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ICE impersonator incidents rise during Trump's second term

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(Animation by Connie Chen/CNN)



and her face behind a mask as she stepped up to the hotel desk clerk.

When she pulled out an ID card that seemed to show she was an immigration agent, she made it clear to the frightened young clerk that she had no choice but to follow her out to a silver sedan.

But this was no immigration raid. It was a kidnapping, police say.

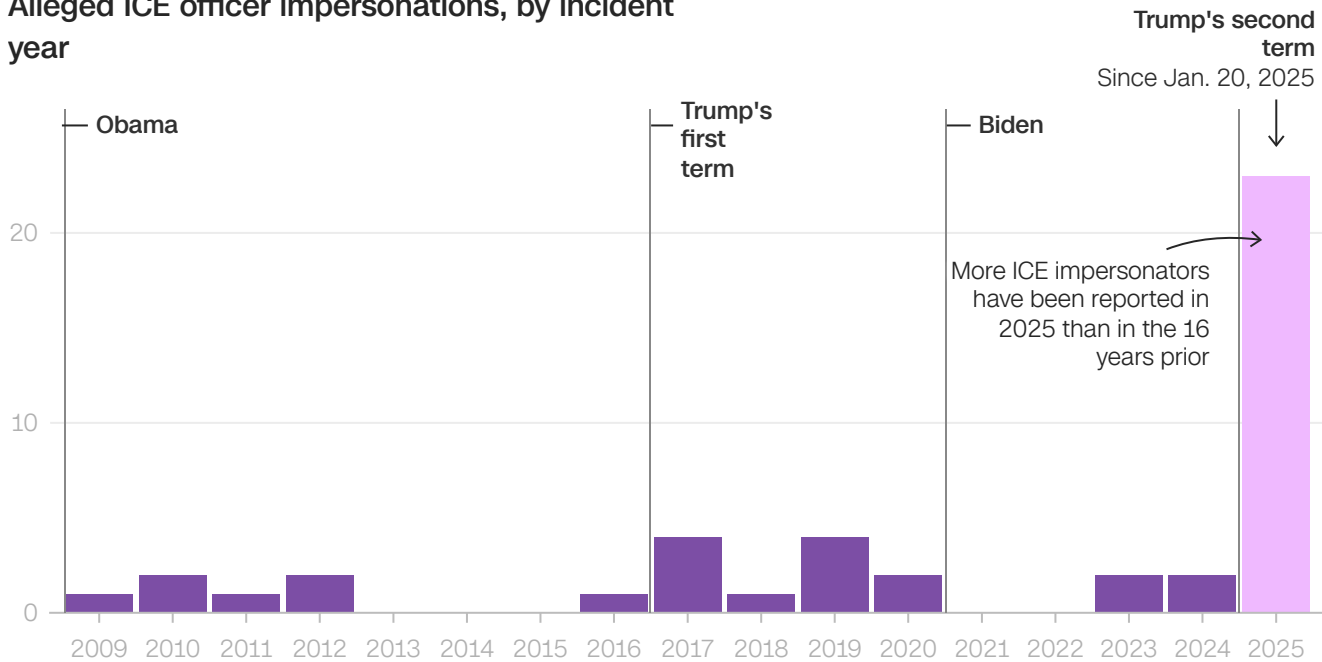
And the woman in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement uniform, authorities say, was no federal agent. She was a jilted ex-lover using the cover of the government's expanding deportation efforts to commit a serious crime and try to eliminate a romantic rival.

A CNN review of court filings, social media posts and local news stories has found two dozen incidents of people posing as ICE officers in 2025, in cases that range from political agitators seeking to intimidate immigrants to others using the guise of authority to allegedly kidnap, rob, assault or rape victims.

That represents a notable jump — more incidents than during the prior four presidential terms combined, dating back to President Barack Obama's first term in office, CNN's review found.

President Donald Trump's second term has seen an increase in Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations, with officers often wearing face masks and not wearing identifying uniforms. CNN's analysis discovered a jump in incidents of alleged ICE impersonations this year.

Alleged ICE officer impersonations, by incident year



Note: Data as of Sept. 12, 2025. Data was collected through detailed searches of court filings, social media posts and local news stories, and includes incidents of people reported as impersonating ICE officers with the aim of committing crimes — such as fraud, theft or sexual assault. This data is not comprehensive and may exclude impersonations that have not been reported.

