

Justice department civil rights division loses 70% of lawyers under Trump

More than 250 lawyers have left or been reassigned since January as critics fear ‘end of the division as we’ve known it’

More than 250 attorneys in the justice department’s civil rights division have either left, been reassigned, or accepted a deferred resignation offer since January, according to an estimate provided to the Guardian by people familiar with the matter. The significant decrease in personnel underscores how [Donald Trump](#) is gutting the arm of the federal government responsible for enforcing federal civil rights laws.

About 235 attorneys in the division’s civil enforcement sections have accepted deferred resignations or have quit the justice department and roughly another 20 have been reassigned or detailed to do other work within the agency, including handling public records requests and internal agency complaints.

The sections that handle civil enforcement work in the division, the core of the its work, had around 365 attorneys in January, according to a rough estimate provided to the Guardian. About 105 remain after a 28 April deadline to accept a deferred resignation offer.

The roughly 70% reduction in attorneys comes as the [Trump administration has sought to transform](#) the civil rights division, created in 1957 to enforce US federal civil rights laws. Harmeet Dhillon, a Trump ally who took over the division in April, [has made it clear](#) that the focus of the division will be enforcing Trump’s priorities, including hunting for voter fraud (which is exceedingly rare), preventing discrimination against white people in college admissions, and limiting the rights of transgender people.

Current and former department employees emphasized that the departures effectively made it impossible for the division to fulfill the civil rights statutes it has long been ordered to enforce by Congress.

“I don’t think it’s an overstatement to see this as the end of the division as we’ve known it,” said a civil rights division attorney. “Some things will certainly go on and there are some excellent folks staying, but the breadth of the work will surely diminish and will certainly be focused almost exclusively on administration priorities.”

The justice department declined to comment.

The civil rights division is led by a handful of political appointees – known as the “front office” – who set the priorities for the section. But the bulk of the work is done by civil servants who serve as line attorneys and report to their section managers, also civil servants, who then interface with the front office.

But now several of the division’s sections have seen a severe reduction in personnel. The voting, educational opportunity, employment litigation and federal coordination and compliance section all went from having dozens of attorneys in January to fewer than five, according to a person familiar with the matter. [The federal coordination and compliance section](#), whose responsibilities include enforcing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act – prohibiting those who receive federal funds from discriminating on the basis of race, national origin and sex – now has zero permanent attorneys.

“The federal government’s capacity to enforce civil rights protections across voting, education, housing, disability rights, and police accountability have been severely compromised,” said Chiraag Bains, a lawyer who served as a career prosecutor and political appointee in the civil rights division.

Dhillon, a Trump ally who supported his efforts to overturn the 2020 election, has celebrated the reduction in attorneys from the division.

“Now, over 100 attorneys decided that they’d rather not do what their job requires them to do, and I think that’s fine, because we don’t want people in the federal government who feel like it’s their pet project to go persecute police departments based on statistical evidence, or persecute people praying outside abortion facilities instead of doing violence,” she said [in a podcast interview](#) with the conservative personality Glenn Beck on 26 April. “The job here is to enforce the federal civil rights laws, not woke ideology.”

She appeared to further cheer on the departures in a post on X on Tuesday, [saying](#) “personnel is policy”.

Stacey Young, a former civil rights division attorney who started the group [Justice Connection](#), a network of department alumni supporting their former colleagues, called Dhillon’s message “sadistic”.

“They made a concerted effort to purge dedicated career civil servants at the civil rights division. And slamming them for leaving is cruel,” she said. “I’ve never seen DoJ employees treated with the kind of malice from their own government, like we’re seeing now.

“They were involuntarily reassigned. They were told to take the deferred resignation offer. And it was suggested to them that if they didn’t, they could be laid off. So the message was clear: ‘If you’re not on board with what we’re doing, if you’re not on board with the president’s own policy agenda, get out.’”

The departures mean the department is losing expertise in complex areas of civil rights enforcement such as housing discrimination and sexual harassment, said Omar Nouredin, who served as a political appointee in the civil rights division during the Biden administration.

“This isn’t the type of knowledge that you learned in law school. It’s the type of knowledge that you develop over years of practice,” said Nouredin, who now is a senior vice-president for policy and litigation at the watchdog group Common Cause. “When you lose that deep expertise, either you’re not going to identify the right cases to bring, and so you’re going to waste resources in bringing cases that are not strong cases, or you’re going to mess up the cases that you could have won because, again, you don’t have the expertise.”

While the work of career attorneys has long been apolitical, Bains speculated that the department would try to fill the positions with lawyers loyal to the president.

“I fully expect them to hire loyalists into these career roles,” he said. “They are going to politicize the career hiring process and hire people, probably first and foremost, who are loyal to Trump.”

“We’re probably going to see some extremely bad lawyering in the department in these cases, if that’s what they do,” he added.