

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 an estimated \$409 billion 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 continues to increase enforcement-related funding to new record highs, 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 issue areas: border security and interior enforcement. Border spending includes staffing and resources needed 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.

Currently, ICE and CBP employ nearly 88,000 people in total.² The number of U.S. Border Patrol agents nearly doubled from 10,717 in Fiscal Year (FY) 2003 to 19,357 FY 2022.³ Additionally, the number of people working at ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) nearly tripled from FY 2003 to FY 2024.⁴ In FY 2024, ICE was funded to employ 7,711 staff at ERO.⁵



Border Patrol agents in Hidalgo, Texas. Photographed by Vic Hinterlang.

\$409B

Estimated amount spent since 2003 by the U.S. federal government on agencies that carry out immigration enforcement.

In February 2019, after the longest government shutdown in history of 35 days, Congress reached a deal with President Trump offering \$1.375 billion for 55 miles of fencing along the Rio Grande Valley.⁶ The President expressed his dissatisfaction with this offer, and shortly after signing the bill, he declared a national emergency to fund his border wall through alternative means. In total, President Trump spent roughly \$15 billion on border barriers during his four years in office.⁷

What has this spending bought? The United States currently has roughly 735 miles of fencing along the Southern border,⁸ record levels of staff for ICE and CBP, as well as a fleet of drones ³/₄ among other resources.⁹ Some of these resources have been spent on ill-conceived projects such as the \$1 billion attempt to construct a “[virtual fence](#)” along the Southwest border - a project initiated in 2005 that was later scrapped for being ineffective and too costly.¹⁰ CBP announced a similar project in July 2020 to install a total of 200 “autonomous surveillance towers” along remote areas of the southern border at a reported cost of several hundred million dollars.¹¹

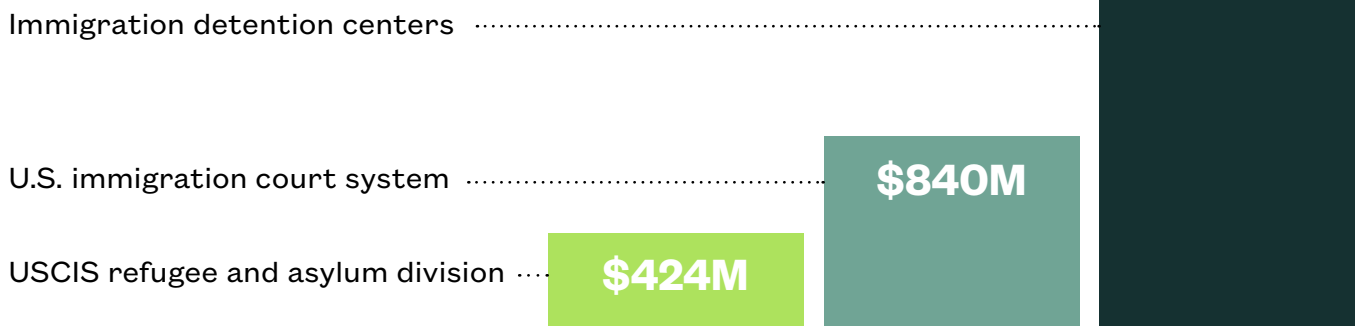
Even with record level spending on enforcement, enforcement alone is not sufficient to address the challenges irregular migration brings.¹² It also has significant unintended consequences; according to U.S. Border Patrol statistics, the Southwest border witnessed more than two deaths per day in FY 2022.¹³ Deaths have only increased since then reaching record levels in FY 2023 and 2024.¹⁴ All of these efforts that have accumulated in the name of security, however, do not necessarily measure border security properly, or secure the border.¹⁵

Critically, increases in funding for immigration enforcement have significantly outpaced funding for the United States humanitarian protection and adjudication systems. In FY 2024, Congress provided \$3.43 billion to immigration detention centers alone.¹⁶ By contrast, Congress appropriated just \$840 million for the entire immigration court system,¹⁷ and funded \$424 million to the entirety of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services’ refugee and asylum division.¹⁸ In other words, the United States spent nearly three times as much on immigration detention alone than it did on the entire adjudication system for removal and asylum claims. This consequently—leads to skyrocketing case backlogs and years of delay.

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.

CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET AUTHORIZATION FY 2024

Increases in funding for immigration enforcement have significantly outpaced funding for the United States humanitarian and adjudication systems.



