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A city under siege: Minneapolis reels after another killing

ICE could become the largest enforcement agency in the US, but critics say its behaviour is increasingly lawless

Guy Chazan in Minneapolis and **Peter Andringa** in London

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The city of Minneapolis was already on edge after the killing of a 37-year-old woman by a federal immigration agent earlier this month. Then, on Saturday, came the news many had been dreading. Another shooting. And another US civilian dead.

Alex Pretti, an intensive care nurse who was also 37, died of multiple gunshot wounds after an altercation with Border Patrol agents at a busy intersection in the south of the city. Minneapolis was once again convulsed with demonstrations by angry citizens.

Within hours, the war of words that had been raging for weeks between local officials and the federal government escalated with fresh intensity. Border Patrol said the man had approached officers with a handgun and “violently resisted” attempts to disarm him.

Yet videos contradicted the official account. Jacob Frey, the mayor of Minneapolis, described one showing “more than six masked agents pummelling one of our constituents and shooting him to death”. Other angles reveal Pretti held a phone, not a gun, when the confrontation started.

Warning

Videos contain graphic language and images

Play

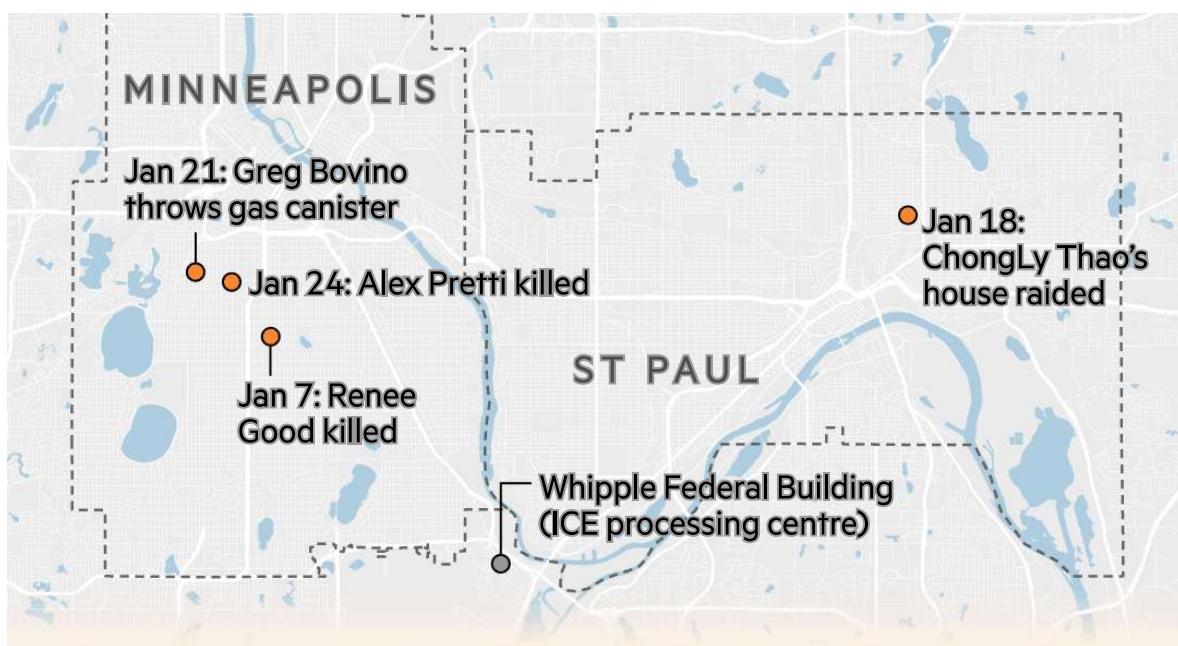
Eyewitnesses captured multiple angles of Saturday's shooting Threads/@dangjessie; Reddit/Philophon; Stella Carlson via MPR

“How many more residents, how many more Americans, need to die or get badly hurt for this operation to end?” Frey asked at a press conference on Saturday.

