

# Unintended Consequences: National Security and Law Enforcement Concerns with ICE's Surge



By Theresa Cardinal Brown

## Introduction

Under President Donald Trump's executive actions, the federal government has initiated an immigration enforcement campaign within the United States that is unprecedented in recent decades.

The Enforcement and Removal Operations office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has primary responsibility for the arrest, detention, and removal of unauthorized and deportable immigrants from within the country. In support of this mission, ICE has received an extraordinary increase in resources and support from across the federal government, including from many other federal law enforcement agencies and the military. Notably, this is in addition to the \$75 billion allocated in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) for ICE, money intended to fund the hiring of 10,000 additional agents. This expansion would more than double ICE's existing 6,100 deportation officer workforce.

The dramatic surge in ICE resources and hiring raises significant concerns regarding their broader implications, including the diversion of resources from other federal law enforcement agencies. This shift may impact these agencies' ability to fulfill their important law enforcement and national security roles, and the government's focus on expanding ICE could affect other agencies' recruiting and staffing efforts.

The rapid pace of ICE recruitment and the acceleration of standard vetting and training processes for new ICE officers present further risks. One is the potential deployment of personnel who are not ideally suited for their responsibilities — including individuals who pose potential security risks. Furthermore, with so many new hires entering the agency, the ratio of probationary staff to supervisors is likely to rise, potentially resulting in less effective oversight and guidance by experienced personnel.

Given these concerns, the current administration and Congress must address the potential unintended consequences of ICE's rapid expansion. Careful attention to the integrity of hiring, training, and oversight processes is necessary to ensure that national security and law enforcement objectives are not compromised.

## Background

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was created as part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003. The Homeland Security Act abolished the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and divided its functions into separate agencies within DHS. ICE inherited the INS's deportation and removal operations division, as well as its criminal investigators. ICE also inherited customs investigators from the former U.S. Customs Service. Meanwhile, the Border Patrol and INS's inspections officers (at ports of entry) went to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). The act also divided INS's authorities for arrest,



detention, and removal, with ICE and CBP sharing those authorities, although the act generally confined CBP's activities to areas with a nexus to the border or ports of entry, while ICE covered the entire interior of the country.

ICE's mission includes not only immigration enforcement, which encompasses Enforcement and Removal Officers (ERO) as well as the attorneys of the ICE Office of the Principal Legal Advisor (OPLA), who prosecute deportation cases in immigration court on behalf of the government, but also the special agents of the Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) division. These special agents are responsible for investigating and building prosecutable criminal cases for violations of immigration and other related laws. HSI investigates cases relating to the cross-border movement of people, goods, money, technology and other contraband, and combats transnational crime in areas such as terrorism, national security threats, narcotics smuggling, gang activity, child exploitation, and human smuggling and trafficking. ICE conducts many of these investigations in collaboration with other federal law enforcement agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF).

One of President Trump's first executive orders, "Protecting the American People Against Invasion," directed the creation of Federal Homeland Security Task Forces (HSTFs) in all states, and directed that these task forces include representation from "any other Federal agencies with law enforcement officers, or agencies with the ability to provide logistics, intelligence, and operational support." By these words, and subsequent orders from the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Attorney General, law enforcement agents and officers from across the federal government, including FBI, DEA, ATF, Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Criminal Investigators, U.S. Marshals, U.S. Park Police, the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service, and even the U.S. Postal Inspection Service have been reassigned to the work of immigration enforcement. Although the language of the executive order states that the objective of the HSTFs is to end criminal cartels, foreign gangs, and transnational criminal organizations, the order also states that the HSTFs are to "ensure the use of all available law enforcement tools to faithfully execute the immigration laws of the United States."

While federal agents have been engaged in these efforts in support of ICE since early in 2025, the OBBBA also provided a huge funding increase of \$75 billion over two years for ICE and other DHS enforcement agencies to carry out the immigration missions. Of that amount, \$45 billion is to provide additional expanded detention capacity, and \$30 billion is for enforcement and deportation activities, including the hiring of 10,000 new ICE personnel. (Notably, DHS also paid its 70,000 law enforcement officers during the 2025 government shutdown with funds from the OBBBA.)

While this would represent an unprecedented increase in personnel for ICE, the slow pace of hiring, training, and deploying new agents means that additional federal law enforcement deployments may be needed for longer. Such a hiring spree also has raised concerns about the proper vetting of new hires; their fitness for



the particular mission of immigration enforcement; and whether or how the hiring push might impact recruitment to other law enforcement agencies at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as military recruitment, all of which tend to prioritize similar candidate profiles. Any of these issues could raise national security and law enforcement concerns.

## **Consequences of ICE Hiring Surge**

The ICE hiring surge carries a range of potential consequences that merit careful consideration. In the immediate term, a significant increase in personnel could lead to operational challenges, including the need for expanded training programs and integration processes for new hires. Demand on existing infrastructure and administrative systems also may increase, potentially straining resources as the agency attempts to maintain continuity in its core functions.

Such has been the experience of DHS in the past. After its creation in 2003, Congress authorized significant increases in staffing for Customs and Border Protection, and in particular the Border Patrol. In the first decade of the 21st century, the Border Patrol saw its staffing and budget almost triple. The agency's staffing more than doubled during this time, reaching more than 20,000 personnel by November 2009.

