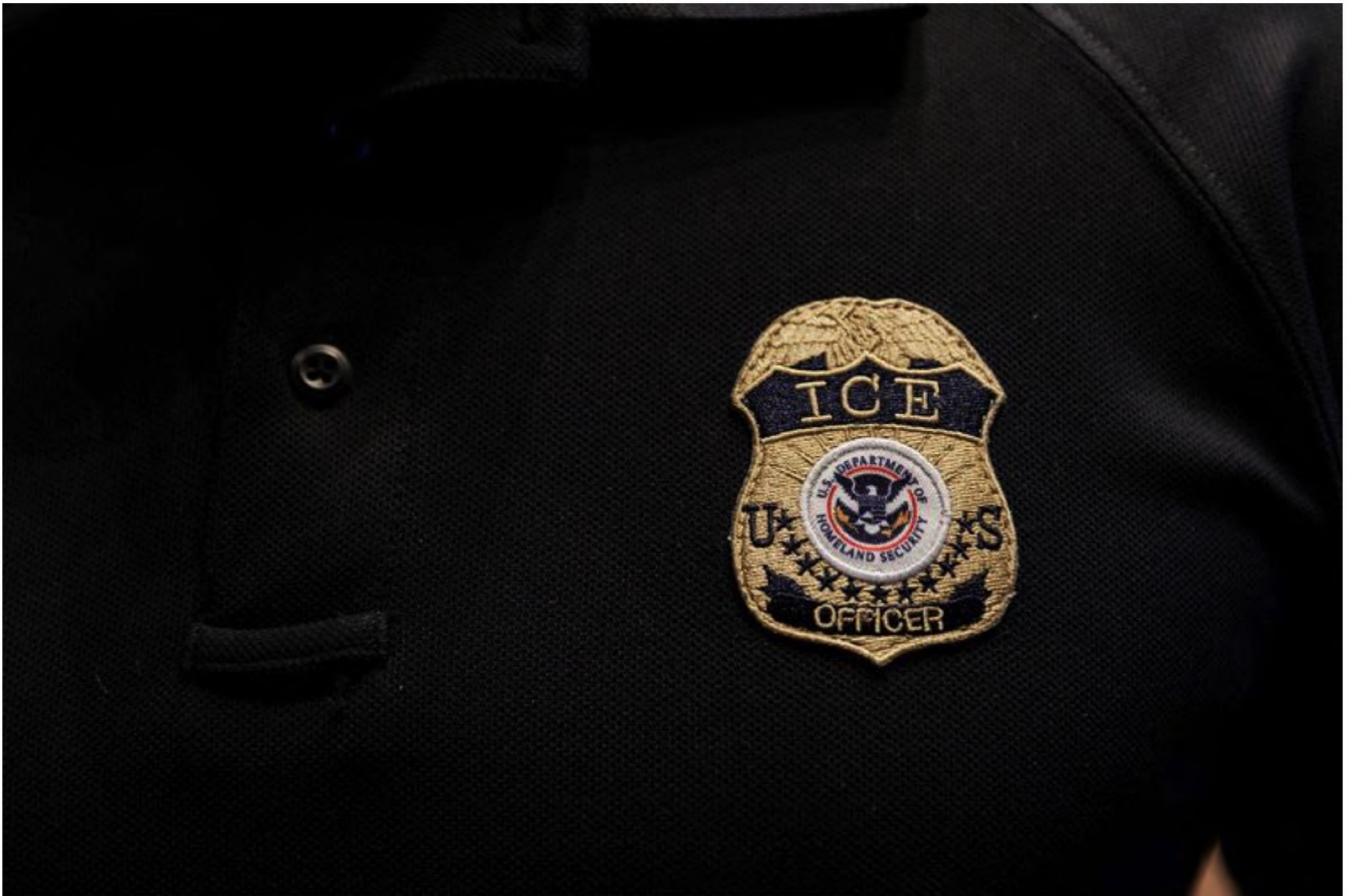


ICE launches new effort to uncover US 'birth tourism schemes'



(Fixes typo in paragraph 16)

By Kristina Cooke and Ted Hesson

WASHINGTON, April 10 (Reuters) - President Donald Trump's administration plans to crack down on networks it says help pregnant women lie on visa applications in order to secure U.S. citizenship for their U.S.-born babies, an issue that Trump has highlighted to justify his attempts to restrict birthright citizenship.

