



Exemption 7*

Introduction

Exemption 7 of the Freedom of Information Act protects six distinct categories of law enforcement information from disclosure, specifically: “records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes, but only to the extent that the production of such law enforcement records or information (A) could reasonably be expected to interfere with enforcement proceedings, (B) would deprive a person of a right to a fair trial or an impartial adjudication, (C) could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, (D) could reasonably be expected to disclose the identity of a confidential source, including a State, local, or foreign agency or authority or any private institution which furnished information on a confidential basis, and, in the case of a record or information compiled by a criminal law enforcement authority in the course of a criminal investigation, or by an agency conducting a lawful national security intelligence investigation, information furnished by a confidential source, (E) would disclose techniques and procedures for law enforcement investigations or prosecutions, or would disclose guidelines for law enforcement investigations or prosecutions if such disclosure could reasonably be expected to risk circumvention of the law, or (F) could reasonably be expected to endanger the life or physical safety of any individual.”¹

For any of these six categories of information to be protected, the information must first satisfy the threshold of Exemption 7, which requires that the “records or information [be] compiled for law enforcement purposes.”² Federal agencies must also consider

* This section primarily includes case law, guidance, and statutes up until March 31, 2023. While some legal authorities after this date may be included, for a comprehensive accounting of all recent court decisions, please visit OIP’s Court Decisions webpage (<https://www.justice.gov/oip/court-decisions-overview>). Please also note that this section generally only includes subsequent case history in the citations when it is relevant to the point for which the case is being cited.

¹ [5 U.S.C. § 552\(b\)\(7\) \(2018\)](#).

² *Id.*; see also *FBI v. Abramson*, 456 U.S. 615, 622 (1982) (explaining that requested record must have been compiled for law enforcement purposes in order to assert “Exemption 7 privilege”); *Friends of Animals v. Bernhardt*, 15 F.4th 1254, 1262 (10th Cir. 2021) (explaining

whether it is reasonably foreseeable that disclosure would harm an interest that each subpart seeks to protect.³ (For further discussions of harms under the FOIA, see the Exemption 7 subparts.)

In making their determinations of threshold Exemption 7 applicability, courts have focused on the content and purpose for compiling the requested information.⁴ In the case of law enforcement agencies, courts have accorded the government varying degrees of deference when considering whether their particular records meet the threshold requirement of Exemption 7.⁵ Indeed, in recognizing the propriety of judicial deference,

that in order to invoke Exemption 7(C), “the threshold inquiry under this exemption is whether the agency compiled the withheld information for a law enforcement purpose”); Pub. Emps. for Env’t Resp. v. U.S. Section, Int’l Boundary & Water Comm’n, U.S.-Mex., 740 F.3d 195, 202-03 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (holding that “[t]o fall within Exemption 7, documents must first meet a threshold requirement: that the records were ‘compiled for law enforcement purposes’”) (internal citation omitted); Pratt v. Webster, 673 F.2d 408, 416 (D.C. Cir. 1982) (explaining that federal agencies “must meet the threshold requirements of Exemption 7 before they may withhold requested documents on the basis of any of its subparts”); Living Rivers, Inc. v. U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 272 F. Supp. 2d 1313, 1318-20 (D. Utah 2003) (explaining that before determining if agency “dam inundation” maps were withheld properly pursuant to either Exemption 7(E) or Exemption 7(F), agency first had to demonstrate that Exemption 7’s threshold requirement was met).

³ See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(8)(A)(i); see also [Attorney General Garland’s FOIA Guidelines](#) (March 2022); OIP Guidance: [Applying a Presumption of Openness and the Foreseeable Harm Standard](#) (posted March 13, 2023).