Tim Walz, the governor of Minnesota, said the claim by federal officials that Pretti had been a threat to agents was false: “It’s nonsense people, it’s nonsense and it’s lies.”

In social media posts, President Donald Trump responded by accusing Walz and Frey of “inciting Insurrection”.

Since the start of the year, Minnesota has become ground zero in Trump’s signature mass campaign against immigrants — a crackdown that has left a city and its residents traumatised. Locals describe the feeling of living under paramilitary occupation, with increasingly brutal crackdowns on protest.



Leading the sweep — code-named Operation Metro Surge — is US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, a body that under Trump has emerged as one of the most powerful law enforcement agencies in the country.

Newly emboldened by a massive increase in its budget, ICE has been entrusted with enacting what Trump has said will be the largest deportation programme in US history. But in boosting ICE's status, experts say the White House has removed all the constraints that once kept it within the bounds of the law.

“What shocks me is their complete disregard for basic American norms and rules regarding policing and law enforcement, and their willingness to use force in ways that are clearly unjustified,” says Will Stancil, a Minneapolis-based civil rights lawyer who’s been monitoring ICE activities for weeks. “Jumping out and grabbing people — it’s secret police tactics, it’s not American.”

Minnesota, and particularly the “twin cities” of Minneapolis and St Paul, have become a showcase for ICE’s new power. Residents have watched in fury as masked law enforcement agents smash car windows and pull people from vehicles, wrestle suspects to the ground and drag them away, and routinely deploy tear gas and pepper spray against locals protesting their operations.

Local officials have loudly complained about ICE’s indiscriminate arrests. The school district in Columbia Heights, just north of Minneapolis, has said that four students have been detained in recent weeks, including one five-year-old boy who was taken into custody with his father on Tuesday.

Even off-duty police officers have been aggressively confronted by ICE agents demanding proof of their citizenship, sometimes with guns drawn. Local

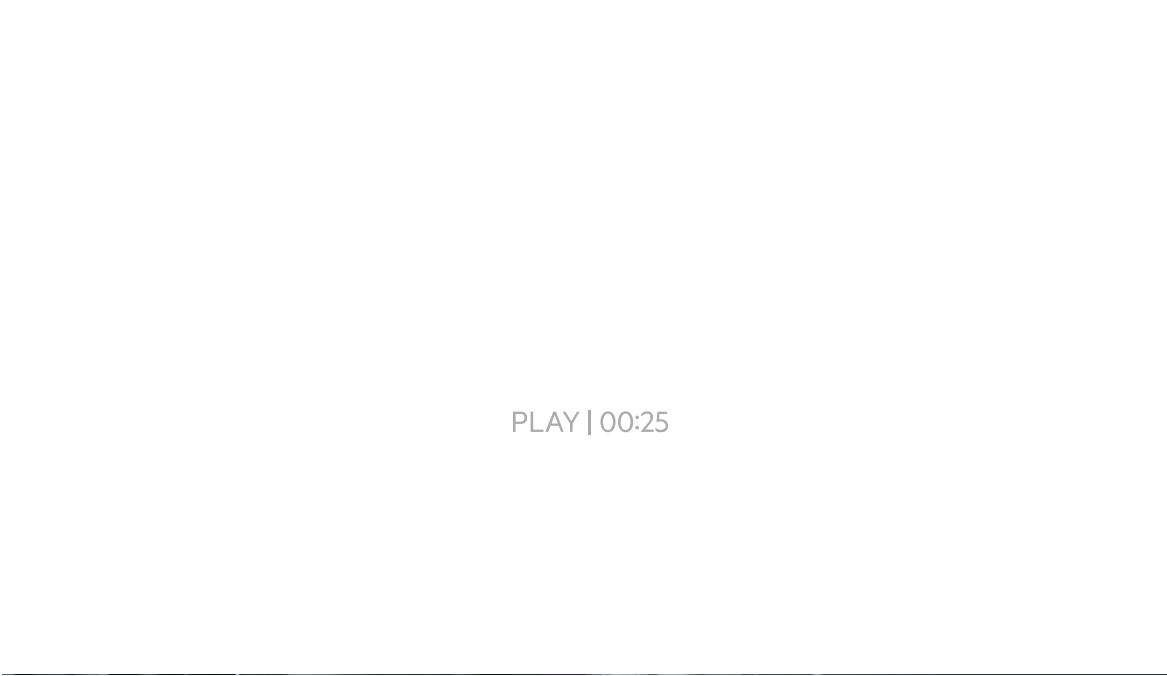
Liam Ramos, a five-year-old boy who was taken into custody with his father by ICE last week © Columbia Heights Public Schools/AFP via Getty Images

officials say the stops are focused on those with black or brown skin.

