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# Citizenship at Risk: DOJ Gives Prosecutors Sweeping Power to Strip Naturalized Americans of U.S. Status

**A new DOJ memo authorizes federal attorneys to pursue denaturalization for a wide range of crimes—including fraud, sex offenses, and violent acts—raising fears among 25 million naturalized citizens that their status may no longer be secure.**

Federal / **Published On June 30, 2025 06:00 PM /**

Staff Consortium **June 30, 2025**

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The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has issued a directive that could reshape the lives of millions of naturalized U.S. citizens, signaling a renewed push to strip citizenship from those who commit certain crimes.

A June 11, 2025, memo from the DOJ's Civil Division, signed by Assistant Attorney General Brett A. Shumate, instructs federal attorneys to prioritize denaturalization cases and grants U.S.

attorneys wider discretion to pursue this drastic measure. The policy, which targets the nation's approximately 25 million naturalized citizens—foreign-born individuals who have earned U.S. citizenship—has ignited fierce debate over its legal, ethical, and social implications.

The memo marks denaturalization as one of the Civil Division's top five enforcement priorities, expanding the scope of offenses that could trigger such proceedings. These include national security violations, fraud against individuals or the government (such as Paycheck Protection Program or Medicaid/Medicare fraud), human trafficking, sex offenses, violent crimes, and cases involving misrepresentation during the naturalization process. Unlike prior policies that focused narrowly on fraud or terrorism-related cases, the new guidance allows U.S. attorneys to pursue denaturalization for a broader range of crimes deemed "sufficiently important," including those referred by U.S. Attorney's Offices or tied to ongoing criminal prosecutions.

"This is a significant escalation," said Cassandra Robertson, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University specializing in immigration law. "By using civil litigation for denaturalization, the government sidesteps the higher burden of proof and right to counsel guaranteed in criminal cases, raising serious due process concerns under the 14th Amendment."

The policy's impact was swiftly illustrated by the case of Elliott Duke, a U.K.-born U.S. military veteran whose citizenship was revoked on June 13, 2025, after he admitted to distributing child sexual abuse material before his naturalization.

The DOJ's move builds on earlier efforts to strengthen denaturalization processes. The Obama administration's Operation Janus targeted individuals who obtained citizenship through fraud, while the first Trump administration established a dedicated Denaturalization Section in 2020 to streamline such cases. The June 2025 memo, however, signals a broader and more aggressive approach, reflecting a shift toward stricter immigration enforcement under the current administration.

Supporters of the policy argue it is a necessary tool to protect national security and uphold the integrity of the citizenship process. Hans von Spakovsky, a senior legal fellow at the Heritage Foundation, praised the directive, stating, "This protects the nation from predators, criminals, and terrorists." He noted that denaturalization targets only those who have violated the law, ensuring that citizenship remains a privilege reserved for those who respect it.

Critics, however, warn of a chilling effect on naturalized citizens, who may feel their status is perpetually at risk. "This creates a two-tiered system of citizenship," said Sameera Hafiz, policy director at the Immigrant Legal Resource Center. "Naturalized citizens, many of whom have built lives here for decades, now face the threat of losing everything over a single misstep, while native-born citizens face no such risk for similar offenses."

According to 2023 data, approximately 25 million immigrants are naturalized U.S. citizens, representing a diverse cross-section of the population. The expanded criteria for denaturalization could affect a wide range of individuals, from those convicted of serious crimes to others caught in bureaucratic errors during their naturalization process. Legal experts note that civil denaturalization cases, which require only a "preponderance of evidence" rather than the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard of criminal law, may disproportionately harm vulnerable communities, particularly those without access to robust legal representation.

The memo also raises questions about enforcement consistency. By granting U.S. attorneys broader discretion, the policy could lead to uneven application across jurisdictions, with some districts pursuing denaturalization more aggressively than others. "This kind of discretion can lead

to arbitrary outcomes,” said Robertson. “It risks targeting communities based on political or regional biases.”

Immigrant advocacy groups have vowed to challenge the policy, both in court and through public campaigns. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is exploring legal strategies to contest the memo’s constitutionality, arguing that it undermines equal protection under the law.

Meanwhile, community organizations are mobilizing to educate naturalized citizens about their rights and provide legal resources.

For now, the DOJ’s directive has sent a clear message: naturalized citizenship is not an absolute guarantee.

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