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 twenty-fold, rising from \$400 million to over \$7.3 billion in FY 2024 (Figure 1).¹⁹ Even when adjusted for inflation, that is an increase of over 765 percent.²⁰

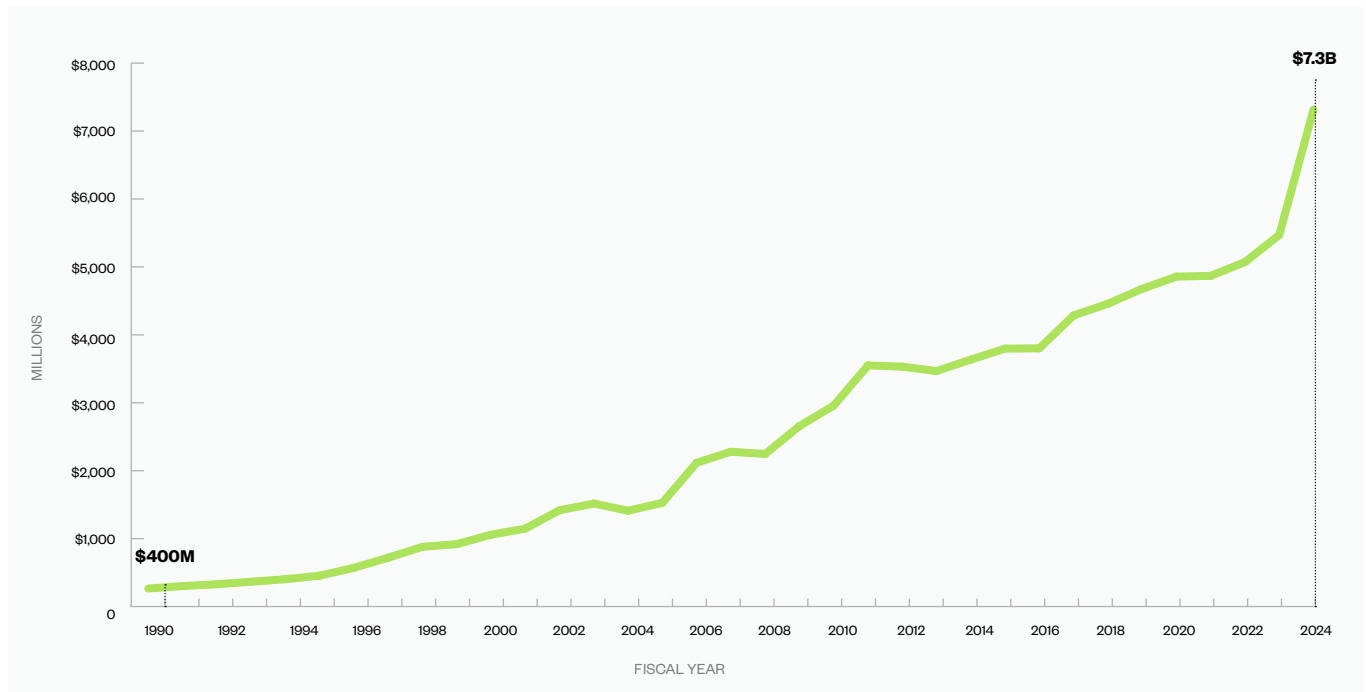
Since 1994, the annual budget of the U.S. Border Patrol has increased from

\$400M → \$7.3B

Adjusted for inflation, that is an increase of more than

+765%

FIGURE 1: U.S. BORDER PATROL BUDGET, FY 1990-2024



Source: Congressional budgets, gross budget authority as provided in Conference Reports, FY 1990-2024.

Since the creation of DHS in 2003, ICE spending has nearly tripled from \$3.3 billion to \$9.6 billion in FY 2024 (Figure 2).²¹ Much of this funding has gone to increasing the agency’s ability to hold immigrants in detention around the country, to electronically monitor noncitizens on “alternatives to detention”, and to carry out deportations.

Since 2003, the budget of CBP, which includes both the Border Patrol and operations at ports of entry, has also more than tripled, rising from \$5.9 billion in FY 2003 to a high of \$19.6 billion in FY 2024 (Figure 2).²² When adjusted for inflation, that is an increase of 144 percent.

