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Homeland Security Task Forces for Countering Transnational Organized Crime

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On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order (E.O.) 14159, "Protecting the American People Against Invasion." Section 6 of the E.O. directed the Attorney General and Secretary of Homeland Security to jointly establish Homeland Security Task Forces (HSTFs) with the objective "to end the presence of criminal cartels, foreign gangs, and transnational criminal organizations throughout the United States, dismantle cross-border human smuggling and trafficking networks, end the scourge of human smuggling and trafficking, with a particular focus on such offenses involving children, and ensure the use of all available law enforcement tools to faithfully execute the immigration laws of the United States." The resulting Homeland Security Task Forces appear to have, in part, replaced the former Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) program. Policymakers may have interest in how the OCDETF program was dissolved and replaced by the HSTF program, similarities and differences between these programs, and how well the current HSTF program may be positioned to counter threats posed by transnational organized crime (TOC) to the United States.

OCDETF Program Background and Evolution

The OCDETF program was originally created in 1982 as part of President Ronald Reagan's initiatives to counter drug trafficking and organized crime. It was the largest anti-crime task force in the United States. The program operated as a stand-alone component within the Department of Justice (DOJ), not under the leadership of any one particular partner agency. OCDETF targeted TOC, with the intent to disrupt and dismantle criminal networks with a historically drug-centric focus.

The OCDETF program had federal partners within DOJ; the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Labor, and State; the U.S. Treasury; and the U.S. Postal Service, as well as state and local law enforcement partners. OCDETF used a prosecutor-led, multi-agency task force model that relied on coordination, intelligence and information sharing, and directed resourcing to counter the highest priority targets. The OCDETF Fusion Center (OFC) led intelligence sharing for the program and housed the International Organized Crime Intelligence and Operations Center (IOC-2), allowing for information sharing between these two entities and their partners. (The IOC-2 was established in 2009 and co-located with the OFC.) The OCDETF program had nine regions and 19 strike forces around the country to coordinate investigations and prosecutions. These strike forces brought together federal, state, and local law enforcement to conduct multi-jurisdictional operations.

OCDETF's mission, while initially focused on drug threats, expanded beyond countering drug trafficking to include investigations of all forms of transnational organized crime. This broader mission began with the release of the 2011 White House Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime and was later reinforced through President Trump's 2017 E.O. 13773, directing federal agencies—with specific reference to OCDETF, OFC, and others—to coordinate to counter TOC, broadly. The OCDETF Director managed what was then known as the Consolidated Priority Organization Target (CPOT) process for identifying priority drug trafficking threats and the Priority Transnational Organized Crime (PTOC) process to identify priority non-drug organized crime threats.

The OCDETF program was involved in carrying out various national strategies, including the Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime and the National Drug Control Strategy.

White House Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime

In July 2011, the Obama Administration released the first White House Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime, which laid out the federal government's first broad conceptualization of TOC, focusing on it as a national security concern. In December 2023, the Biden Administration issued an updated White House Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime (2023 Strategy). This updated strategy (which is the most current) notes that:

> Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) refer to groups, networks, and associated individuals who operate transnationally for the purpose of obtaining power, influence, or monetary or commercial gain, wholly or in part by illegal means, while advancing their activities through a pattern of crime, corruption, or violence, and while protecting their illegal activities through a transnational organizational structure and the exploitation of public corruption or transnational logistics, financial, or communication mechanisms.

The 2023 Strategy also notes the opportunistic, poly-criminal nature of transnational criminal networks, the fluidity of their sizes and structures, and their activities that overlap the licit and illicit realms. It outlines four broad strategic pillars to counter TOC: (1) enhancing intelligence and information sharing; (2) strengthening interdictions, investigations, and prosecutions; (3) targeting TOC enablers; and (4) building international capacity, cooperation, and partnerships.

The 2023 Strategy affirms that many counter-TOC investigations are led by task forces and fusion centers, including entities such as OCDETF and the OFC. It is currently unclear how the elimination of the OCDETF program has affected the implementation of the 2023 Strategy and other related strategies and initiatives.

Elimination of the OCDETF Program

In March 2025, Deputy U.S. Attorney General Blanche issued a memorandum establishing "Operation Take Back America," reliant on OCDETF and Project Safe Neighborhoods resources to support DOJ's "core enforcement priorities: stopping illegal immigration, eliminating Cartels and TCOs, and ending illegal trafficking of dangerous drugs and human beings." While OCDETF resources had consistently been used to counter criminal networks engaged in a range of illegal activity, the use of its resources to counter illegal immigration (including "cases involving obstruction of immigration objectives by sanctuary jurisdictions," as outlined in the memorandum) was an expansion of the OCDETF mission beyond countering priority target organizations. This memorandum also nodded to the future establishment of HSTFs.

