American Immigration Council

AUGUST 2026

FACT SHEET

The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security

Since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003, the federal government has spent over half a trillion dollars (an estimated $532.5 billion through Fiscal Year 2026) on the agencies that carry out immigration enforcement,[1] and tens of billions more on border barriers and other immigration enforcement-related infrastructure projects. As Congress in 2025 and 2026 has continued to pour record levels of funding to immigration enforcement, it is important to review how much money has already been spent on these initiatives, and what outcomes have been produced.

Immigration enforcement spending largely falls into two areas: border security and interior enforcement. Border spending includes staffing and resources for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), an agency of DHS working at and between United States ports of entry. Interior enforcement is primarily focused on staffing and resources for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), also part of DHS, to apprehend noncitizens in the interior of the country, detain or monitor those undergoing removal proceedings, and deport those ordered removed. Because DHS has shifting operational priorities, funding for border enforcement may at times be used for interior enforcement, and vice versa.

As of 2026, ICE and CBP employed over 96,400 people in total, a number which is set to increase through the end of 2029 due to an unprecedented increase in funding from Congress in 2025 and 2026.[2]

The number of U.S. Border Patrol agents has more than doubled from 10,717 in Fiscal Year (FY) 2003 to 21,471 agents by the end of June 2026.[3] Additionally, the number of people working at ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) more than tripled from FY 2003 to FY 2024, when the agency had 7,711 staff.[4] In 2025, through the budget reconciliation process, Congress provided ICE with $30 billion to increase hiring, with ICE setting a goal of increasing ERO staff by another 10,000 people by the end of FY 2029.[5]

What has this spending bought? The United States currently had roughly 775 miles of wall or fencing along the Southern border as of July 2025 (with another 644 miles of wall planned),[6] record and growing levels of staff for ICE and CBP, as well as a fleet of drones — among other resources.[7] Some of these resources have been spent on ill-conceived projects such as the 2026 effort by ICE to purchase commercial warehouses and convert them into immigration detention centers, which was abandoned within months after the U.S. had already spent $1 billion to acquire the facilities.[8]

Even with record level spending, enforcement alone is not sufficient to address the challenges irregular migration can bring.[9] It also has significant unintended consequences; at least 9,700 people died crossing the border between 2000 and 2023, a number which is widely agreed to be an undercount.[10] Inside the United States, after the Trump administration ramped up immigration enforcement in 2025, over 50 people died in ICE detention centers in his first 18 months in office; a

record.[11] All of these efforts that have accumulated in the name of security, however, do not necessarily measure border security properly, or secure the border.[12]

Critically, increases in funding for immigration enforcement have significantly outpaced funding for the United States humanitarian protection and adjudication systems. In FY 2025, Congress provided $45 billion to immigration detention centers alone.[13] By contrast, that same year Congress appropriated just $800 million for the entire immigration court system through the normal appropriations process,[14] and despite providing the Department of Justice $3.3 billion for immigration purposes (including the immigration court system) through the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, capped the total number of judges that the funding could be used for.[15] In other words, even when supercharging immigration enforcement, the United States spent a minimum of 11 times as much on immigration detention alone than it did on the entire adjudication system for removal. This consequently leads to skyrocketing case backlogs, years of delays, and increased time spent in detention for immigrants choosing to challenge their removal.