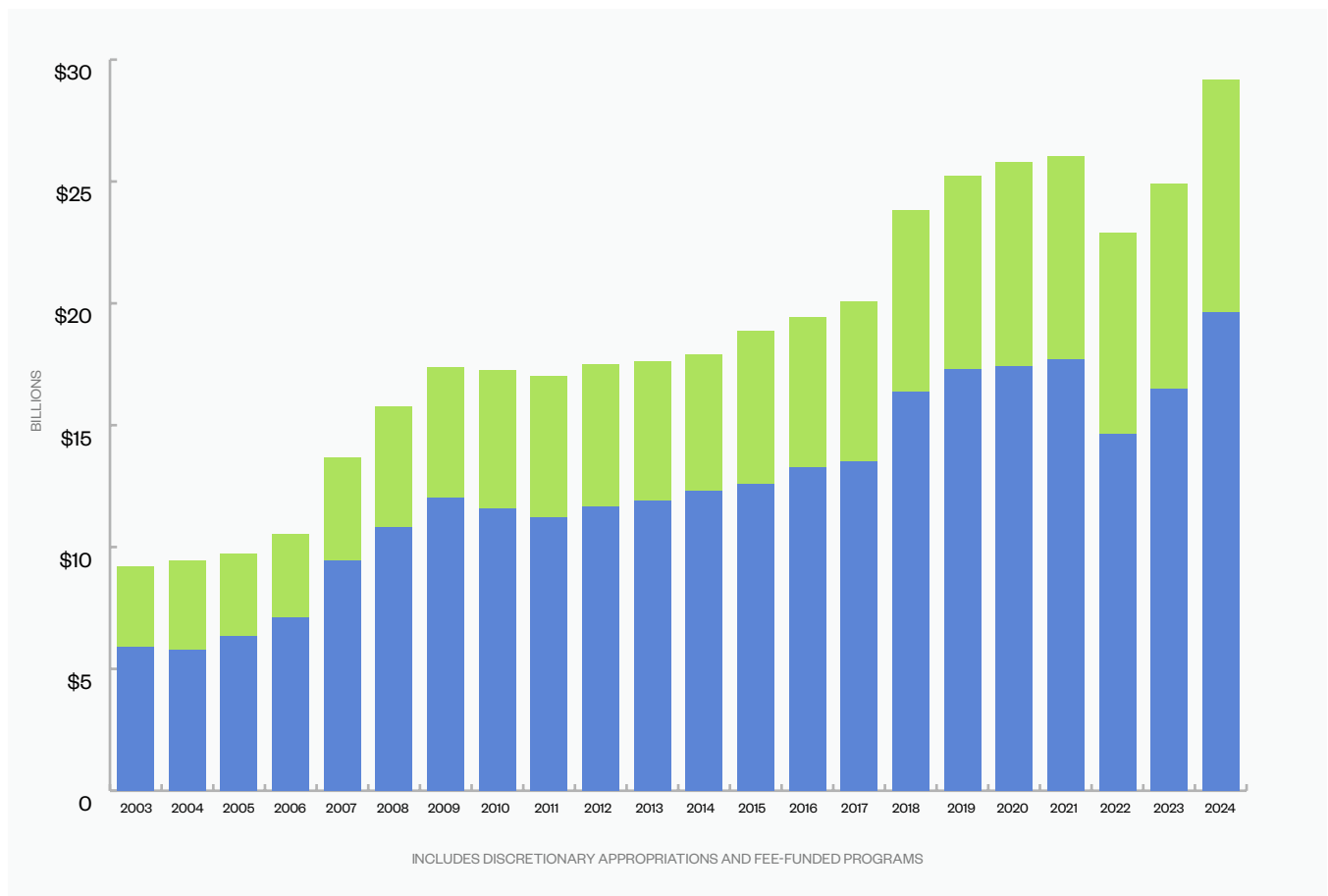
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FIGURE 2: CBP & ICE ANNUAL BUDGETS, FY 2003-2024



Source: Congressional budgets, gross budget authority as provided in Conference Reports, FY 2003-2024.

Previous Benchmarks Have Been Met, Yet Enforcement Funding Continues to Grow

The federal government has already met the border security benchmarks laid down in earlier Senate immigration reform bills.

- As the American Immigration Lawyers Association pointed out in a [January 2013 analysis](#), the “benchmarks” for border security specified in the bipartisan 2006, 2007, and 2010 immigration-reform legislative packages in the Senate have been largely met.²³ Yet each time a benchmark was met, Congress continued to fund ever-greater levels of enforcement without significant increases in adjudication or passage of broader reforms to the immigration system.
- The requirements in those Senate bills for more border enforcement personnel, border fencing, surveillance technology, unmanned aerial vehicles, and detention beds have also been fulfilled and in many ways surpassed.²⁴ ICE detention bed funding reached a record level in FY 2024, funding 41,500 beds, the third highest level in Congressional history.²⁵ And when Congress authorizes ICE to increase detention beds, the agency often detains more than funded. For example, despite Congress appropriating enough money for 40,520 beds throughout the year, ICE’s use of budgetary mechanisms in FY 2019 to shift money from other locations to their detention account led to ICE breaking records by detaining more than 55,000 people.²⁶

Border security depends on the smart and efficient use of available resources. At the same, border enforcement cannot and should not be done in isolation. Instead, it must be examined in the larger context of reforms needed for the entire immigration system.