In its FY2026 budget request, the Trump Administration proposed shifting OCDETF program management away from its status of being managed by a director of a stand-alone entity within DOJ to being managed by a task force director within the Office of the Deputy Attorney General. It also proposed eliminating funding for the OCDETF program, noting that resources for OCDETF would be provided by participating entities. In September 2025, OCDETF was closed; its caseload was transferred to the newly formed HSTFs.

HSTF Program

DHS and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) co-lead the HSTFs, with the mission "to identify, investigate, and prosecute TCOs and [Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)] engaged in complex, multi-faceted criminal activity." The focus of HSTFs on countering the criminal activity of not only profit-motivated TCOs but FTOs as well follows the designation of certain TCOs as FTOs, pursuant to President Trump's E.O. 14157, "Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists."

There are 59 HSTFs (30 regional offices and 29 satellite offices), staffed by over 9,000 federal agents, task force officers, and analysts, and the program includes over 20 federal agencies and 440 state, local, and international law enforcement agencies. There is a National Coordination Center (NCC), co-led by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), and the FBI, which serves as the operational hub for the HSTFs. Funding for the HSTFs comes from participating agency budgets, and the NCC "directs resources, coordinates criminal network analysis, and deconflicts targets across task forces nationwide."

Federal Resources for HSTFs

Unlike OCDETF, the HSTFs do not have their own budget or appropriation; rather, they are funded from appropriations provided to participating agencies. For reference, the OCDETF program was funded at $547 million for FY2025. There is no public information on the total federal resources dedicated to HSTF activities. As such, policymakers may consider whether to direct the Administration to report on annual resources allocated to the HSTFs from each participating agency. Over 20 federal agencies participate in the HSTFs, and DHS and the FBI are the leads. The FY2027 DHS budget request includes $57.7 million for HSTF support, though details are classified. Additionally, the FY2027 FBI budget request includes an additional 148 positions and nearly $77.1 million to further support HSTFs. These are snapshots of HSTF funding for DHS or FBI and do not reflect comprehensive HSTF funding across the federal government.

Effects on TOC Investigations

Some observers, including former Acting OCDETF Director Thomas Padden, have expressed concern that the new HSTF model may not be as effective at countering TOC as the former OCDETF model. One key reason cited is that the OCDETF model was a prosecutor-led initiative, whereas under HSTF, it is investigator-led; "without prosecutorial oversight, information sharing between law enforcement, the Intelligence Community, and the military is unclear and the potential for mismanagement of the process is increased." Former Acting Director Padden further noted that "law enforcement agencies regularly share information with prosecutors that they do not necessarily share with each other." Policymakers may examine whether the HSTF NCC is well-positioned and able to alleviate these concerns about potential mismanagement and agency gatekeeping of information.

The HSTFs appear to have a potentially broader mission scope than did OCDETF. Because the scope of the resources allocated to HSTFs is currently unclear, it is difficult to assess whether the current resources are sufficient to support their expanded mission. Policymakers may explore whether the HSTFs have the resources needed to counter the breadth of threats they intend to cover, including those related to illicit drugs and other contraband, human trafficking and smuggling, weapons trafficking, financial crimes, and transnational gangs. Congress may also examine how the HSTFs interface with other existing task forces focused on countering specific crimes; for instance, how might the HSTFs coordinate with human trafficking task forces.

Effects on Strategies to Help Counter TOC

As noted, OCDETF was previously involved in supporting federal strategies to counter TOC, including the National Drug Control Strategy and the White House Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime. The 2026 National Drug Control Strategy, released in May 2026, highlights the role of the HSTFs in stopping the flow of illicit drugs into and throughout the United States. This strategy identifies specific action items related to the HSTFs, including fully resourcing and empowering the HSTFs to be the lead on counter-TCO and FTO operations. It also notes that the HSTFs have a management information system for case tracking and reporting to help understand and evaluate TOC disruption and dismantlement. Policymakers may question whether the Administration will also update the 2023 Strategy or other relevant strategies to reflect the roles of the HSTFs and the NCC. The 2023 Strategy had referenced the roles of OCDETF and the OFC; policymakers may consider examining whether the HSTFs and NCC are currently positioned to carry out the goals of the 2023 Strategy.

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