Source: CNN analysis

Graphic: Lou Robinson, CNN

“I’ve been at this for 38 years, and I’ve never seen cases involving the impersonation of ICE agents before Donald Trump won the second time,” said Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner, a Democrat whose office is prosecuting two impersonator cases from this year.

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Some experts and public officials have tied this rise in imposters to the Trump administration's aggressive use of ICE agents – in particular the use of masks by agents, who often wear plain clothes during raids that have been widely captured on social media. When agents wear masks, it sows confusion about how to identify real agents, opening the door for imitators, critics argue.

“It's very easy for somebody to just play dress up and go out acting like these agents,” said Mike German, a former FBI agent. “And because these agents have been so aggressive in public without identifying themselves, it creates fear and that fear is an opportunity for a criminal.”

ICE says masks are needed to protect agents from doxxing as mass street protests have erupted in cities like Los Angeles, and as violent threats have targeted the agency. FBI officials say anti-ICE sentiment drove **the shooting** that killed two detainees at an ICE facility in Dallas last week. The agency also said in a statement to CNN that agents “always have credentials visible and clearly announce who they are.”

VIDEO: CNN found two dozen reports of people posing as ICE officers this year

4:53

“ICE strongly condemns the impersonation of its law enforcement officers or agents. This action is not only dangerous but illegal. Imposters can be charged with various criminal offenses at the state/local level and federally,” the agency said in a statement.

The rash of impersonator incidents comes as Democratic lawmakers push back against the masking practice. California Gov. Gavin Newsom **signed** a bill on September 20 making his state the first to ban federal agents from wearing masks during operations – a law driven in part by concern about imitators.

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“The increase in masked law enforcement operations has already spurred dangerous copycat activity,” state Senators Scott Wiener and Jesse Arreguín said in a **statement** in June.

The White House has declared the California law unconstitutional and said ICE will not abide.

“This stunt comes as our ICE officers are facing a more than 1000% increase in assaults against them, including vehicles being used as weapons towards them, and doxing campaigns targeting federal officers and their families,” said the Department of Homeland Security in a **press release**.

Among the two dozen incidents identified by CNN, criminal charges have been filed in 10. Only one case has resulted in federal charges for imitating an officer – another break from the past four administrations, when roughly half of the ICE-imposter cases were charged under federal statutes.

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The Department of Justice did not provide a comment for this story.



Miguel Arias, a city council member in Fresno, California, where two ICE imitators have been arrested. (CNN)

That lack of federal action could be leaving the door open for more bad actors to take advantage of the political moment to target immigrants, some lawmakers warn.

“I expect it will continue to grow exponentially because those individuals have seen that the federal government is not willing to hold them accountable,” said Miguel Arias, a city council member in Fresno, California, where two ICE imitators have been arrested but have not faced federal charges.

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Arias added, “That sends a very clear message to these individuals that the general public is fair game and that they can continue impersonating law enforcement officers and violating our constitutional rights and our feeling of safety in our own neighborhoods.”

A rise in imitators

Because immigrants are a vulnerable population in danger of being victimized, ICE impersonators have long been a problem.