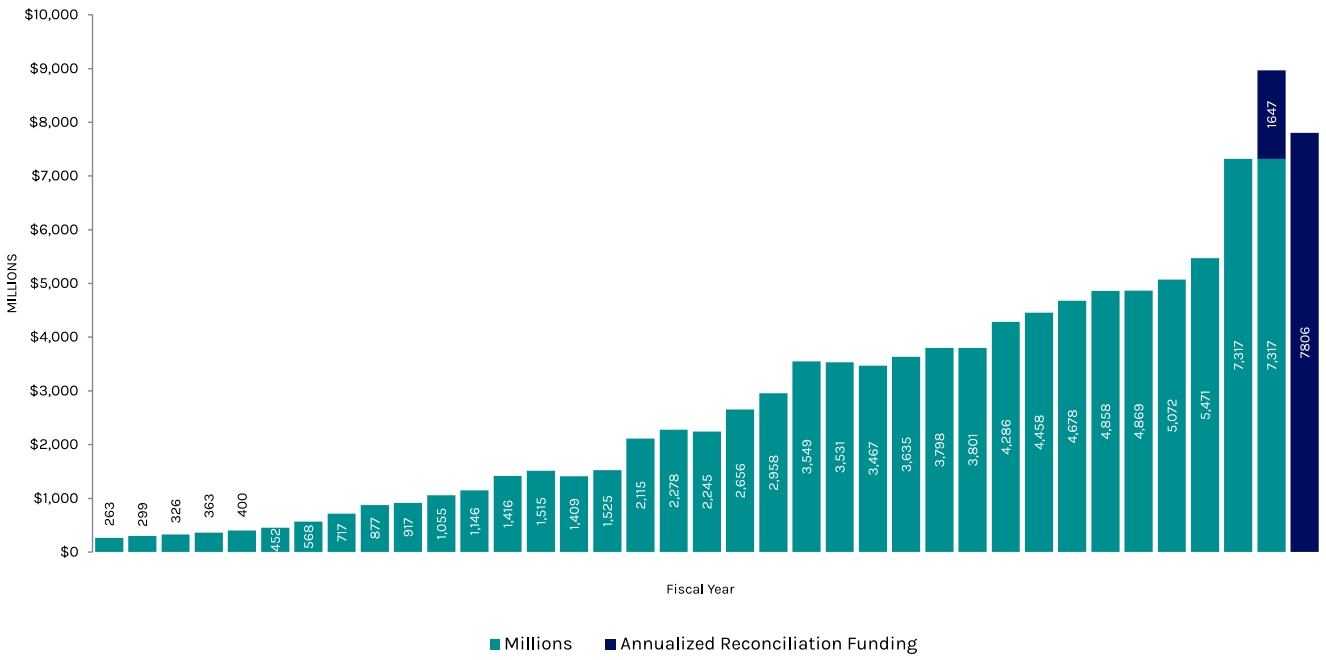
It is past time for the United States to turn away from strictly focusing on enforcement and deterrence-based policies and instead focus on a more balanced approach that provides the resources necessary to build a functional humanitarian protection system while balancing security interests. Better options are available.[16]

The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security in Dollars

Government spending on immigration enforcement has increased massively since the early 1990s, but many members of Congress continue to call for further increases.

Since 1994, when the current strategy of concentrated border enforcement was first rolled out along the U.S.-Mexico border, the annual budget of the U.S. Border Patrol has increased nearly 22-fold, rising from $400 million to a peak of roughly $9 billion in FY 2025 (Figure 1).[17] Even when adjusted for inflation, that is an increase of over 890 percent.[18]