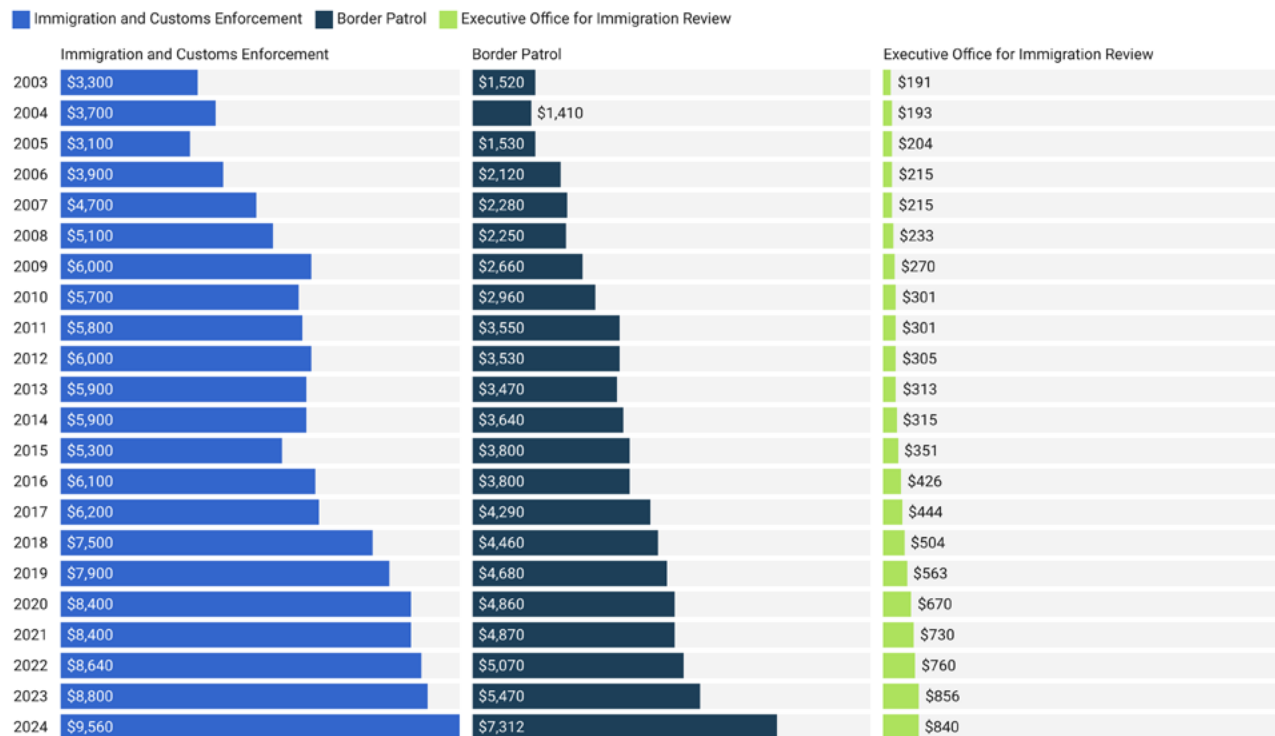
*ICE detention bed funding reached a record level in FY 2024, funding 41,500 beds, the **third largest level in Congressional history.***

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 often failed to provide similar funding infusions to the immigration court system. Taken together, from FY 2003 through 2024, Congress has spent \$24 on ICE and Border Patrol for every \$1 spent on the immigration court system. Over that 22-year period, Congress spent \$11.65 billion on the immigration courts (see Figure 3)—\$3.5 billion less than the Trump administration spent on border walls alone.²⁷

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 2024, there were more than 3.7 million cases pending in the immigration court system, an increase of over 2000 percent since 2007. Despite the demand, as of the first quarter of FY 2024, there were only 725 immigration judges across the entire country for an average of nearly 5,000 cases per judge.²⁸ So long as Congress continues to supercharge enforcement at the expense of adjudication, these backlogs will likely persist, and the funding poured into enforcement will not produce the results intended.

