

‘Systemic breakdowns in vetting’

Record number of people have left ICE amid its hiring spree

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USA TODAY

Flush with cash to fulfill President Donald Trump’s mass deportation agenda, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement began a hiring spree last year that more than doubled its number of agents and officers. In the first half of this year, nearly 3,000 have left ICE, a record number according to a new data analysis by USA TODAY.

Historically, most who leave the agency retire. But this year the majority who parted ways with ICE quit or were fired.

In just the first half of 2026, more people have quit than in any other full calendar year since 2012, the first available year of data from the federal Office of Personnel Management. Terminations so far this year are higher than the whole decade before the second Trump administration combined.

The median tenure for people who quit this year was six months — it was under four months for those who were terminated — meaning a significant number of those who left were hired amid the Trump administration’s push to expand ICE.

Experts and former ICE officials said the mass exit could stem from new hiring practices, low morale and other changes within the agency. They also said the trend underscores challenges with proper vetting and training, which can put the public at risk during interactions with ICE that have become more frequent.

“That means that they were hiring people they shouldn’t have hired. They hired too many people too quickly,” said Claire Trickler-McNulty, an attorney who held senior positions within the Department of Homeland Security, ICE’s parent agency, during Republican and Democratic administrations. “If they’re getting fired, that means they weren’t fit for the job. And if they’re resigning, then they also weren’t fit for the job.”

DHS offered \$50,000 signing bonuses and student loan repayment and waived age limits, saying in a news release: “so even more patriots will qualify to join ICE in its mission.” ICE received more than 220,000 applications.

In all, it hired nearly 12,000 full-time employees in the first year and a half of the second Trump administration, more than the previous decade combined. Most were hired for an occupational category that includes deportation officers. In September 2025 alone, ICE hired just under 2,500 people, which eclipses any single calendar year before, according to the analysis.

The data also shows the education level among new hires changed. In the decade before the second Trump administration, the biggest share had a graduate degree, closely followed by people with bachelor’s degrees. Now, those with a high school education or less are the biggest share.

DHS denied education requirements changed, and did not respond to questions about USA TODAY’s other findings. It also did not make ICE employees available for interviews.

“ICE is hiring the best of the best to get the worst of the worst criminals off America’s streets,” a DHS spokesperson said in a statement. “The vast majority of new officers brought on during the hiring surge are experienced law enforcement officers who have already successfully completed a law enforcement academy.”

The National ICE Officers Association and the Fraternal Order of Police, which represent ICE officers, did not respond to requests for comment.

‘Deficient training’

In September 2025, attorney Ryan Schwank joined the ICE academy at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia, where he taught legal classes for new hires. Five months later, Schwank resigned and became a whistleblower.

The same month he quit, Schwank testified during a forum hosted by Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Connecticut, and Rep. Robert Garcia, D-California, that ICE’s training program was “deficient, defective and broken.” He added ICE had slashed 240 hours from its 584-hour training program, including classes about the U.S. Constitution, firearms, use of force, lawful arrests, proper detention and the limits of officer authority.

“Deficient training can and will get people killed. It can and will lead to unlawful arrests, violations of constitutional rights, and a fundamental loss of public trust in law enforcement,” Schwank said during the forum.

During a federal budget hearing June 3, DHS Secretary Markwayne Mullin confirmed ICE’s training curriculum was rewritten and that it would “be back up to the regular standards” starting July 1.

Despite Mullin’s comments, DHS said no training was cut, though the agency declined to provide a copy of the new curriculum, nor the one taught a year ago.

“DHS has streamlined training to cut redundancy and incorporate technology advancements, without sacrificing basic subject matter content. Under these new improvements, candidates still learn the same elements and meet the same high standards ICE has always required. No subject matter has been cut,” a DHS spokesperson said.

In the past, Schwank said, deportation officers focused on processing people detained by other law enforcement agencies, but now their emphasis is on pursuing undocumented immigrants.

“They’re performing a role that is completely alien to the way the agency was set up,” Schwank said. Since their work has become “more aggressive and dangerous,” Schwank added, their training “needs to reflect that.”

Another whistleblower filed a complaint in August 2025 to the DHS Office of Inspector General, describing how the agency was “overwhelmed by law enforcement officer applications, leading to systemic break-



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MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO/GETTY IMAGES FILE

downs in vetting.” The ICE official said in its complaint the agency issued final job offers without preliminary vetting, which includes fingerprinting, identity verification and credit checks.

The whistleblower was put on leave for 10 months and retired immediately after being reinstated, according to The New York Times, which first reported on this.

Mullin’s tenure starts with deaths

As ICE officials deal with new roles and training, they’re frequently becoming embroiled in controversy.

Their enforcement activity decreased after ICE officers fatally shot Renee Good and Alex Pretti in January in Minneapolis. Vowing a less confrontational approach, Mullin replaced Kristi Noem as DHS secretary in March. But by June, arrests had picked up again to more than 1,300 per day — the highest level so far during the new administration, according to the latest data.