FIGURE 1: U.S. BORDER PATROL BUDGET, FY 1990-2026, INCLUDING ANNUALIZED BUDGET RECONCILIATION FUNDING*



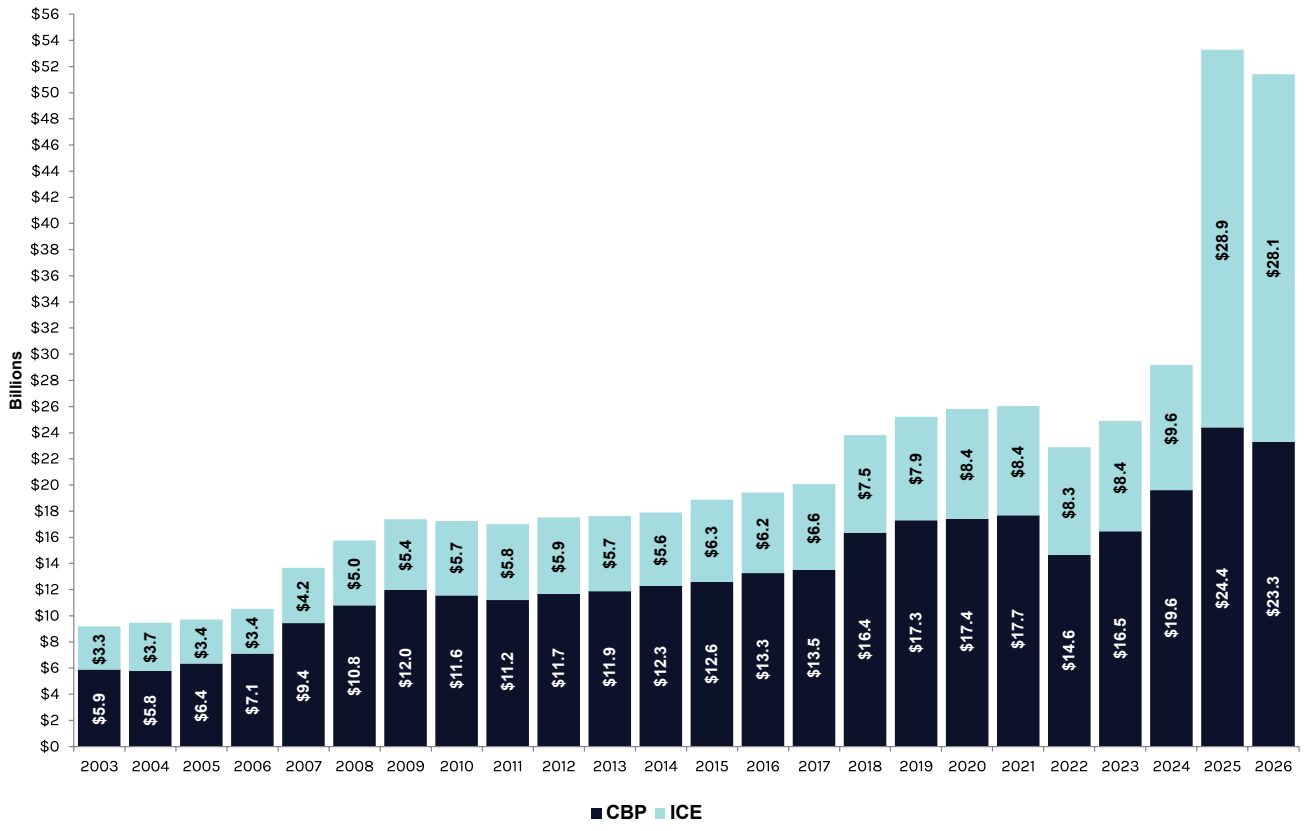
Source: Congressional budgets, gross budget authority as provided in Conference Reports, FY 1990-2026.

* Includes discretionary appropriations and fee-funded programs

Since the creation of DHS in 2003, ICE's annual appropriations spending nearly tripled from $3.3 billion to $10 billion in FY 2025 (Figure 2). On top of that, Congress provided ICE an additional $75 billion in budget reconciliation funding through the One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025, and then an additional $38.5 billion in the Secure America Act of 2026, all to be spent through September 30, 2029.[19] Taking into consideration all of this funding, ICE's annual funding, when adjusted for inflation, has increased over 400 percent since 2003. The majority of this funding has gone to increasing the agency's ability to hold noncitizens in detention around the country, to electronically monitor noncitizens on "alternatives to detention", and to carry out deportations, with $45 billion in budget reconciliation funding given provided for immigration detention alone. By July 2026, ICE had already spent or set aside $58 billion of the funding it received in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.[20] Crucially, funding provided through the budget reconciliation process bypasses normal oversight provisions included in federal spending bills.

