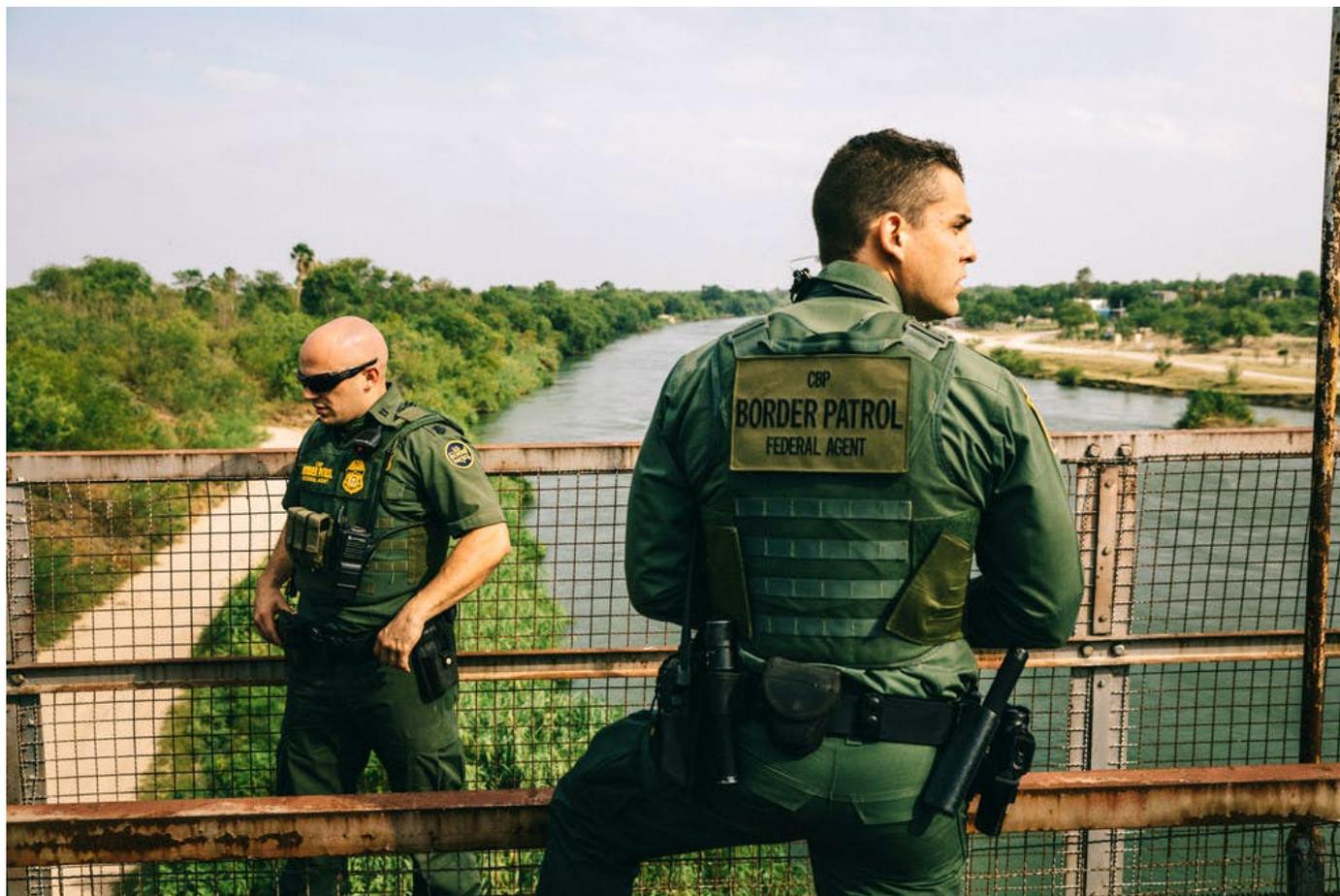


# Trump ordered the Border Patrol to hire more agents, but instead, it's losing them

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WASHINGTON — Five days after his inauguration, President Donald Trump ordered the Department of Homeland Security to add 5,000 Border Patrol agents to a staff of roughly 20,000. But instead of gaining agents, the Border Patrol has been losing them.

A Government Accountability Office [report](#) last week found that attrition has outstripped improvements in recruiting and hiring.

Rep. Filemon Vela, a Brownsville Democrat, requested the report along with three other representatives and two senators.

