



ICE Deployment at U.S. Airports: What Immigrants and International Travelers Need to Know

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In March 2026, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) began deploying agents to U.S. airports in response to Transportation Security Administration (TSA) staffing shortages caused by an ongoing Department of Homeland Security (DHS) funding shutdown. Although intended to ease operational strain, the expanded and more visible ICE presence increases immigration enforcement risk at airports and highlights the need for careful legal planning before domestic or international travel.

Why ICE Is Operating Inside Airports

The deployment is in response to a partial DHS shutdown that has left thousands of TSA employees unpaid, causing staffing shortages, large crowds, and extended security lines at major airports. In response, the Administration directed ICE personnel to assist with airport operations.

ICE has stated that its agents are not conducting TSA screening functions such as operating X-ray machines or magnetometers, but are instead assisting with checkpoint flow, crowd control, and monitoring secure areas. Critically, ICE agents retain full immigration arrest authority while operating inside airports.

Airports and Immigration Enforcement Authority

International terminals function as ports of entry, where U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers have broad authority to inspect travelers, review documentation,

and determine whether someone is permitted to enter the United States. Although ICE typically focuses on interior enforcement, it also operates at airports through its Homeland Security Investigations division and in coordination with CBP.

Recent reporting highlights an additional layer of enforcement risk, namely expanded information sharing within DHS. Advocacy organizations, including the National Immigration Law Center and the American Civil Liberties Union, report that TSA passenger data is being shared internally with ICE for immigration enforcement purposes.

Since 2025, this enforcement posture has coincided with an increase in airport detentions of lawful permanent residents based on old or minor criminal convictions, alleged abandonment of their lawful permanent resident status in the United States, or prior immigration history that previously did not trigger enforcement. The physical presence of ICE agents inside airport terminals increases the likelihood that such issues result in immediate detention rather than deferred review.

Nonimmigrant visa holders such as B-2 visitors for pleasure, F-1 students, and H-1B temporary workers likewise face heightened scrutiny at airports in the current environment. CBP may deny entry based on suspected past status violations, inconsistent documentation, or refusal to answer questions. While the ICE airport deployment does not alter the legal standards governing the admission of nonimmigrants to the United States, it increases the speed and visibility of enforcement actions when ICE officers become involved.

Reported Arrests Inside Airport Terminals

Within days of the deployment, multiple news outlets reported ICE arrests occurring inside airport terminals, including in secure gate areas. Some of these incidents were recorded by bystanders and raised questions about identification procedures and use of force. While ICE and airport officials have stated that certain arrests were unrelated to the TSA support mission, the incidents demonstrate the practical effect of increased ICE presence in travel spaces.

These events highlight that enforcement actions may occur in real time during travel, without advance notice, and in highly stressful circumstances.

Practical Takeaways

While the duration of ICE's airport deployment remains uncertain and may depend on congressional action to resolve the lapse in DHS funding, the broader trend is clear: Airports are active enforcement environments. Given the current enforcement climate, we strongly recommend that noncitizens assess travel risks carefully, carry appropriate documentation, and seek legal advice before traveling, especially if there are any prior arrests, convictions, prior overstays or other immigration violations, or pending immigration matters.

If you have questions about how international or domestic travel could affect your immigration status, please reach out to our firm.

**Disclaimer: This information is presented for the purposes of general education and does not constitute legal advice. For advice about a specific case, please consult legal counsel.* immigration counsel to ensure compliance and explore available options.