Since 2003, the budget of CBP, which includes both the Border Patrol and operations at ports of entry, has also more than quadrupled, rising from $5.9 billion in FY 2003 to a high of $24.4 billion in FY 2025, when accounting for annualized funding provided in the 2025 and 2026 budget reconciliation bills (Figure 2). In addition, in 2025, Congress provided CBP an additional $46.6 billion for border wall construction, a record sum.[21]

FIGURE 2: CBP & ICE ANNUAL BUDGETS, FY 2003-2026, INCLUDING ANNUALIZED BUDGET RECONCILIATION FUNDING*



Source: Congressional budgets, gross budget authority as provided in Conference Reports, FY 2003-2026.

* Includes discretionary appropriations and fee-funded programs

The Negative Social and Economic Costs of Mass Deportation Grow as Congress Increases Funding for Interior Enforcement

Since 2025, DHS has been engaged in a whole-of-government effort to carry out a mass deportation campaign targeting the entire U.S. undocumented population, most of whom have been present in the United States for at least 10 years with no clear path to permanent legal status.[22] This effort has led to record levels of arrests and deportations, but has also led to civil unrest, a rise in deaths, and measurable economic damage to communities targeted for immigration enforcement operations. Despite this, Congress continues to provide unprecedented funding to ICE and CBP for mass deportation, including an additional $69.5 billion in the Secure America Act of 2026.[23] As this enforcement campaign expands, the secondary effects for American communities are coming into view.

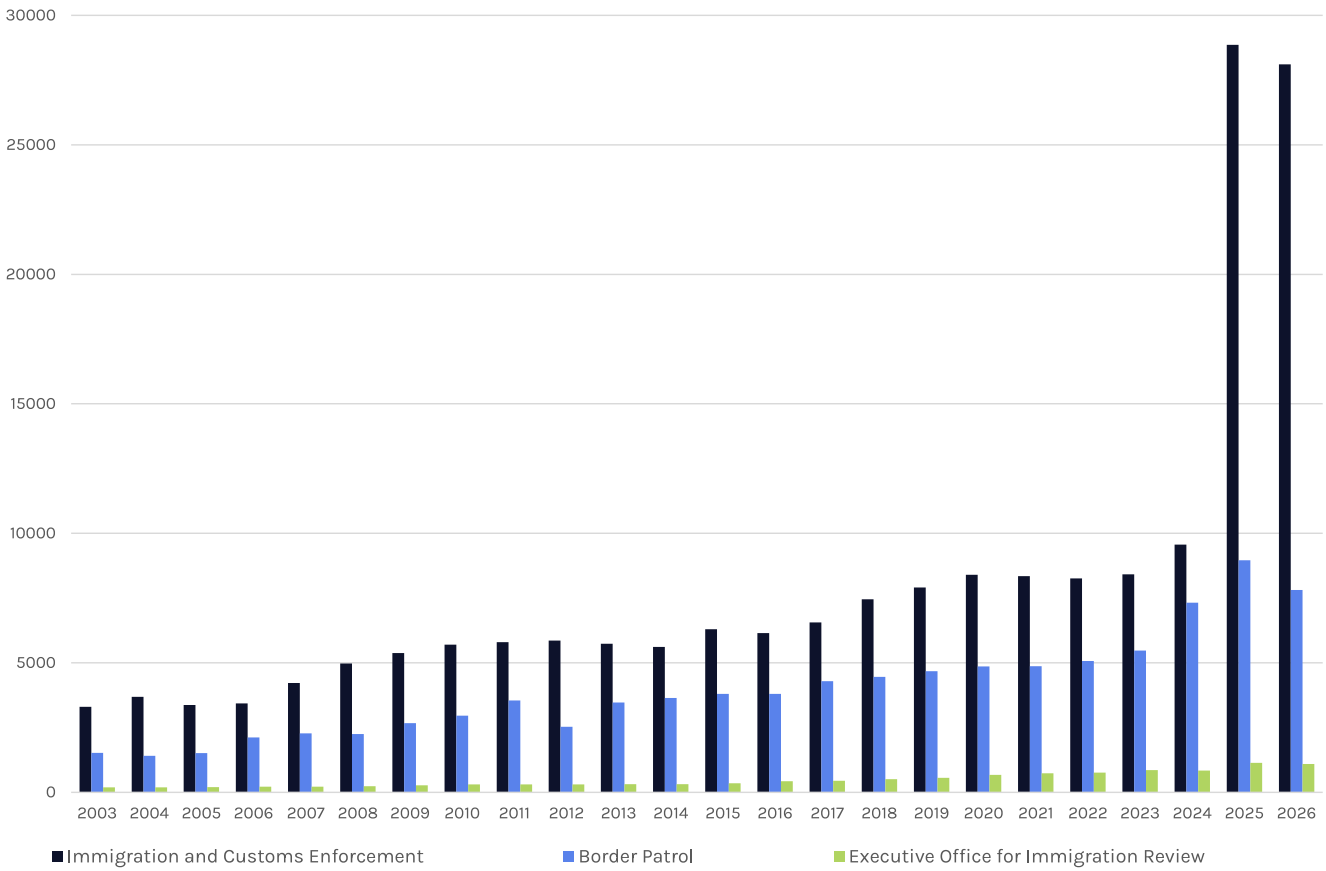
- A 2024 analysis of the projected impacts of mass deportation of 13.3 million people found that expelling the entire undocumented population would lead to a loss in U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) of 4.2 to 6.8 percent, equal to or greater than the loss in GDP during the Great Recession.[24]
- A 2026 study of communities heavily impacted by ICE enforcement during President Trump's first year in office shows that areas that experienced sudden and large increases in arrests and deportations saw a decline in economic activity that led to fewer jobs overall, including for American citizens working in low-income industries.[25]
- Following Operation Metro Surge in Minneapolis, in which DHS deployed 3,000 federal agents to the city to carry out mass arrests, protests and civil unrests wracked the city and two American citizens, Alex Pretti and Renee Good, were killed by federal agents in contentious incidents. In June 2026, the City of Minneapolis published an impact assessment determining that Operation Metro Surge cost the city nearly $700 million in economic damages.[26]
- After the number of people in immigration detention have risen by nearly 75 percent in President Trump's first year back in office,[27] deaths in ICE detention have hit record highs.[28] During the first six months of 2026, one person was dying in ICE detention every eight days.[29]
- From January 2025 through April 2026, researchers estimate that 145,000 U.S. citizen children have experienced at least one parent being taken into ICE custody, with an estimated 22,000 children left without any parent in the home due to detention and deportation.[30] This coincides with a documented rise in immigrant children entering the foster care system.[31]