The Border Patrol, part of Customs and Border Protection and its parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security, more than doubled its recruitment budget from \$432,775 in fiscal year 2015 to \$1,019,182 in 2016 and \$1,019,940 in 2017. The bolstered recruitment efforts were effective. Applications increased and training sped up.

Improvements cut the average time from a job announcement closing to deployment of an agent from 628 days to 274 days. In the first half of 2018, the Border Patrol hired nearly double the number of agents it brought on over the same period in 2017.

But it wasn't enough to keep up with departures.

In 2017, the Border Patrol posted a net loss of nearly 400 agents.

That left staffing at almost 7,000 below Trump's target.

CBP officials say that low pay — the starting [salary](#) is \$52,583 — and postings in remote, undesirable locations make retention hard.

Unemployment is also at a 10-year low. That also makes it harder to recruit and retain agents, said Doris Meissner, a former Immigration and Naturalization Service director who now works at the Migration Policy Institute.

CBP faces competition from other branches of the federal government. Last year, 39 percent of Border Patrol agents who quit left to go work for another

federal agency.

## Legislative response

Trump's 2019 [budget request](#) would have provided \$211 million to hire 750 more Border Patrol agents. The latest funding bill from the Senate Appropriations Committee provides enough for half that many new agents. Last year, Congress [rejected funding for any additional agents](#), with lawmakers noting that the agency was already well below its authorized staffing levels and hadn't been able to fill existing vacancies.

Ali Noorani, executive director of the immigrant advocacy group National Immigration Forum, said the the administration's push for more border agents is a "strategy of throwing more money at the problem, and is not a good use of taxpayer dollars."

Rep. Will Hurd, a San Antonio Republican, introduced a [bill](#) in May with Vela to make it easier for Border Patrol agents to collect overtime.

"We already have dangerous manpower shortages at the border; we cannot afford such high turnover as well," said Rep. Martha McSally, R-Ariz., who is co-sponsoring the measure. "Fixing these compensation concerns will address one of the problems causing lack of retention of these highly qualified individuals."

Last year, Vela and another Texas Democrat, Rep. Henry Cuellar of Laredo, co-sponsored a [bill](#) that would make it easier for CBP to hire law enforcement and military veterans by letting them waive the requirement to pass a polygraph test. Cuellar said [on the House floor](#) that the measure would help address staffing shortages by avoiding "laborious," "failure-prone" and "redundant" tests.

The bill passed the House, but stalled in the Senate.

## The controversy

The Trump administration's zero-tolerance policy, requiring criminal prosecution of anyone caught crossing the border illegally, has prompted a national debate about immigration enforcement and border policy.

Some Democrats have called for abolishing or overhauling Immigration and Customs Enforcement, another agency within DHS, in response to a crisis involving thousands of children separated from their migrant parents.

Abolishing ICE was one of the campaign promises of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who beat Rep. Joe Crowley in last week's Democratic primary in New York, a stunning upset that ousted a member of the party's leadership who'd been seen as a potential speaker someday.

The controversy has led to finger-pointing between sister agencies at DHS and could damage the reputation of agencies already struggling to keep up with hiring pressure.

"This protest ... about family separations on the border, ICE doesn't separate families on the border," Thomas Homan, Trump's former acting ICE director, told Fox News last week. "That's the Border Patrol. We're a different agency."

Last week, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen [chose](#) Ronald Vitiello as acting director and deputy director of ICE. Vitiello was previously the acting deputy commissioner of CBP and served as chief of the Border Patrol.

Brandon Judd, president of the National Border Patrol Council, [told NPR last month](#) that Border Patrol agents aren't responsible for family separations because they separate children for only a short amount of time. He made the

distinction that families and children are transferred to other federal agencies for longer-term detention after the initial separation by the Border Patrol.

“We've been called the Gestapo. We've been called Nazis. I mean, we've been called everything in the media,” Judd said. “The fact of the matter is as Border Patrol agents, we are not separating families, except for a few hours for them to go see a magistrate or in extreme cases.”

Meissner said in her experience working with law enforcement, she did not think the zero-tolerance policy would have a negative impact on hiring. “Individuals who are drawn to law enforcement or are already in law enforcement have a sense of loyalty and commitment to enforcing the laws of the country,” Meissner said. “Their training heavily reinforces the idea that their responsibility is to enforce laws, and that laws are the responsibility of others to determine.”

Noorani said while the process of criminally prosecuting migrants was complicated, the important issue is that DHS has been separating families.

“I don't think any American wants to be that person, and I have to believe that is not what the majority of Border Patrol and immigration enforcement officers signed up to do,” Noorani said.