

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106233](#), a report to the Chair of the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

ICE, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is responsible for enforcing the nation's immigration laws. Citing limited resources, ICE states that it cannot respond to all immigration violations or act on all persons determined to be removable from the U.S. It therefore prioritizes its enforcement actions.

GAO was asked to review ICE immigration enforcement priorities. This report examines, among other things, (1) ICE data on immigration enforcement actions from 2019 through 2022, and the extent to which ICE is reporting data on all immigration detentions; (2) ICE's implementation of immigration enforcement policies; and (3) ICE data on detentions of select vulnerable populations.

GAO analyzed ICE enforcement action data for calendar years 2019 through 2022 (2022 being the most recent year that data were available). GAO also reviewed ICE policies and procedures, and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that ICE publicly report (1) data on all detentions of individuals in ICE detention facilities, and (2) its explanation of the methodology used to report detention statistics. DHS did not concur with the recommendations, stating ICE already reports sufficient information. GAO continues to believe ICE should report complete and transparent information on its annual detentions.

View [GAO-24-106233](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler, (202) 512-8777, gablerr@gao.gov

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IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

Arrests, Removals, and Detentions Varied Over Time and ICE Should Strengthen Data Reporting

What GAO Found

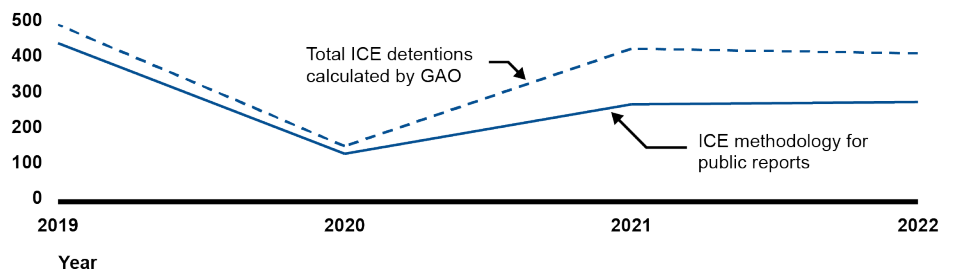
The number of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrests and removals declined from 2019 through 2021, and then increased in 2022, according to GAO's analysis of ICE data:

- The number of arrests varied from calendar years 2019 through 2022 but increased overall, from 133,541 arrests for 2019 to 154,204 arrests for 2022.
- While increasing slightly in 2022, since 2019 removals have declined significantly from 276,122 for 2019 to 81,547 for 2022.

Regarding detentions, ICE's public reporting understates the total number of individuals detained, according to GAO's analysis. In its calculations, ICE excludes individuals who were first booked into certain temporary facilities but were subsequently detained in an ICE immigration detention facility. GAO's analysis shows that this exclusion amounts to tens of thousands of individuals (see fig.). In its annual reporting of detentions, ICE does not fully explain the rationale and basis for its methodology.

Total Number of ICE Detentions Compared to ICE's Methodology for Public Reporting of Initial Book-ins, 2019-2022

Number of detentions (in thousands)



Source: GAO analysis of Immigration and Customs Enforcement data. | GAO-24-106233

Note: ICE uses a subset of detention data when reporting annual initial book-ins. GAO calculated the total number of initial detentions by identifying all initial "book-ins" for each year where an individual was recorded in ICE data as having been detained in an ICE detention facility for one day or more.

From 2019 through 2022, ICE updated its policies for making enforcement decisions to reflect changing priorities. From 2019 to January 2021, DHS policy directed ICE to take enforcement action against all removable noncitizens. In September 2021, DHS updated its policy to prioritize action against noncitizens who are deemed a threat to national security, public safety, or border security. ICE's policy also establishes how its officers are to identify individuals within selected vulnerable populations such as those with a mental health condition.

ICE collects detention data related to select vulnerable populations in accordance with agency guidance. GAO's analysis of ICE's data showed that generally detentions of select vulnerable populations varied across the years but were lower in 2020 through 2022 compared to 2019. The average length of stay decreased from 2019 to 2022 for these populations.