“Our officers know what the constitution is, they know what right and wrong is, and they know when people are being targeted,” says Mark Bruley, chief of police in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Park. “If it is happening to our officers, it pains me to think of how many of our community members are falling victim to this every day.”

The tensions escalated on January 7 when an ICE agent shot and killed Renee Good, a mother-of-three, as she was driving away from an ICE enforcement operation in southern Minneapolis. Videos of the incident spread across news and social media, triggering outrage and protests across the US.

A YouGov poll conducted two days later found that 70 per cent of American adults had seen a video of the shooting, and a majority said it seemed unjustified. Federal officials have repeatedly said the agent acted in self-defence.



PLAY | 00:25

Border Patrol commander Gregory Bovino throws tear gas into a crowd of protesters ©
Ben Luhmann

Many in Minneapolis, the city in which George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in 2020, have been left feeling scarred by the show of force. “Since this operation began in December, it has truly felt like our community is under siege,” says Mike Howard, a Democratic representative in the Minnesota state legislature.

Longtime residents have watched ICE’s onslaught in horror. “The way they conduct themselves is like an occupying army,” says Jess Sundin, a retired clerical worker.

She is a member of a neighbourhood watch group that raises the alarm to alert people whenever federal agents are spotted. “ICE is not restrained by anyone at the moment except us and our whistles,” she says.

Courts have tried to curb the agency’s excesses. On January 16, a US district judge in Minneapolis prohibited federal agents from retaliating against or arresting peaceful protesters, using pepper spray against them, and detaining drivers who were following them.

But on Wednesday, a federal appeals court paused that injunction. The same day, Gregory Bovino, the US Border Patrol commander who is leading the crackdown in Minneapolis, threw a tear gas canister into a crowd of protesters.



Federal agents pinned a protester to the ground and sprayed a chemical irritant into his face on Wednesday Ben Luhmann; Richard Tsong-Taatarii/TNS via ZUMA Press Wire/dpa

Trump administration officials have defended Metro Surge, saying ICE is only targeting criminal illegal immigrants. Speaking to reporters on Tuesday, Bovino said agents had arrested “some of the most dangerous criminal offenders” operating in Minnesota since the operation began in December.

“These are not minor violators or minor garden-variety criminals — these are repeat offenders with serious criminal histories,” he said. “This is what public safety looks like when the law is enforced consistently and professionally.”

But it is also the case that innocent people have been caught in the dragnet. ICE's data shows that the majority of its immigrant detainees have no convictions, and a third have pending charges.

A majority of ICE detainees have no criminal convictions

Current detainees arrested by ICE, by criminal status

Convicted criminal Pending charges No charges or convictions



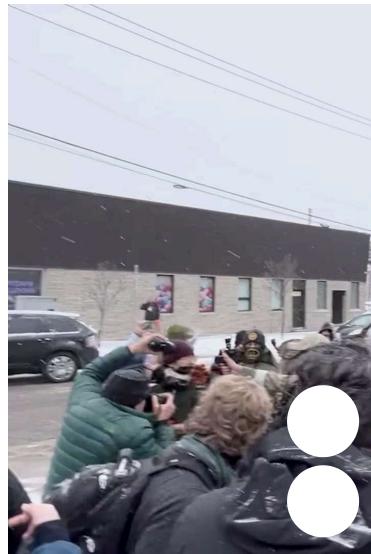
Source: [ICE](#) • Data not reported during the government shutdown (Oct-Nov 2025)
FINANCIAL TIMES

Many of the 3,000 people ICE says it has arrested in Minneapolis since the start of the operation have filed lawsuits for wrongful detention in recent weeks.