⁴ See Abramson, 456 U.S. at 626 (explaining that “threshold requirement for qualifying under Exemption 7 turns on the purpose for which the document sought to be withheld was prepared”); Clemente v. FBI, 867 F.3d 111, 119 (D.C. Cir. 2017) (noting that “this circuit has long emphasized that the focus is on how and under what circumstances the requested files were compiled” (quoting Jefferson v. DOJ, 284 F.3d 172, 176-77 (D.C. Cir. 2002))); Living Rivers, Inc., 272 F. Supp. 2d at 1319 (finding that records created to protect dams from terrorism satisfy Exemptions 7’s threshold, and reasoning that “the context in which an agency has currently compiled a document . . . determines whether it is ‘compiled for law enforcement purposes’” (quoting John Doe Agency v. John Doe Corp., 493 U.S. 146, 153-54 (1989))); Hogan v. Huff, No. 00-6753, 2002 WL 1359722, at *11 (S.D.N.Y. June 21, 2002) (declaring that “[d]ue to the nature of the origin” of documents used to determine target’s “status as a potential unregistered agent for the Cuban government, the documents in question meet the requirement of being gathered for law enforcement purposes”); cf. Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. USCIS, 30 F.4th 318, 328 (2d Cir. 2022) (explaining that when determining if record was compiled for law enforcement purpose, “material should be considered as a whole rather than broken into parts and scrutinized in isolation”).

⁵ See, e.g., ACLU of N. Cal. v. FBI, 881 F.3d 776, 779 (9th Cir. 2018) (“[L]aw enforcement agencies such as the FBI should be accorded special deference in an Exemption 7 determination.”); Blackwell v. FBI, 646 F.3d 37, 40 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (declaring that FBI’s assertion that records concerning insider trading investigation were compiled for law enforcement purposes “is entitled to deference”); Campbell v. DOJ, 164 F.3d 20, 32 (D.C. Cir.

the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit observed in Center for National Security Studies v. DOJ⁶ that it was acting “in accord with several federal courts” that defer to the executive on decisions of national security.⁷ However, while acknowledging the role of deference, courts have clarified that deference is not “blind acceptance” of the agency’s position.⁸

1998) (stating that FBI specializes in law enforcement and thus its “decision to invoke exemption 7 is entitled to deference”); Binion v. DOJ, 695 F.2d 1189, 1193 (9th Cir. 1983) (“Some circuits, including this, have decided that law enforcement agencies such as the FBI should be accorded special deference in an Exemption 7 determination.”); Gardels v. CIA, 689 F.2d 1100, 1104-05 (D.C. Cir. 1982) (explaining that “test” is not whether court agrees with agency; rather, test is “whether on the whole record the Agency’s judgment objectively survives” because court must “accord” weight to agency determination); Pratt, 673 F.2d at 418 (concluding that “a court may apply a more deferential attitude toward the claims of ‘law enforcement purpose’ made by a criminal law enforcement agency”); Fogg v. IRS, No. 19-03006, 2023 WL 2044327, at *3 (D. Minn. Feb. 16, 2023) (noting that “[a]gencies whose primary function is law enforcement, such as the F.B.I., are entitled to a certain amount of deference”); Advancement Project v. DHS, No. 19-52, 2022 WL 4094061, at *8 (D.D.C. Sept. 7, 2022) (explaining that “[a]n agency whose ‘principal function is law enforcement’ is entitled to deference when it claims that records were compiled for law enforcement purposes”) (internal citation omitted); Espino v. DOJ, 869 F. Supp. 2d 25, 29 (D.D.C. 2012) (stating that claim made by “law enforcement agency, such as the FBI, is accorded greater deference than a similar claim made by a mixed-function agency”); Council on Am.-Islamic Relations v. FBI, 749 F. Supp. 2d 1104, 1117 (S.D. Cal. 2010) (explaining that “[i]n the Ninth Circuit, law enforcement agencies such as the FBI are accorded ‘special deference’ in an Exemption 7 determination” (quoting Binion, 695 F.2d at 1193)); see also ACLU v. BOP, No. 20-2320, 2022 WL 17250300, at *14 (D.D.C. Nov. 28, 2022) (concluding that because BOP is a law enforcement agency it is entitled to deference).

⁶ 331 F.3d 918, 932 (D.C. Cir. 2003).

