

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Local Crime & Public Safety

Justice Department deletes database tracking federal police misconduct

Trump executive order ends National Law Enforcement Accountability Database, which he proposed creating in 2020.

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By [Tom Jackman](#) and [Elizabeth Dwoskin](#)

The first nationwide database tracking misconduct by federal police officers has been shut down by President Donald Trump, the Justice Department confirmed, deleting a resource that experts said improved public safety by helping to prevent bad officers from jumping to new agencies and starting over with clean records.

The database was first proposed by Trump in 2020 in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd. But it wasn't created until two years later when an executive order from President Joe Biden launched the National Law Enforcement Accountability Database. Trump issued an order last month revoking Biden's orders, and the database.

The national database encompassed nearly 150,000 federal officers and agents, from the FBI and IRS down to the Railroad Retirement Board. And though it launched only in December 2023, by the end of last year all 90 executive branch agencies with law enforcement officers had provided thousands of disciplinary records dating to 2017, a report issued by the Justice Department in December said.

Trump's revocation of Biden's executive orders was part of the president's effort to reduce the size and cost of the federal government. The policing order revoked by Trump laid out steps to improve use-of-force standards and research, ensured appropriate use of body cameras, and required anti-bias training, in addition to creating a misconduct database.

The White House and the Justice Department declined to explain why they had "decommissioned" the database. Trump's executive order, entered Jan. 20, revoked dozens of Biden's executive orders, saying they had "embedded deeply unpopular, inflationary, illegal, and radical practices within every agency and office of the Federal Government." At least one police group had objected that officers weren't given a chance to challenge the information about them before it was entered into the database, and said that only serious misconduct should be entered.

Police reform experts were disappointed, if unsurprised, by the shutdown.

"Everyone, cops and communities alike, has an interest in keeping officers with histories of serious misconduct from

rejoining the profession,” said Thomas Abt, director of the Violence Reduction Center at the University of Maryland. “Nonpartisan public safety reforms like these should be placed above politics and maintained across administrations.”

Lauren Bonds, executive director of the National Police Accountability Project, said, “Trump has made clear through actions such as this that he doesn’t think law enforcement accountability advances public safety.” Though the database includes only federal officers, Bonds noted that covers “a potentially impactful group who can impact a lot of vulnerable people’s civil rights” in areas such as immigration and Border Patrol. “Even though databases are the bare minimum of tracking, it’s a low bar, but it’s still a bar we should have in place.”

Trevor Hugh Davis, a research scientist at the University of Notre Dame who tracks disappearing government websites by analyzing historical data, first noticed last week that [the website](#) for the police accountability database had disappeared. He dug further and found that it had been down since Jan. 24. A [separate Justice Department website](#) about the database now has an announcement saying that the site is no longer active and “user agencies can no longer query or add data to the NLEAD. The U.S. Department of Justice is decommissioning the NLEAD in accordance with federal standards.”

“We have lost countless records of disciplinary actions, terminations, complaints and settlements related to police misconduct,” Davis said. “Officers with serious misconduct histories often move between departments. Despite its limitations, it addressed a real problem — rehiring officers who had been fired or resigned for misconduct ... its removal sends a clear message about the new administration’s priorities.”

The “wandering officer” phenomenon has been widely studied over the years. [One study](#) from Yale Law School found that 3 percent of active officers in Florida had been [previously fired](#) by another agency in Florida.

The deletion of the federal database does not affect the [National Decertification Index](#), a national registry of state and local police officers who have lost their certification or licensing because of misconduct. That database is operated by the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training, which declined to comment on the shutdown of the federal database.

The National Association of Police Organizations, a coalition of police unions and associations that says it represents 241,000 officers, repeatedly aired its concerns with the database in letters to the Biden administration beginning in 2022. As recently as last month, executive director William J. Johnson [wrote to Attorney General Merrick Garland](#) noting that minor administrative infractions shouldn’t be included in the database, and that officers should have due process available to challenge being included in the data.

Johnson’s Jan. 14 letter expressed frustration that the Justice Department wasn’t listening.

“Our comments and recommendations on the establishment of a National Law Enforcement Accountability Database have been largely disregarded,” Johnson wrote. “As representatives of rank-and-file officers, it is incredibly concerning that their voices are being ignored.”

Johnson did not respond to a request for comment Thursday. Officials with the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association also did not respond to requests for comment. The FBI Agents Association declined to comment.

The initial actions by both Trump and Biden were attempts to impose police reform in the wake of seismic news events, beginning with the May 2020 slaying of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Trump issued his “[Executive Order on Safe Policing for Safe Communities](#),” which called for improved certification for police, more training to deal with those in mental crisis, and “a database to coordinate the sharing of information” between federal and local law enforcement on “instances of excessive use of force.”

The Trump-proposed database would track terminations or decertifications of police officers, plus criminal convictions, civil judgments and resignations for improper use of force. But it was not enacted.

After Biden’s election, his administration pushed the “George Floyd Justice in Policing Act” in 2021, but it could not pass Congress. So in May 2022, on the second anniversary of Floyd’s death, Biden signed an executive order titled “Advancing Effective, Accountable Policing and Criminal Justice Practices to Enhance Public Trust and Public Safety.” It included proposals on strengthening officer recruitment, restricting “no-knock” warrants and limiting the transfer of military equipment to local police.

The order also created the national database. Unlike the proposed Trump database, it applied only to federal officers and federal agencies, and only those agencies could access the database. The Justice Department had been exploring ways to open the database so that state and local police could check it, too.

Damon Hewitt, the president and executive director of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, said when Biden signed the order in 2022 that “once [the George Floyd Act] was sabotaged, the administration has stepped up as much as it could via executive action.”

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(The Washington Post)

After the database went live in December 2023, the number of searches by federal agencies rose steadily, from around 400 in January 2024 to more than 3,000 in August, [a December report](#) shows. There were more than 4,000 officers in the database with nearly 4,800 reports of misconduct, and 25 queries to the database caused a “match” last year, enabling police personnel managers to dig deeper into someone’s background.

“This database helps law enforcement agencies ensure they are not hiring officers who have been criminally charged, fired for misconduct, or are otherwise unsuitable candidates,” said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a D.C.-based think tank that advises police departments. “Problem officers tend to move from agency to agency, and police chiefs and sheriffs want access to any information that can help them avoid hiring a problem officer.”