Locals say Metro Surge has been driven more by political considerations than a desire to enhance security. Trump has fuelled that perception: early on he linked the ICE operation to long-running investigations into alleged pandemic-era fraud schemes in Minnesota that often involved members of the Somali community — an ethnic group he described as “garbage”.

Since then, his attacks have only escalated. As clashes continued between residents and ICE agents in early January, Trump warned he might invoke the Insurrection Act, which allows a president to use US troops for domestic law enforcement. The Pentagon then told about 1,500 active-duty soldiers to be ready for potential deployment to Minnesota.

“FEAR NOT, GREAT PEOPLE OF MINNESOTA, THE DAY OF RECKONING & RETRIBUTION IS COMING!” Trump wrote on Truth Social.



Eyewitness videos have captured federal officers acting aggressively and using tear gas and pepper spray Will Stancil

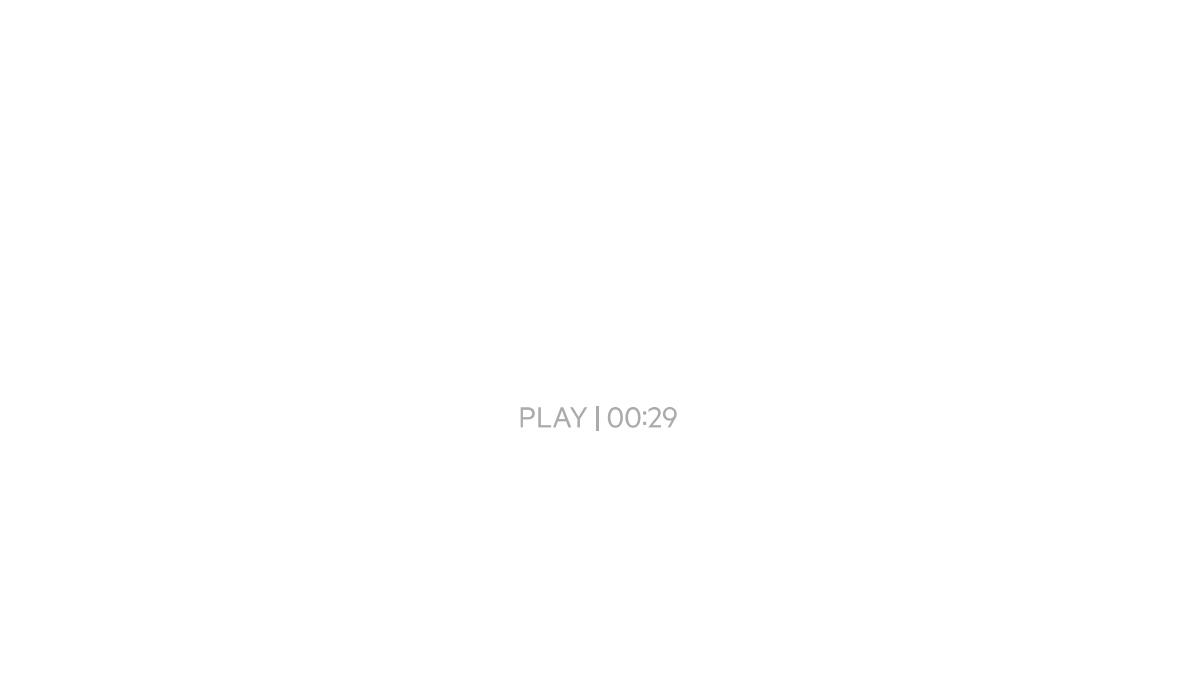
Meanwhile, the Department of Justice confirmed it is investigating Walz and Frey, both Democrats, over whether they impeded or obstructed Metro Surge. Bovino has himself complained about the role Walz and Frey have played, saying last week that there had been “collusion and corruption” between elected officials and “anarchists that are intent on creating violence for law enforcement”.