⁷ Id. at 927-28; see, e.g., L.A. Times v. Dep’t of the Army, 442 F. Supp. 2d 880, 896-99 (C.D. Cal. 2006) (determining that mixed-function agency was providing intelligence information “to aid the Army in fulfilling its mission in Iraq,” which includes security and “maintenance of law and order”; adding that it is “well-established that the judiciary owes some measure of deference to the executive in cases implicating national security”); Edmonds v. FBI, 272 F. Supp. 2d 35, 55 (D.D.C. 2003) (stating that “the Circuit Court recently chronicled in detail the ‘weight of authority counseling deference . . .’ and concluded that the deference that has historically been given to the executive when it invokes FOIA Exemption 1 must be extended to Exemption 7(A) in cases like this one, where national security area issues are at risk” (quoting Ctr. for Nat’l Sec. Stud., 331 F.3d at 927-28)).

⁸ Friedman v. U.S. Secret Serv., 923 F. Supp. 2d 262, 283 (D.D.C. 2013) (stating that “deference does not amount to blind acceptance of the agency’s assertions”); McRae v. DOJ, 869 F. Supp. 2d 151, 164 (D.D.C. 2012) (explaining that it is clear that claims by law enforcement agencies are entitled to deference, but “deference is not blind acceptance” and broad statements are insufficient); Shannahan v. IRS, 680 F. Supp. 2d 1270, 1275 (W.D. Wash. 2010) (noting that although agency’s determination is entitled to deference, “the court nonetheless reviews the determination de novo” to satisfy itself that agency is correct), aff’d,

Records or Information

The threshold requirement for Exemption 7 has been modified by Congress twice since the enactment of the FOIA. The last amendments occurred with the passage of the 1986 FOIA amendments, which broadened the threshold of Exemption 7.⁹ Those amendments eliminated the requirement that the records be “investigatory” files and expanded Exemption 7 protection to any “records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes.”¹⁰ Accordingly, records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes, even if not actually investigatory, satisfy the exemption’s threshold requirement.¹¹

672 F.3d 1142 (9th Cir. 2012); Lardner v. DOJ, 638 F. Supp. 2d 14, 31 (D.D.C. 2009) (stating that deferential standard is not vacuous), aff’d, 398 F. App’x 609 (D.C. Cir. 2010); see also New Orleans Workers’ Ctr. for Radical Just. v. ICE, 373 F. Supp. 3d 16, 57 (D.D.C. 2019) (holding that while criminal law enforcement agency is ordinarily entitled to deference, information presented in Vaughn Index “failed to provide the Court with the information necessary for it to independently evaluate the [agency’s] claim” that all records met threshold).

⁹ See Pub. L. No. 99-570, § 1802, 100 Stat. 3207, 3207-48 (1986); see also Tax Analysts v. IRS, 294 F.3d 71, 79 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (explaining that 1986 FOIA amendments broadened threshold for Exemption 7); North v. Walsh, 881 F.2d 1088, 1098 n.14 (D.C. Cir. 1989) (stating that Congress in 1986 “changed the threshold requirement for withholding information under exemption 7” so that “it now applies more broadly”); Hopkinson v. Shillinger, 866 F.2d 1185, 1222 n.27 (10th Cir. 1989) (“The 1986 amendment[s] broadened the scope of exemption 7’s threshold requirement . . .”), overruled on other grounds by Sawyer v. Smith, 497 U.S. 227 (1990).

¹⁰ Pub. L. No. 99-570, § 1802, 100 Stat. at 3207-48; see also Friends of Animals v. Bernhardt, 15 F.4th 1254, 1268 (10th Cir. 2021) (explaining that “[a]lthough Exemption 7(C) initially only applied to ‘investigatory records’ compiled for law enforcement purposes, later amendments removed that phrase and replaced with the broader ‘records or information’” (quoting Tax Analysts, 294 F.3d at 79)); Jordan v. DOJ, 668 F.3d 1188, 1196-97 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (noting that “Congress modified Exemption 7” to broaden its scope by replacing word “files” with word “records” and deleting word “investigatory”); Abdelfattah v. DHS, 488 F.3d 178, 184 (3d Cir. 2007) (clarifying that “1986 FOIA amendments broadened the applicability of Exemption 7 by expressly removing the requirement that the records be ‘investigatory’”); Tax Analysts, 294 F.3d at 79 (explaining that 1986 FOIA amendments deleted “any requirement” that information be investigatory and emphasizing that “legislative history makes it clear that Congress intended the amended exemption to protect both investigatory and non-investigatory materials, including law enforcement manuals and the like” (citing S. Rep. No. 98-221, at 23 (1983))); Hawkinson v. ICE, 554 F. Supp. 3d 253, 275 (D. Mass. 2021) (noting that “Congress specifically deleted a requirement that the information must be compiled for ‘investigatory’ purposes from exemption 7”).