Partial data for July shows the agency was on track for even higher numbers of arrests. That month, three people died during encounters with ICE agents. Among them was Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero, a 25-year-old Colombian immigrant who was fatally shot in Biddeford, Maine, by an ICE officer. The officer was “fearing for public safety” after Durán Guerrero “attempted to flee the scene” in his car, according to an emailed statement from DHS, which declined to identify the officer. Durán Guerrero was not the target of the enforcement operation.

Ashley Brouillette told USA TODAY her ex-husband, David Brouillette, is the agent who shot Durán Guerrero. Their two-year marriage, she said, was riddled with verbal and physical abuse. She added she made multiple attempts to get a court protection order against Brouillette, 37, alleging he choked her, threatened her with a gun and threw boiling hot water on her while she was holding their daughter.

She said he’d displayed “deep-rooted anger problems” since they were teenagers, bullied classmates, referred to Black and Mexican people with slurs and thought he was “superior.” He held several law enforcement jobs in Maine and was a U.S. Army veteran who deployed to Afghanistan. In July, his ex-wife said, he called her and told her he’d shot someone.

“I think that all these agencies — ICE, police, even the military — need to dig deeper into the mental health of these people that they’re allowing to do these jobs,” she said. “David should’ve never been allowed to have this type of job.”

Another ex-wife, Lucinda Brouillette, accused him of abuse in a statement she sent news outlets in July.

David Brouillette has no criminal convictions in Maine, according to state court records. He did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The Maine attorney general’s office, which is investigating the shooting, declined to comment.

DHS, which is also investigating the shooting, said in an email statement that ICE observes “proper personnel vetting regulations” and evaluates all available information about applicants during the hiring process.

Ashley Brouillette said DHS interviewed her after the shooting and asked about her ex-husband’s history of violence, medications, diagnoses of mental illness and if she knew where he was. Wanting “answers” about the investigation and ICE’s hiring process, she said she’s also contacted the agency, but hasn’t gotten a response.

Traumatic stress, low morale

First responders — including police officers — face heightened risks of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide compared to the general population, and they are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty, according to reports commissioned in 2018 and 2022 by the Ruderman Family Foundation, which advocates for people with disabilities.

ICE reported at least 11 suicide-related deaths from fiscal year 2016 to 2025, according to a Government Accountability Office report in June. The report concluded DHS workers — there are more than 77,000 officers across nine agencies and offices within the department — “perform critical work to protect national security, but this work may expose them to stress that could adversely affect their mental health.” This challenge will likely grow as DHS gets additional funding for hiring and training more officers, according to the report.

“Any population that is chronically exposed to potentially traumatic events is at an elevated risk of PTSD,” said Anka Vujanovic, who directs clinical training in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences at Texas A&M University and who has studied PTSD and suicide risks among first responders.

Those who work in detention facilities, in particu-

lar, face high risks of PTSD, depression and suicide, said Lisa Jaegers, an occupational science professor at Saint Louis University who has studied corrections officers’ working conditions.

People may apply for this line of work because the “job description is written in a way where they feel as though they’ll be doing something towards the betterment or assisting with improving a situation,” Jaegers said, adding they might ultimately learn it’s not what they expected.

ICE hires private contractors, including guard services, for some detention centers, while state and local governments run the other detention facilities, according to Trickler-McNulty. So those workers are not reflected in federal workforce data analyzed by USA TODAY.

Since Trump took office, nearly half a million people have been booked into immigration detention centers, where there have been reports of overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, medical neglect and poor food. Since 2025, at least 56 people have died under ICE detention custody, according to USA TODAY’s tracker.

Outside detention centers, arrest quotas and new enforcement strategies have lowered morale among ICE agents, which could be contributing to turnover, said John Sandweg, who served as acting ICE director from August 2013 to February 2014 under President Barack Obama.

Agents who joined ICE with hopes of getting “bad guys off the streets,” Sandweg said, no longer feel good about their work after the agency’s mission changed to arresting “just any immigrants.”

“No one wants to work at a place where you can’t tell your family and friends — you’re scared or nervous to tell people you work at ICE,” he said. “You want to be proud of what you do.”

Meanwhile, “demoralizing” changes in ICE’s mission and low morale have caused senior officers to leave, Sandweg said. And the loss of those senior officials has had a “devastating impact on culture at the agency.”

“Policies are critically important. Training is critically important. But in my experience, there’s nothing more important than that culture, and it’s established from the top down in all the field offices in the country,” Sandweg said.

The cultural shift began under Noem, who replaced ICE’s regional leaders with Border Patrol officials and deployed hundreds of authorities to carry out immigration enforcement in cities. Some of those changes were met with resistance from senior DHS officials, who were then forced to resign, or be transferred or demoted, Sandweg said.

Terminations and resignations peaked in the first three months of 2026 and then started to slow down in the second quarter. There’s still mounting pressure from the Trump administration to continue aggressive enforcement tactics at airports, immigration courts and traffic stops.

“If people have concerns about what they’ve seen from ICE in the last year, it’s going to be a different agency, in many not good ways, over the next year or two,” Sandweg said. “Every year, more and more of these new agents are coming online.”

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