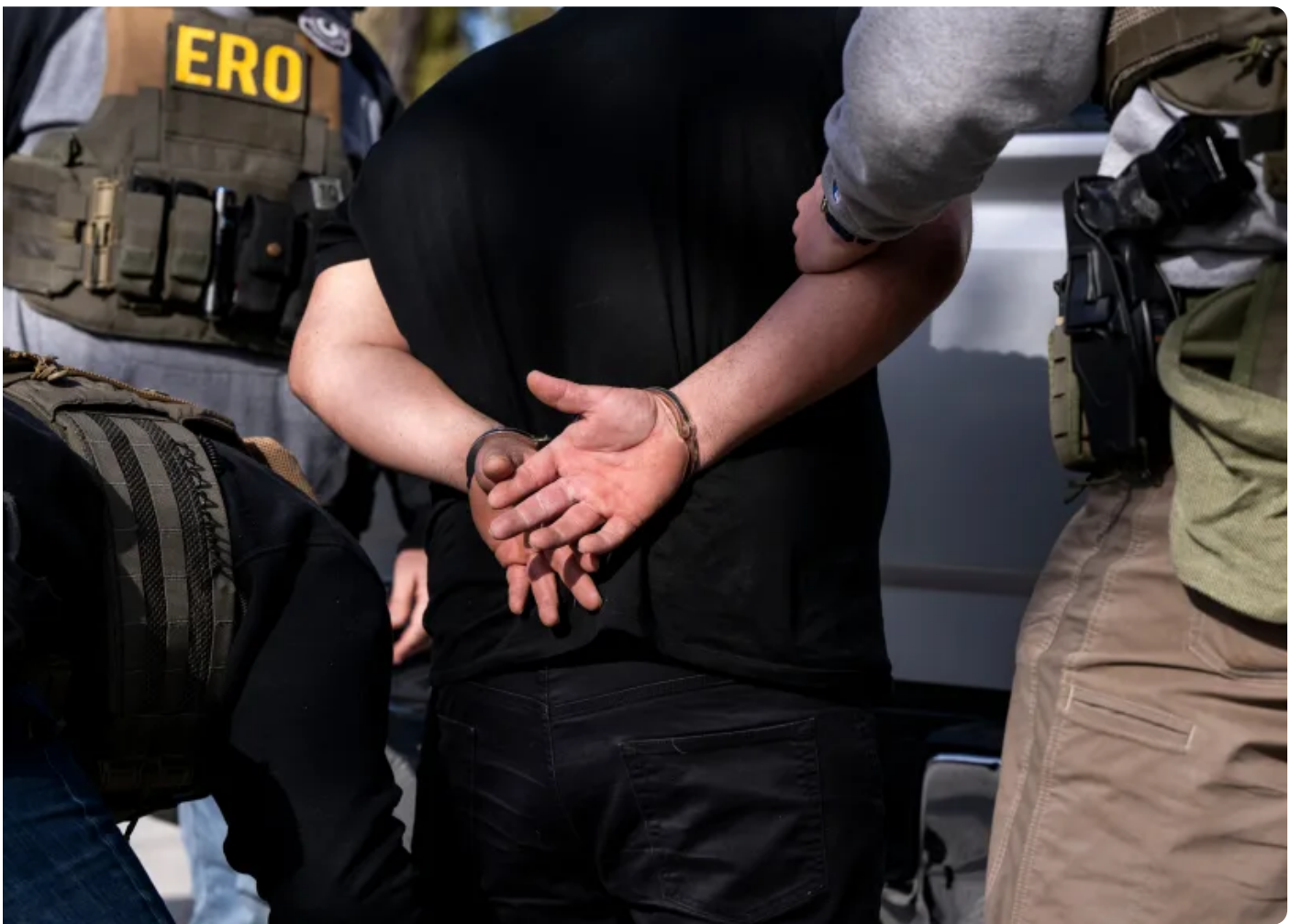
But in years past, many cases reviewed by CNN involved scam artists who sought to shake down immigrants for cash under threat of deportation.

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Starting in 2009, for instance, Ruben Alvarado of New Jersey **met with** undocumented immigrants wearing an ICE badge and what appeared to be a holstered gun and collected fees in return for the promise of citizenship. But

months in prison, according to the US Department of Justice.

All told, CNN found at least seven cases of ICE agent imitators during President Obama's tenure – most involving financial scams like the Alvarado case. There were at least 11 cases during Trump's first four-year term, and four cases during President Joe Biden's time in the White House. Federal prosecutors filed charges in about half of those cases prior to Trump's second term, between 2009 and early 2025.



US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents detain a suspect during a multi-agency targeted enforcement operation in Lyons, Illinois, on January 26. *(Christopher Dilts/Bloomberg/Getty Images)*

Since Trump took office again in January, however, the nearly two dozen incidents found by CNN have deviated from the previous pattern of mostly

inauguration, and then surged in February, when saw 10 instances.

Another surge happened in June, shortly after news reports revealed that White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller had imposed a quota calling for ICE agents to arrest at least 3,000 people a day.

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As ICE began swarming into US cities including Boston and Los Angeles this summer, bystanders captured hundreds of social media videos of agents without visible ICE logos and with their faces covered by masks detaining people off the street.

It's unclear whether ICE ever issued a formal policy allowing the masks or to not wear identifying uniforms during operations. Todd Lyons, ICE's acting director, said in a July interview with CBS News that while he isn't a proponent of the masks, he would continue to allow it, calling it a "tool" used by agents to keep themselves and their families safe.