¹¹ See Attorney General’s 1986 Amendments Memorandum; see also Tax Analysts, 294 F.3d at 79 (“It is clear that, under the amended threshold of Exemption 7, an agency may seek to block the disclosure of internal agency materials relating to guidelines, techniques, sources,

Similarly, with the addition of “information,” Exemption 7 protection is no longer limited to investigatory records, but rather encompasses information compiled for a law enforcement purpose regardless of how the information is maintained.¹² This shifts the focus from the format and compilation purpose of the overall record to individual items of information within the record, “regardless of the overall character of the record in which it happens to be maintained.”¹³

Compiled

As discussed above, to meet the Exemption 7 threshold, federal agencies must demonstrate that the records or information are “compiled for law enforcement purposes.”¹⁴ The Supreme Court has ruled that an item of information originally compiled by an agency for a law enforcement purpose does not lose Exemption 7 protection merely because it is maintained in or recompiled into a non-law enforcement record.¹⁵

and procedures for law enforcement investigations and prosecutions, even when the materials have not been compiled in the course of a specific investigation.”).

¹² See [Attorney General’s 1986 Amendments Memorandum](#).

¹³ *Id.*; see also S. Rep. No. 98-221, at 23 (1983) (explaining that expansion meant “to ensure that sensitive law enforcement information is protected under Exemption 7 regardless of the particular format or record in which [it] is maintained”).

¹⁴ [5 U.S.C. § 552\(b\)\(7\) \(2018\)](#).

¹⁵ *FBI v. Abramson*, 456 U.S. 615, 631-32 (1982) (“We hold that information initially contained in a record made for law enforcement purposes continues to meet the threshold requirements of Exemption 7 where that recorded information is reproduced or summarized in a new document for a non-law-enforcement purpose.”); see also *Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. USCIS*, 30 F.4th 318, 328 (2d Cir. 2022) (holding that “a document initially compiled for law enforcement purposes but later provided to a different, non-law-enforcement agency may still fall within Exemption 7”); *Lesar v. DOJ*, 636 F.2d 472, 487 (D.C. Cir. 1980) (holding that documents compiled from review of previous FBI surveillance meet threshold); *Citizens for Resp. & Ethics in Wash. v. DOJ*, No. 20-0212, 2022 WL 4598537, at *5 (D.D.C. Sept. 30, 2022) (noting that “it is not fatal that DOJ has compiled information it stores elsewhere into spreadsheets to fulfill this FOIA request” as records created for law enforcement purpose retain that status when recompiled into non-law enforcement document); *Jordan v. DOJ*, No. 07-02303, 2009 WL 2913223, at *9 (D. Colo. Sept. 8, 2009) (declaring that “records originally developed for law enforcement purposes and later recompiled into a document not used for law enforcement still qualify for withholding under the series of exemptions covered by § 552(b)(7)” (citing *Abramson*, 456 U.S. at 631-32)), *aff’d*, 668 F.3d 1188 (10th Cir. 2011); *Assassination Archives & Rsch. Ctr. v. CIA*, 903 F. Supp. 131, 132-33 (D.D.C. 1995) (stating that information from criminal investigations recompiled into administrative file to assist FBI in responding to Senate committee hearings “certainly satisfies” threshold requirement).

