2,565 special agents—only 248 more agents than in 2001.⁵⁰ In response to the FY 2024 budget cuts, ATF canceled four special agent classes, preventing 96 special agents from being trained and onboarded.⁵¹ If Congress enacts the Trump administration’s proposed budget, ATF will shrink to 3,671 employees from its 5,136 positions budgeted in 2025, a 29 percent reduction.⁵² This

includes eliminating 541 industry operations investigators, severely reducing ATF's capacity to inspect gun dealers.⁵³ ATF anticipates eliminating 186 agent positions due to attrition in 2026, resulting in ATF having only 2,444 agents—fewer agents than ATF employed 25 years ago.⁵⁴

In addition to needing additional funding for agents, ATF needs to hire more research analysts and crime gun intelligence experts to ensure the agency can handle current crime problems and get ahead of future threats. According to ATF, funding cuts have forced ATF to decrease the crime gun intelligence services it can offer local law enforcement, “thereby impeding the flow of timely investigative leads to our state and local law enforcement partners, including delays in crime gun tracing requests, ballistic evidence processing, and DNA forensics that can tie individuals to unsolved crimes.”⁵⁵ If Congress approves the Trump administration's budget, the 29 percent decrease in ATF's budget will lead to fewer investigations and operations with local law enforcement, endangering community safety.

Additional threats to federal law enforcement's ability to prevent crime

ATF is facing additional threats beyond inadequate funding, including a lack of stable and independent leadership. In the first six months of 2025, ATF has had four different leaders and still lacks a Senate-confirmed leader.⁵⁶ Congress should urge President Trump to name a permanent director and quickly confirm the nominee to replace Acting Director Daniel Driscoll, who also serves as U.S. Army Secretary.⁵⁷

According to the Trump administration's budget proposal, the ATF will be “incorporated” into the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) with the transition beginning in FY 2026, further undermining ATF's independence and capacity.⁵⁸ The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) budget summary confirms the proposal to reorganize federal law enforcement, saying “ATF is eliminated as a separate component” with the DEA “absorbing select functions of ATF.”⁵⁹

The Trump administration's proposed budget also reduces funding to other federal law enforcement agencies, albeit to a significantly smaller degree than cuts proposed to ATF. The proposed budget reduces the FBI's budget by \$545 million, the DEA's by \$122 million, and cuts \$823 million for state and local grant programs compared with the previous year.⁶⁰ The DOJ has previously terminated 373 federal grants that funded efforts to improve policing, prosecution, and child protection, and to prevent human trafficking.⁶¹

The proposed budget also eliminates funding for the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF), the nation's largest anti-crime task force, in its current form as a standalone component within the DOJ.⁶² This Reagan-era program mobilizes federal law enforcement—including ATF—to combat transnational criminal organizations and helped arrest notorious Mexican drug cartel leader “El Chapo.”⁶³ The department also plans to close the OCDETF Fusion Center, “the single largest repository of federal and foreign investigative reporting throughout the

federal government.”⁶⁴ Congress has the opportunity to improve public safety by properly funding ATF to carry out its vital mission and restoring funding to law enforcement and violence prevention programs.

Conclusion

Local law enforcement relies on ATF’s technology, special agents, and the world’s leading experts in firearms, arson, and explosives to keep communities safe. Cutting the ATF’s budget and merging it with other agencies would seriously harm public safety. In order to prevent violence from occurring in the first place and to hold individuals and gun dealers accountable when they break the law, Congress needs to reject the Trump administration’s proposed cuts.

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