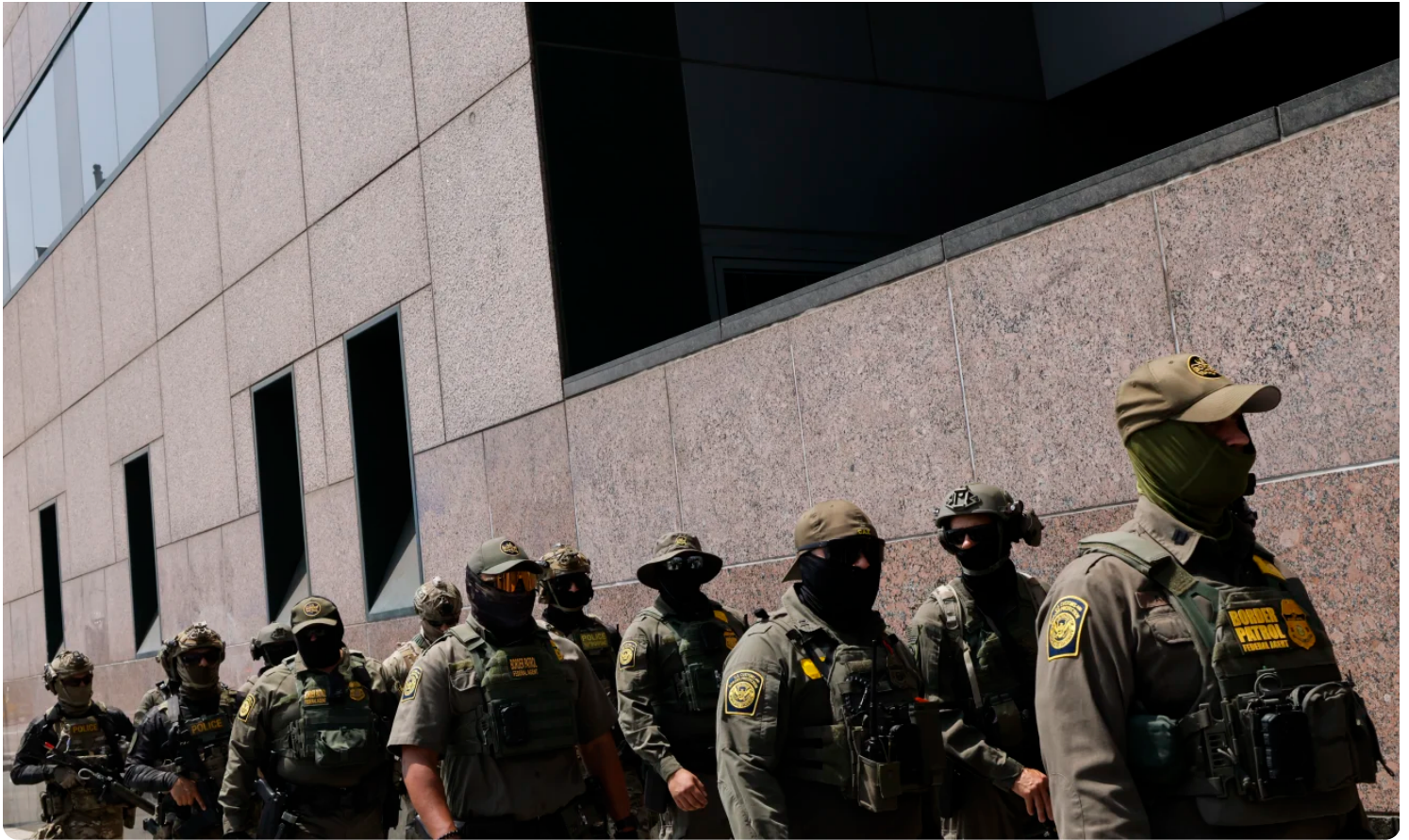
But critics have argued the practice makes it easier for anyone to pose as an ICE agent and violently act out against immigrants. Arturo Flores, the mayor of Huntington Park, California, said the opaqueness of ICE's current masking policy adds a dangerous layer of uncertainty.

city in Los Angeles County had a possible ICE impersonation case in June.

“With ICE agents you can’t make that determination because of the operational tactics and operational protocol that they’ve adopted.”

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As ICE’s mass operations increased around the US, criminals also continued imitating agents – and in at least four incidents found by CNN, wore masks like federal agents.



US Border Patrol agents march in Los Angeles in August. *(Carlin Stiehl/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images)*

A daring escape

When the 26-year-old hotel desk clerk got into the back seat of the car in Panama City, Florida, on April 10, she thought she was complying with an ICE officer's demand, authorities said.

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agents show up,” a deputy’s report said.

