

# The asylum backlog could double by the end of the decade without a DHS staffing surge

USCIS is failing to meet its legal obligations due to its shrinking workforce and growing responsibilities, IG says.

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Insufficient staffing and funding for a key agency has led to the backlog of asylum cases to skyrocket in recent years to unprecedented levels, according to a new audit, with the Biden administration conceding the matter will languish and worsen without congressional intervention.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service now has more than 1 million asylum cases pending. Within just the “affirmative” case backlog—meaning those involving individuals not currently going through removal proceedings—800,000 have been pending for more than the statutory cap of 180 days.

The Homeland Security Department inspector general highlighted several causes for the spike in its [new report](#), including evolving migration patterns and prioritization decisions by agency leadership. Ultimately, the IG said, the backlog grew significantly in recent years because its staffing levels have stayed flat or decreased while the workload has grown significantly. The watchdog and agency leaders both suggested the issue will compound until the largely fee-funded agency is provided annual appropriations.

USCIS first saw a backlog in asylum cases in 2010 and the agency declared the situation a crisis in 2018 when the pending cases reached just 311,000. Now, 38% of affirmative asylum cases have been pending for more than two years. In 2022 and 2023, USCIS adjudicated just 3% of the cases within the mandatory 180-day window. From 2020 through 2023, USCIS worked through just one-quarter of the affirmative asylum applications it received. The agency is still struggling to dig out from a hiring freeze it implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the agency threatened to [furlough most of its workers](#) as normal funds collected through fees dried up. Congress eventually intervened, but not before the longstanding hiring pause depleted the agency.

While the freeze was in place, USCIS lost more than 10% of its asylum officers. It now employs just 824 officers in that role as of May, 250 of whom were in training. Across its asylum division, USCIS models showed it required about 3,300 employees in 2023 while it employed just 2,000.

President Biden in fiscal 2023 requested Congress reorient USCIS funding to be more appropriations-based, asking for \$900 million and funding to hire 1,000 asylum staffers. Congress provided just \$243 million and demanded the funding not be used on asylum backlog reduction. Congress gave the agency \$281 million in fiscal 2024, but officials said it could not spend the money on hiring asylum officers because the money arrived too late in the fiscal year and it had no guarantees lawmakers would offer a similar appropriation to fund the hires going forward.

USCIS receives no revenue from asylum processing, instead only generating money from fees it charges for immigration benefits such as naturalization or work visas. Due to legal proceedings, those fees stayed stagnant between 2016 and 2024. In January, the agency finalized a plan to increase some of its fees and projected it would raise an additional \$313 million annually. Still, the IG said, the revenue is insufficient to keep pace with growing demands or reduce the existing backlog. To the contrary, USCIS projects its backlog will grow to 2 million by 2030 if Congress does not provide additional funding.

“The rise in asylum claims without a corresponding increase in resources will continue to prevent USCIS from meeting statutory timelines and result in the continued growth of the backlog of affirmative asylum cases,” the IG said. “USCIS’ staffing has been insufficient to address its existing workload.”

The struggles persisted at USCIS despite the agency completing 10 million cases in fiscal 2023, an all-time record, reducing its overall number of pending cases by 15%.

In response to the report, USCIS Director Ur Jaddou said she appreciated that the IG recognized her agency “is neither sufficiently funded nor staffed to complete its asylum-related workloads.”

“USCIS acknowledges that the agency has not adjudicated asylum applications in a manner sufficient to reduce its existing backlog,” she said, adding the agency has been forced to prioritize how to allocate its limited resources.

Agency leadership has shifted the focus of its workforce to migrants newly arriving at the border, prioritizing cases that require shorter timeframes to adjudicate. When those migrants request credible fear interviews, the agency must provide them within 14 days. In June 2023, for example, USCIS allocated 90% of its asylum officers to process credible fear screenings. Jaddou stressed that factors outside USCIS’ control, including changes in patterns of global migration, have—in conjunction with insufficient funding and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic—caused the backlog to spike. The administration has leaned more heavily on expedited removal to confront the unprecedented number of migrant arrivals at the U.S.-Mexico border that occurred in recent years, diverting more USCIS staff away from tackling the existing backlog.

She noted the administration’s support for the bipartisan immigration deal that would have [surged USCIS staffing](#) by 4,300 officers, but that measure has failed to gain any traction in Congress.

Jaddou pledged to issue a multi-year operational plan by September 2025 that includes performance metrics and goals for hiring and reducing the backlog, which the IG said would help define and demonstrate the agency's needs.