FIGURE 3: ANNUAL BUDGETS OF ICE, BORDER PATROL, AND EOIR, IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS



Data Appendix

FIGURE 1: U.S. BORDER PATROL BUDGET, IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, FY 1990-2024

Fiscal Year	Budget	Fiscal Year	Budget
1990	263	2015	3798
1991	299	2016	3801
1992	326	2017	4286
1993	363	2018	4458
1994	400	2019	4678
1995	452	2020	4858
1996	568	2021	4869
1997	717	2022	5072
1998	877	2023	5471
1999	917	2024	7317
2000	1055		
2001	1146		
2002	1416		
2003	1515		
2004	1409		
2005	1525		
2006	2115		
2007	2278		
2008	2245		
2009	2656		
2010	2958		
2011	3549		
2012	3531		
2013	3467		

Data Appendix (continued)

FIGURE 2: CBP & ICE ANNUAL BUDGETS, IN BILLIONS OF DOLLARS, FY 2003-2024

Fiscal Year	CBP	ICE
2003	5.9	3.3
2004	5.77	3.69
2005	6.35	3.37
2006	7.1	3.43
2007	9.448	4.22
2008	10.8	4.97
2009	12	5.375
2010	11.56	5.7
2011	11.2	5.8
2012	11.65	5.86
2013	11.89	5.74
2014	12.283	5.61
2015	12.582	6.3
2016	13.27	6.154
2017	13.508	6.56
2018	16.36	7.45
2019	17.3	7.91
2020	17.41	8.4
2021	17.69	8.35
2022	14.643	8.258
2023	16.464	8.419
2024	19.62	9.56

FIGURE 3: ANNUAL BUDGETS OF ICE, BORDER PATROL, AND EOIR, IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS

Fiscal Year	ICE	EOIR	Border Patrol
2003	3300	191	1,520.00
2004	3690	193	1,410.00
2005	3370	204	1,530.00
2006	3430	215	2,120.00
2007	4220	215	2,280.00
2008	4970	233	2,250.00
2009	5380	270	2,660.00
2010	5700	301	2,960.00
2011	5800	301	3,550.00
2012	5860	305	3,530.00
2013	5740	313	3,470.00
2014	5610	315	3,640.00
2015	6300	351	3,800.00
2016	6150	426	3,800.00
2017	6560	444	4,290.00
2018	7450	504	4,460.00
2019	7910	563	4,680.00
2020	8400	670	4,860.00
2021	8350	730	4,870.00
2022	8260	760	5,070.00
2023	8420	856	5,470.00
2024	9560	840	7,312.00

Includes discretionary appropriations and fee-funded programs

ENDNOTES

- 1 This number is derived from the gross or total budget authority figure provided in conference reports accompanying congressional appropriations bills for Fiscal Years 2004-2023, an amount which includes fee-funded expenditures.
- 2 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *FY 2024 Budget-in-Brief*, 26, 33, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/DHS%20FY%202024%20BUDGET%20IN%20BRIEF%20%28BIB%29_Remediated.pdf.
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- 4 See National Immigration Forum, *Fact Sheet: Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)* (Washington, DC: July 10, 2018), <https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-immigration-and-customs-enforcement-ice/>.
- 5 U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, "Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2025" (March 8, 2024), at ICE - O&S - 4, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2024-04/2024_0308_us_immigration_and_customs_enforcement.pdf.
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- 7 "President Biden cancels funding for Trump border wall," *BBC News*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56031481>.
- 8 "President Biden cancels funding for Trump border wall," *BBC News*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56031481>.
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- 11 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, CBP's Autonomous Surveillance Towers Declared a Program of Record along the Southwest Border, July 2, 2020, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-s-autonomous-surveillance-towers-declared-program-record-along>. See also Nick Miroff, "Trump administration hires tech firm to build virtual border wall, an idea democrats have praised," *Washington Post*, July 2, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/trump-virtual-border-wall/2020/07/02/7b380490-b0ac-11ea-a567-6172530208bd_story.html.
- 12 Doris Meissner, Donald M. Kerwin, Muzaffar Chishti, and Claire Bergeron, *Immigration Enforcement in the United States: The Rise of Formidable Machinery* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, January 2013), <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigration-enforcement-united-states-rise-formidable-machinery>.
- 13 Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "At least 853 migrants died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in past 12 months — a record high," *CBS News*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-2022-record-high/>.
- 14 Luis Pablo Beauregard, "US-Mexico border records one of its deadliest years ever," *El País*, December 27, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2023-12-27/us-mexico-border-records-one-of-its-deadliest-years-ever.html>.
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ENDNOTES

- 16** Joint Explanatory Statement, Division C– Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2024, March 18, 2024, at 90, <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20240318/Division%20C%20Homeland.pdf>.
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- 22** Ibid.
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- 25** Joint Explanatory Statement, Division C– Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2024, March 18, 2024, <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20240318/Division%20C%20Homeland.pdf>.
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- 27** Christopher Giles, “Trump's wall: How much has been built during his term?,” *BBC*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46748492>.
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