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United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement | ICE, undocumented immigrants, illegal aliens, Barack Obama, & Donald Trump

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8–11 minutes

Top Questions

What is the primary role of United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)?

Who appoints the director of ICE?

What are the main directorates of ICE?

When was ICE formed and why?

News •

United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, agency of the [U.S.](#) federal government that [enforces](#) laws governing border control, [customs](#), [trade](#), and [immigration](#). ICE is overseen by a director who is appointed by the [president of the United States](#) and confirmed by the [U.S. Senate](#). The director reports to the secretary of the [Department of Homeland](#)

[Security](#) (DHS). From the start of Pres. [Donald Trump](#)'s second term (2025–), the agency expanded its efforts to arrest and [deport](#) undocumented immigrants, and its size and budget were greatly increased.

Structure and functions

ICE has several major operational sections, or directorates, including Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO), and the Office of the Principal Legal Advisor (OPLA). The HSI directorate combats transnational [criminal](#) organizations (e.g., [drug-smuggling cartels](#)), while the ERO handles the arrest, detention, and supervised release or [deportation](#) of undocumented immigrants. The OPLA provides the legal support necessary for these operations, including the litigation of deportation cases before the [U.S. Justice Department](#)'s Executive Office for Immigration Review. Another directorate, Management and Administration (M&A), performs managerial and administrative functions for the other directorates while maintaining their [infrastructure](#).

Many divisions and offices within the directorates provide important services to the organization. For example, the Office of the Chief Financial Officer [allocates](#) funding, and the Office of Professional Responsibility is tasked with upholding ICE's standards for professional conduct.

History

ICE—alongside Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)—was established on March 1, 2003, to carry out government functions previously performed by the U.S. Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which were

formally disbanded. The agency's creation was part of a much larger reorganization in the federal government after the [terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001](#), in which all or part of 22 federal agencies were absorbed into the new U.S. Department of Homeland Security. ICE's first director ("assistant secretary" at the time) was Michael J. Garcia, who previously served as acting commissioner of the INS. In 2008 ICE moved into a new headquarters, Potomac Center North, in the Southwest quadrant of [Washington, D.C.](#)

ICE represented a new emphasis in the federal government on border security and the removal of undocumented immigrants believed to be a threat to national security or public safety. This more aggressive stance garnered [criticism](#) from many immigrant-rights activists as the number of deportees climbed. An all-time high number of [deportations](#) during the administration of Pres. [Barack Obama](#) (2009–17) led advocates of more [lenient](#) immigration policies to refer to him as the "deporter in chief."

ICE under the first Trump administration

In 2016 the National Immigration and Customs Enforcement Council—the union that represents ICE employees—made its first endorsement of a presidential candidate: [Republican](#) nominee [Donald Trump](#), who promised to dramatically increase expulsions of undocumented immigrants. Immediately after Trump became president, he signed an [executive order](#) to triple the size of the agency's deportation staff by hiring 10,000 officers (this did not happen, and the number of officers as of 2025 was about 6,100). The same order called for the expansion of ICE officers' authority and the deportation of all undocumented immigrants. Trump thus overturned the strategy

of Pres. [Joe Biden](#)'s administration (2021–25), which prioritized immigrants who posed a danger to the public.

According to the Pew Research Center, ICE arrests of individuals either known to be or suspected of being in the [United States](#) illegally greatly increased during Trump's first term as president (2017–21). The number of arrests ultimately remained well under those made during the Obama administration, but combined with Trump's anti-immigrant [rhetoric](#) and other policies (e.g., the separation of parents from their children at the border), the spike led to mainstream backlash against the agency. [Democrats](#) in general came to hold negative opinions of the agency—a campaign to “abolish ICE” gained traction among progressives—while Republicans viewed it more favorably.

This [tumultuous](#) era left ICE with a stigma that made its work more difficult even after Trump's first term. Agents of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), a directorate of ICE, found that officials in many cities were less willing to cooperate with them. Some HSI investigators were kicked off joint task forces, and some recruiters were heckled at career fairs. In 2024 HSI went so far as to distance itself from ICE by scrubbing mentions of the parent agency from its website and issuing employees new email addresses. Despite ICE's reduced public support, the number of its yearly arrests of undocumented immigrants increased significantly during the first three years of the Biden administration, from more than 74,000 in 2021 to nearly 171,000 in 2023.

ICE under the second Trump administration

One of the major themes of [Trump's 2024 campaign](#) for a second presidential term was his promise to deport all

undocumented immigrants living in the United States (some 11 million people) by conducting raids on immigrant [communities](#) and employers and sending immigrants to military-controlled deportation camps. Although the number of daily ICE arrests in the last week of January 2025 exceeded the average daily figure for all of [fiscal year](#) 2024 (759), the numbers for February and March 2025 did not. The exact numbers of daily ICE arrests during this period were unclear, however, in part because the Trump administration stopped publishing daily figures in February.

The start of Trump's second term was also marked by highly publicized ICE raids in Democratic-run [sanctuary cities](#), which limit the enforcement of federal immigration laws and generally decline to cooperate with federal authorities in the arrest and deportation of undocumented immigrants. In [Los Angeles](#), for example, ICE raids drew large crowds of protesters in early June 2025. After demonstrators were seen vandalizing federal buildings and throwing rocks and other objects at police officers, Trump ordered the deployment of about 2,000 soldiers of the [National Guard](#) of [California](#) and 700 active-duty [Marines](#) to protect federal buildings and personnel in the city; he then increased the number of National Guard troops to 4,000. The deployment marked the first time in 60 years that a state National Guard was federalized without the permission of the governor, who is the Guard's commander in chief. (Pres. [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) did so in 1965, when he sent troops to [Alabama](#) to protect a peaceful [civil rights](#) march.) Anti-ICE protests in Los Angeles were thereafter mostly peaceful, and in mid-July Trump ordered the [withdrawal](#) of 2,000 National Guard troops.

ICE raids in sanctuary cities and other areas were frequently conducted in sensitive locations that had been off-limits for

immigrant arrests—including churches, schools, and hospitals. Even immigrants attending legally required hearings at immigration courts to avoid deportation were subject to arrest in or near the courthouses where their hearings took place. The increased number of arrests and [detentions of immigrants](#) throughout the country, as well as the perceived violence and cruelty of many ICE officers, led to greater public sympathy for immigrants and inspired many Americans to consider themselves pro-immigration. Trump's crackdown became a major theme of the anti-Trump rallies held across the country on Trump's birthday in mid-June 2025. The [“No Kings” protests](#), as they were called, amounted to one of the largest single-day demonstrations in U.S. history.

Also called:

ICE

In July 2025 the [U.S. Congress](#) passed, and Trump signed into law, a Republican budget bill, officially titled the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA). The act included an [unprecedented](#) increase in funding for immigration enforcement, detention, and deportation networks over four years, including approximately \$75 billion for ICE.

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