There is a Serious Enforcement-Adjudication Funding Mismatch

Despite pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into immigration enforcement over the last two decades, Congress has failed to provide similar funding infusions to the immigration court system. Taken together, from FY 2003 through 2026, Congress has spent roughly $25 on ICE and Border Patrol for every $1 spent on the immigration court system. Over that 24-year period, Congress spent $11.4 billion on the immigration courts (see Figure 3)—just one fourth of the amount Congress appropriated for ICE detention in 2025 alone.[32]

Given this funding mismatch, the immigration court's backlog of cases has risen every single year since FY 2007. As of the middle of FY 2026, there were more than 3.5 million cases pending in the immigration court system, an increase of over 332 percent since 2016.[33] Despite the demand, as of April 2026, there were only 655 permanent or temporary immigration judges across the entire country, for an average of 5,450 cases per judge.[34] So long as Congress continues to supercharge enforcement at the expense of adjudication, these backlogs will likely persist.

FIGURE 3: ANNUAL BUDGETS OF ICE, BORDER PATROL, AND EOIR, IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, FY 2003-2026



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1 This number is derived from the gross or total budget authority figure provided in conference reports accompanying congressional appropriations bills for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and U.S. Customs and Border Protection for Fiscal Years 2004-2026, an amount which includes fee-funded expenditures, as well as $13.5 billion in funding for reimbursing state and local government agencies that carry out immigration enforcement which was included in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025, and $5 billion included for general DHS immigration enforcement included in the Secure America Act of 2026.

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