But this staffing increase brought with it serious issues for the agency. To reach the hiring goals, CBP lowered recruiting standards, shortened training time at the Border Patrol Academy, and hired individuals without fully vetted background checks. The result was a sharp increase in charges of corruption and misconduct. So many new agents were deployed to the field that there were not enough supervisors to continue their training. At one point, more than half of the Border Patrol had less than 2 years of service. The resulting issues led Congress to create the Anti-Border Corruption Act in 2010, which mandated polygraph testing for all new Border Patrol applicants.

This history is relevant for ICE's current hiring surge. If successful, the hiring of 10,000 new ICE agents will double its staff, as was the case for the Border Patrol in the 2000s. To do this, ICE is also lowering recruitment standards, shortening training time, and hiring people without fully completed background checks. ICE risks experiencing many of the same problems the Border Patrol experienced during rapid expansion, including the lack of supervisory agents and officers to oversee the new hires. While many of the additional personnel actually are rehires of former ICE employees who previously have passed background checks, not all are. Rapidly hiring new law enforcement officers can come with severe challenges for accountability.

Additionally, already the push to train ICE officers quickly has delayed the training of other federal law enforcement hires. The Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers (FLETC), which falls under DHS, is the training center for many federal law enforcement agencies as well as state, local, and tribal law



enforcement — more than 75 agencies total. These other agencies include ATF, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, U.S. Capitol Police, U.S. Marshals, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Park Police, and the National Park Service. In August 2025, FLETC notified its staff that it would reschedule all training for agencies other than ICE for the remainder of the year to later dates in 2026. This in turn creates staffing gaps for these other agencies, especially for those that also have had some of their personnel reassigned to ICE for enforcement.

Finally, ICE's lucrative offer of a \$50,000 signing bonus is drawing law enforcement officers and agents from other federal agencies, as well as state and local governments. The federal Bureau of Prisons notes that it is losing corrections officers to the ICE hiring spree, which is exacerbating issues at federal corrections facilities. Even state and local law enforcement departments are feeling the strain, as the bonus could represent an entire year's salary in some local police departments.

ICE is also targeting both active-duty military and veterans. While military recruitment had been in decline for several years, the Pentagon indicates that the military did meet its goals for 2024 and 2025, but that was mostly before the current hiring push from ICE.

## **National Security Effects**

The overextension of immigration enforcement can create holes in other public safety and national security missions.

Recent reporting by The New York Times suggests that the focus on immigration is compromising some of ICE's and DHS's other missions, including investigations of money-laundering, human trafficking, and online child exploitation —and even extending to Coast Guard search and rescue. Other reporting has shown that federal drug prosecutions, usually led by the DEA, have fallen to the lowest levels in decades. ATE, meanwhile, reassigned 80% of its special agents to immigration cases and is on pace for a 90% drop in gun license investigations.

Even within immigration enforcement operations, coordination difficulties can arise from challenges in interagency communication and the alignment of operations among so many different agencies with different training, operational standards, and legal authorities. Without effective coordination, duplication of effort or failure to share essential information in a timely manner are real risks. In particular, the involvement of military assets and personnel — including those of the National Guard, which receives military rather than law enforcement training — can further exacerbate these challenges. The lack of coordination or communication with state and local law enforcement authorities can create dangerous situations, as well as lead to misidentification of the agencies or offices involved in challenged enforcement actions. Los Angeles offers an example: The public believed, incorrectly, that the Los Angeles Police Department had been involved in the ICE actions.



The diversion of so many personnel and resources to immigration enforcement also risks gaps in other security domains and key missions of DHS, such as border security, counterterrorism, and cyber initiatives. The potential impacts of such gaps may not be known until after a major incident.

## **Policy Considerations**

The current immigration enforcement actions in the interior of the country are unprecedented in recent memory. The reorientation of the entire federal law enforcement and military apparatus toward immigration enforcement likewise is new and raises significant concerns over the other important federal national security and public safety missions that may go undone.

Regardless of whether one agrees with the policies and tactics of the Trump administration in immigration enforcement, the consequences already under way across the federal government, the U.S. military, and state and local law enforcement could create vulnerabilities for our national security and public safety. Despite the administration's continued assertions that all missions are being fully carried out, the sheer scope of the enforcement effort and the reassignment of thousands of federal government law enforcement agents and officers, military, and the National Guard make such assurances suspect.

If the administration wanted to continue to conduct these operations without sacrificing other important mission areas, it would have other options. First, it would be more productive to detail only a certain number of agents from other departments in the immigration effort to ensure that those agencies are not abandoning other important investigations and operations. Before deployment, operational commanders from all participating agencies should conduct joint operational and policy training to ensure that standards are enforced. Communication with state and local law enforcement prior to operations can reduce the potential for conflict and misidentification of agencies involved. Finally, ICE should not lower hiring and recruitment standards. Hiring should take place at a pace that allows for proper training and supervision of new agents and officers to ensure that they are fit for duty and effectively accountable for their actions.

The administration urgently must address these issues to ensure that it conducts immigration enforcement with professionalism, alongside the other important and necessary missions of the federal law enforcement agencies.



## About the Author

**Theresa Cardinal Brown** is a former federal government official, serving for over six years with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. She served as a policy advisor in the office of the Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) under then-Commissioner Robert Bonner, served on Secretary Michael Chertoff's Second Stage Review of USCIS, was a member and later director of the Immigration Legislation Task Force for the DHS Office of Policy in 2006 and 2007 and served in the DHS Office of International Affairs as both the first Director of Canadian Affairs and the first DHS Attaché to Canada, supporting international and bilateral homeland security missions for Secretaries Michael Chertoff and Janet Napolitano. Brown has over 20 years of experience in immigration and border security law, policy, and government relations with law firms, associations, and think tanks.