The woman wearing the ICE gear told the clerk that she was taking her to a sheriff’s station, according to the report. And on the drive, she appeared to be speaking with someone on a handheld radio – further convincing the clerk she was really an ICE agent.

But things soon took an ominous turn.

When the clerk, Merika Senior, tried to call her attorney, the woman in the ICE shirt driving the car reached back and snatched the phone from her hand, according to the report.

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The victim told deputies she grew more suspicious when the car blew past a turn that would have led to the nearest sheriff’s station. Instead, they drove across a bridge to an apartment complex in Panama City Beach, where the driver said more ICE agents would be waiting.

When the supposed ICE agent went up to a room in the complex, Senior seized an opportunity to escape. She flagged down a man in a parked car who allowed her to use his phone to call 911 while she hid.

an imposter — then 32-year-old Lorraine Battle, who was on felony probation for aggravated assault and who had formerly dated the victim's husband. She was **arrested** and charged with several offenses including kidnapping and impersonation of an officer. She has pleaded not guilty. Battle's attorney declined CNN's request for comment; her next trial date is on October 28.

The case is one of at least eight this year CNN found that involved people allegedly posing as ICE agents to commit violent acts.

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Among those is the only ICE imitation crime that federal prosecutors have taken on in 2025.

Authorities say **54-year-old** Robert Rosado walked into an auto-repair shop in Philadelphia on June 8 wearing a tactical vest, badge and a holstered gun and announced he was an ICE agent. After most of the employees scattered, police say, Rosado zip-tied the last remaining employee's wrists together and took about \$1,000 from the till of the business, according to court records and media reports.

The owner of the store declined to comment.



Authorities say 54-year-old Robert Rosado walked into an auto-repair shop in Philadelphia on June 8 wearing a tactical vest, badge and a holstered gun and announced he was an ICE agent. *(Philadelphia Police Department)*

Rosado faces federal charges of impersonating an officer and robbery. His attorney in that case did not return an email from CNN seeking comment. Rosado's jury trial is scheduled to begin on October 21.

Another violent case happened later in June in Delaware, after police say a vehicle with flashing police lights pulled over another car in the historic shipbuilding town of Milton.

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Two masked men wearing vests bearing the word “ICE” got out and robbed the driver at gun- and knife- point before punching him, according to media reports. They are still at large.

That’s not the only bogus ICE traffic stop police have responded to. In South Carolina in late January, a video that went viral on social media showed a man sticking his head in the open window of a parked car, snatching the keys out of the ignition and telling the Hispanic men inside, “You from Mexico? You’re going back!”

Sean-Michael Johnson, then 33, was charged with kidnapping and impersonating a police officer.

Two other cases involved men who allegedly tried to use their fake ICE status as a cover for committing rape.

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In North Carolina, a man allegedly showed a badge and threatened to deport a woman in January if she didn’t have sex with him at a motel. Police

degree rape.

In Brooklyn, police say 43-year-old Leon Howell ordered a 51-year-old Hispanic woman into a basement stairwell in February after he told her he was an ICE agent. Howell punched and raped her before making off with her necklace, cellphone and purse, police said. The woman was left with lacerations and bruises to her face, head, legs and arms, according to court documents.

Howell has been charged with rape, burglary and assault; he has pleaded not guilty and his next court appearance is on October 3.

Attorneys for Howell, Johnson and Bennett did not respond to CNN's requests for comment.

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In August, a masked man walked into a grocery store in Colorado Springs to pick up a to-go order with a semi-automatic gun in a holster on his hip. When an employee told the man that firearms were not allowed in the business, he flashed a fake ICE badge, according to court records and media reports.

himself inside with two young children and aimed a gun at officers, police said.

Officers de-escalated the situation and arrested 22-year-old Antonio Mellon. He faces several charges, including impersonating an officer, unlawful possession of a firearm and child abuse. The Colorado public defender's office, which is representing Mellon, did not respond to CNN's request for comment. His next court appearance is October 28.

Social media incidents

In several other 2025 cases, ICE agent imitators have been seeking social media clout or making a political point.

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In March, a man driving a decommissioned police SUV adorned with what appeared to be an ICE emblem drove erratically through the parking lot of a Ukrainian grocery store near Tacoma, Washington, before taking up two spots near the exit.

Olena Ray, the store's manager and – like many customers – a Ukrainian immigrant, said customers and staff were unsettled. Many feared that ICE was about to raid the store.

terrible," she told CNN. "It's mean and it's disrespectful."