Locals feel they are the victims of a vendetta. “I can’t speak for why the government does what it does, but what I can say is that this feels like a targeted campaign to cow Minnesotans,” says Alicia Granse, a lawyer who has been representing protesters targeted by ICE.

Hovering over the immigration enforcement operation in Minneapolis is growing alarm among civil rights lawyers and experts over what they see as a dramatic shift in ICE’s modus operandi.

For much of its history, the agency concentrated on targeted enforcement, with carefully planned operations against criminals who represented a threat to public safety. But recent events in Minneapolis show a more freewheeling approach to its mission.

In one widely shared video, armed agents are shown breaking down a door in East St Paul, dragging out a man clad only in underwear, shirtless with a blanket around his shoulders. The man, ChongLy Thao, was handcuffed and driven around for nearly an hour until officers realised he was a US citizen.



PLAY | 00:29

Protestors heckled ICE agents as they conducted a raid and arrested ChongLy Thao, a US citizen, releasing him later that day (Warning: graphic language) © Reuters

Defending the agents, Tricia McLaughlin, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), wrote on X that this was a “targeted operation” seeking “two convicted sex offenders” at the address.

Thao’s family, though, “categorically disputes” these claims, noting that only his son, daughter-in-law and young grandson live with him. Minnesota public records show that none are on the sex offender registry, and that the nearest registered offender on their street lives several blocks away.

Deborah Fleischaker, ICE’s former acting chief of staff under the Biden administration, says that prior to Trump’s second term the agency would prepare meticulously for its operations to avoid such mistakes.

“There would be an enforcement plan written out, detailing what was allowed and what was not — it would go by the lawyers and there would be a lot of care ensuring it was complete,” she says.

Such a plan might take days or weeks to draw up. “You want to make sure you have the right person, and you want to make sure you’re doing that safely for everyone involved,” she says.

Now, says Scott Shuchart, a senior ICE official under the Biden administration, officers are no longer just going after specific targets. “This thing where they’re just walking up to people based on race or what kind of car they’re driving, or whatever, is totally new, and they’re pursuing it in ways that seem quite reckless,” he says.

Lawsuits challenging wrongful detention in Minnesota have surged

Weekly habeas corpus cases filed in the federal District of Minnesota, by type

Immigrant US citizen



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: [US District Court, District of Minnesota](#) • "US citizen" counts only claims against federal officers

Traditionally, says Fleischaker, ICE “didn’t use race or ethnicity” as a reason to stop and question people about possible violations of immigration law. But under Trump, that has been changing. Last September the US Supreme Court gave its backing to the shift by lifting an order from a lower court prohibiting ICE agents from relying solely on factors like race, ethnicity and language when stopping people. Bovino himself has spoken of a “renewed focus on public safety over paperwork”.

But critics say the Supreme Court ruling has given federal officers permission to engage in indiscriminate racial profiling and to arrest and detain people living in the US legally.

“We’re not far away from federal immigration officials setting up shop in our places of business and asking everyone who comes in who’s a person of colour for their papers,” says Howard, the Democratic state lawmaker.

Members of Minneapolis’ Somali community, most of whom are US citizens, have been a key casualty of this change in tactics. “They target you according to your accent, the colour of your skin, not your immigration status,” says Feisal Abdullahi, owner of a phone accessory shop in Karmel Mall in south Minneapolis, a shopping complex popular with the Somali community.

The consequences are clear in Karmel, with most businesses shuttered and many people staying at home. “There are no customers — people only come in for necessities,” Abdullahi says. “The whole Somali community is living in fear.”

US Border Patrol commander Gregory Bovino stands alongside other law enforcement officers observing a protest outside the Whipple Federal Building in Minneapolis this month © Dave Decker/ZUMA Press Wire/dpa
Locals say ICE carries out almost daily patrols of the predominantly Somali area of Cedar-Riverside, south of downtown Minneapolis. “They just come in and drive around the neighbourhood, just to provoke and intimidate us,” says Amino Warsame, who works at an adult foster care agency.