In an internal email sent Thursday and reviewed by Reuters, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement ordered investigative agents around the country to focus on a new "Birth Tourism Initiative." The

operation will seek to root out networks that help pregnant foreign nationals come to the U.S. to give birth so their children can receive citizenship, it said.

Trump, a Republican, has kicked off an aggressive push to reduce both legal and illegal immigration after taking office in January 2025. His administration has used the threat of birth tourism as a rationale for attempting to restrict the practice of granting automatic citizenship <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/pregnant-immigrants-warily-eye-us-supreme-court-birthright-citizenship-case-2025-05-14/> to children born on U.S. soil.

"Uninhibited birth tourism poses a tremendous cost to taxpayers and threatens our national security," White House spokeswoman Anna Kelly said in a statement, adding that most nations do not provide automatic citizenship at birth.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security declined to comment on any ongoing investigations, but said it was aware that some networks facilitate travel to the U.S. for birth tourism.

"While the act of giving birth in the United States is not unlawful, DHS remains focused on identifying and addressing potential violations of federal law associated with these activities," a spokesperson said.

No U.S. law outright bars birth tourism, but a federal regulation implemented

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/01/24/2020-01218/visas-temporary-visitors-for-business-or-pleasure> in 2020 during Trump's first term prohibits using temporary tourist and business visas for the primary purpose of obtaining U.S. citizenship for a newborn. People who engage in birth tourism schemes could be prosecuted for fraud or other related crimes.

BIRTH TOURISM USED AS RATIONALE TO LIMIT CITIZENSHIP

There are no official figures tallying the number of foreigners who come to the U.S. for the explicit purpose of giving birth and obtaining citizenship for their children, or the cost to taxpayers.

The Center for Immigration Studies, which supports lower levels of immigration, estimated in an analysis in 2020 that between 20,000-25,000 mothers came to the U.S. for birth tourism in a year-long period between 2016-2017.

There were 3.6 million births in the U.S. in 2025

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/us-fertility-rates-drop-record-low-2025-births-fall-2026-04-09/> and birth tourism likely represents a fraction of total births.

Republicans have highlighted allegations of birth tourism as a reason to limit access to U.S. citizenship, which has long been conferred at birth under an amendment to the Constitution.

Trump issued an executive order on his first day in office that instructed U.S. agencies not to recognize the citizenship of children born in the U.S. if neither parent is an American citizen or legal permanent resident, a sharp break from legal precedent spanning more than a century.

Multiple federal judges blocked the order, sending the case to the Supreme Court for oral arguments

<https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/us-supreme-court-considers-trumps-effort-limit-birthright-citizenship-2026-04-01/> last week. U.S. Solicitor General D. John Sauer, representing the Trump administration, said automatic citizenship had encouraged "a sprawling industry of birth tourism."

Sauer said the promise of citizenship for those born in the U.S. had

encouraged thousands of people from “potentially hostile nations” to come to give birth, “creating a whole generation of American citizens abroad with no meaningful ties to the United States.”

ICE AIMS TO FIND FRAUD

ICE's new birth tourism effort - spearheaded by its Homeland Security Investigations arm - aims to surface cases of fraud, but it is unclear how many cases they might find.

“HSI is advancing efforts to protect the integrity of U.S. immigration and identification systems, specifically targeting fraudulent activities associated with birth tourism schemes,” the email said. The agency said it would seek to disrupt “fraud, financial crimes, and organized facilitation networks that exploit lawful immigration processes.”

In one federal case in 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us-charges-19-in-chinese-birth-tourism-scheme-in-california-idUSKCN1PQ3MS/>, more than a dozen people were charged in a scheme to operate “birth houses” in Southern California that catered to wealthy women from China.

In the case -- billed by ICE at the time as the first U.S. prosecution against birth tourism -- Chinese national Dongyuan Li pleaded guilty to federal charges in connection with the scheme. She was sentenced to 10 months in prison and released in December 2019.

Another Chinese national, Chao “Edwin” Chen, was sentenced to three years in prison in 2020 but had already fled the U.S. for China, according to ICE.

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