Olena Ray manages a Ukrainian grocery store near Tacoma, Washington, where police say an imitator drove a fake ICE vehicle in March. (CNN)

An employee told police that the vehicle's "strange behavior," such as honking and blocking the entrance to the parking lot, "made me feel unsafe at my own workplace."

In fact, police later found the ICE emblem was a fake – slapped on the side of the SUV by Ilya Kukhar, now 27, who told police he was also Ukrainian, and that he had filmed the video as a skit for YouTube that "got blown out of proportion."

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He was charged with second-degree criminal impersonation, a gross misdemeanor.

Kukhar and prosecutors recently agreed that the charge against him will be dismissed in two years if he doesn't violate any criminal laws, and apologizes to Emish Market.

"This began as a joke and we're working to resolve the case," Kukhar's attorney, Steve Karimi, told CNN. "He's a good kid, a young kid, who did something very politically charged."

Other incidents posted to social media and reviewed by CNN did not result in criminal charges, but clearly depicted people pretending to be immigration officers.

At an anti-Trump rally in June in Miami, a pair of men in tactical vests showed up – including one in an ICE ballcap.

But the pair weren't agents on the scene – they were a father-son duo there to disrupt the protest and to post about it on social media, according to their own posts on Instagram and elsewhere.

"It was fun being an ice agent for one day," posted the older man on a social media account.

assault rifles, along with a message referencing the anti ICE arrest in Los Angeles that flared up this summer: “Bring the LA Chaos down here. I volunteer my self.”

Their commentary earned the ire of local activists who reposted the videos, demanding action from local authorities. Neither man in the social media posts has been charged with a crime, and they did not respond to CNN’s requests for comment.

At the Conservative Political Action Conference earlier this year in Maryland, another young man dressed in an ICE jacket admitted in a viral **video** that he was not actually an agent and had purchased the gear online.

“It’s \$29.99 on Amazon,” the man says in the video. “If you want some entertainment, wear this and go to a Home Depot in a sanctuary city like where I live right now, Washington, D.C., and you’ll see all the illegals. Not all of them, but you can maybe see a lot of them start to run away, and you feel like a group fitness instructor. It’s really good.”

Clashes over masked agents

Democrats in Congress and in multiple states, including New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois, have proposed legislation to bar ICE agents from wearing masks.

California **passed** a bill, which takes effect in January. But Trump administration officials have said they would not follow the state law, arguing it cannot compel federal agents to comply.

Tricia McLaughlin, Homeland Security assistant secretary for public affairs, **called** it “despicable and a flagrant attempt to endanger our officers.”

sweeping judgment against the Trump administration's crackdown on pro-Palestinian student protesters, US District Judge William Young in Boston called ICE's justification for masks "disingenuous, squalid and dishonorable."



Federal law enforcement agents watch demonstrators outside of an immigrant processing center on September 27 in Broadview, Illinois. *(Scott Olson/Getty Images)*

"ICE goes masked for a single reason – to terrorize Americans into quiescence," Young wrote in the opinion. "To us, masks are associated with cowardly desperados and the despised Ku Klux Klan. In all our history we have never tolerated an armed masked secret police."

Some lawmakers have also called on DOJ to take a more active role in prosecuting criminals who pretend to be ICE agents. The low count of

COURT REPORTER.

“My fear is that this could get worse before it gets better given the lack of accountability by federal law enforcement officials to hold these individuals accountable,” he said.

German said that other steps by ICE, including clearly identifying individual agents and notifying local police ahead of their operations, would make it easier to swiftly spot impersonators. “All of that could be very helpful,” the former FBI agent said.

In the meantime, cases continue working their way through local courts – including one in Florida where a man in a truck allegedly chased and cornered a minivan occupied by a group of men heading to work on an April morning before dawn.

The suspect got out and told the men he was an ICE officer and asked to see the driver’s ID, the driver told deputies with the Martin County Sheriff’s Office.

“I mean, he scared me,” the driver told a deputy that night, according to bodycam footage obtained by CNN. “Not only did he scare me, he scared my guys because he was, like, really close – he was just following me.”

The suspect, 25-year-old Jose Juan Lopez, admitted to a deputy that he told the men they were going to get deported “because they look like a bunch of people that they ain’t got papers.” Deputies arrested Lopez and charged him with impersonating an officer. Lopez’s attorney did not return a request for comment, and his next trial date is scheduled for early November.

CNN’s Audrey Ash and Dalia Abdelwahab contributed to this report



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