What is worse, the community has also found itself the target of far-right activists emboldened by Trump's verbal attacks and by Metro Surge. One of them, the January 6 rioter Jake Lang, raised alarm in Cedar-Riverside after threatening earlier this month to march through the neighbourhood with his supporters.

At that point, Warsame says, her mother decided to decamp to another part of town for a few days. "She says it reminds her too much of the situation back in Somalia."

The removal of some of the old constraints on ICE has come at a time when the agency is experiencing an unprecedented influx of funds. Trump's massive spending plan, passed by Congress last summer, allocated \$75bn to ICE on top of its annual budgets.

The agency has already put some of that cash to use, hiring thousands more agents and spending hundreds of millions on new contracts for detention facilities, deportation flights and surveillance technologies.

ICE has more than doubled its detainee flights from Minneapolis

ICE flight departures from Minneapolis-Saint Paul airport, by month



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: [ICE Flight Monitor / Human Rights First](#)

“The funding Congress provided in the ‘one big beautiful bill’ has given [ICE] the ability to become arguably the largest law enforcement [agency] in the entire federal government,” says Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, a senior fellow at the American Immigration Council.

It has also been able to target far more immigrants than it was able to under the Biden administration. Around a million people who have lived in the US for years are now at risk of deportation after the federal government ended “temporary protected status” for people from a range of countries including Venezuela, Haiti and Honduras.

Then in January the DHS launched an initiative in Minnesota known as Operation Parris, which is designed to combat fraud in the immigration system. Some 5,600 refugees already living in the state but not yet in possession of a green card will have their refugee cases re-examined, and will be subjected to new background checks, interviews and merit reviews of their refugee claims.

Under Parris, ICE has already picked up at least a hundred asylum-seekers and “taken them down to detention centres in Texas” where they are “interrogated about their status”, says Reichlin-Melnick. “It’s not anything we’ve seen before, and it has sent shockwaves through the refugee community.”

With ICE’s expansion — it is hiring some 10,000 additional agents — there are concerns its training standards are slipping. Mark Warner, a Democratic senator, said earlier this month that the traditional five months’ training for ICE agents had been reduced to just 47 days.

Marc Brown, a lecturer in policing at the University of South Carolina who used to train ICE officers, says videos suggest they are not adequately prepared for enforcement actions in densely populated areas. Agents have removed people from cars, leaving vehicles abandoned in the street. The officer who killed Good stood in front of her car and shot into it as it moved away — actions that agents are trained not to do, Brown says.

“A lot of it leaves me asking questions,” he says. “What are the parameters? What are the directives? What kind of intelligence are you working off of?”

Marcos Charles, a senior ICE official, says his men are operating with the utmost professionalism. “They’re everyday people doing a very hard job, trying to enforce the immigration laws in an environment where local and state politicians have been spreading rhetoric that dehumanises these officers and agents,” he told reporters on Tuesday.

That view is increasingly a minority opinion: polls show events in Minnesota — and across the country — have dented Americans' opinion of ICE in Trump's first year. A CBS/YouGov poll this month found that 52 per cent of Americans believed that ICE operations made communities "less safe", while only 31 per cent felt they were making communities safer.

Americans increasingly support the idea of abolishing ICE

Poll: "Do you support or oppose abolishing the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency?"

Party crosstabs: All Democrats Independents Republicans

80

60

Long-term surveys also reflect a shift. Over the first year of Trump's presidency, support for abolishing ICE entirely has risen from 25 per cent to 43 per cent, including 71 per cent of Democrats.

Meanwhile, residents of Minneapolis are continuing their protests. Many of them have joined so-called rapid response teams which patrol the city, blowing whistles whenever ICE appears. Volunteers follow ICE convoys around in their cars and report suspicious licence plates. Churches have organised grocery deliveries for immigrants afraid to leave their homes.

Paul Sullivan, an organiser at the American Civil Liberties Union in Minneapolis, says Trump's deployment of ICE to the city is an experiment: an attempt by the White House to "test how far they can go, what resistance they will encounter" in their quest to expand presidential powers.

"But we're proving that we're not going to bend the knee," he says. "And that really unsettles them."

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