Furthermore, the Supreme Court in 1989 resolved a conflict in lower court decisions by holding that information not initially obtained or generated for law enforcement purposes may still qualify under Exemption 7 if it is subsequently compiled for a valid law enforcement purpose at any time prior to “when the Government invokes the Exemption.”¹⁶ Rejecting the distinction between documents originally compiled or obtained for law enforcement purposes and those later assembled for such purposes, the Court held that the term “compiled” must be accorded its ordinary meaning – which includes “materials collected and assembled from various sources or other documents” – and found that the plain meaning of the statute contains “no requirement that the compilation be effected at a specific time.”¹⁷

¹⁶ John Doe Agency v. John Doe Corp., 493 U.S. 146, 153 (1989); accord Elec. Priv. Info. Ctr. v. DHS, 777 F.3d 518, 522 (D.C. Cir. 2015) (noting that “Exemption 7 requires that a document be created, gathered, or used by an agency for law enforcement purposes at some time before the agency invokes the exemption”); Lion Raisins Inc. v. USDA, 354 F.3d 1072, 1082 (9th Cir. 2004) (“Information need not have been originally compiled for law enforcement purposes in order to qualify for the ‘law enforcement’ exemption, so long as it was compiled for law enforcement at the time the FOIA request was made.” (quoting John Doe Agency, 493 U.S. at 155)), overruled on other grounds by Animal Legal Def. Fund v. FDA, 836 F.3d 987 (9th Cir. 2016); KTVY-TV v. United States, 919 F.2d 1465, 1469 (10th Cir. 1990) (per curiam) (applying John Doe Agency to hold that information regarding personnel interview conducted before investigation commenced and later recompiled for law enforcement purposes satisfied Exemption 7 threshold); see also Sorin v. DOJ, 758 F. App’x 28, 32 (2d Cir. 2018) (per curiam) (concluding that interviews conducted by private law firm during internal investigation later referenced in prosecutorial memoranda were compiled for law enforcement purpose) (summary order), cert. denied, 139 S. Ct. 2674 (2019); CNN, Inc. v. FBI, Nos. 17-1167, 17-1175, 17-1189, 17-1212, 17-1830, 2018 WL 692921, at *70 (D.D.C. Feb. 2, 2018) (explaining that original intent behind compilation of records immaterial as documents were later “gathered” or “used” in investigation conducted by Special Counsel), remanded on other grounds, 2018 WL 3868760 (D.C. Cir. Aug. 8, 2018).

¹⁷ John Doe Agency, 493 U.S. at 153.

Law Enforcement Purposes

The “law” to be enforced within the meaning of the term “law enforcement purposes” includes both civil¹⁸ and criminal statutes,¹⁹ as well as those statutes

¹⁸ See, e.g., Pub. Emps. for Env’t Resp. v. U.S. Sec’y. Int’l Boundary & Water Comm’n, U.S.-Mex., 740 F.3d 195, 203-04 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (finding that Exemption 7 threshold was met for emergency action plans and inundation maps compiled to enforce statutory duty to establish programs and policies to enhance dam safety for protection of human life and property); Rugiero v. DOJ, 257 F.3d 534, 550 (6th Cir. 2001) (explaining that “this court has adopted a per se rule” that applies not only to criminal enforcement actions but “records compiled for civil enforcement purposes as well”); Rural Hous. All. v. USDA, 498 F.2d 73, 81 & n.46 (D.C. Cir. 1974) (holding that “character of the statute violated would rarely make a material distinction, because the law enforcement purposes . . . include both civil and criminal purposes”); Jordan v. DOJ, No. 07-02303, 2009 WL 2913223, at *9 (D. Colo. Sept. 8, 2009) (“Courts interpret ‘law enforcement purposes’ to include enforcement of both criminal and civil law.”), aff’d, 668 F.3d 1188 (10th Cir. 2011); Faiella v. IRS, No. 05-238, 2006 WL 2040130, at *4 (D.N.H. July 20, 2006) (noting that there is no distinction between civil and criminal enforcement); Env’t Prot. Services v. EPA, 364 F. Supp. 2d 575, 587 (N.D. W. Va. 2005) (reiterating that law enforcement standard includes “civil laws”); Martinez v. EEOC, No. 04-0391, 2004 WL 2359895, at *2 (W.D. Tex. Oct. 19, 2004) (restating that requirement of “law enforcement purpose” is satisfied by both criminal and civil laws); Jud. Watch, Inc. v. Rossotti, No. 01-2672, 2002 WL 31962775, at *6 (D. Md. Dec. 16, 2002) (ruling that letters written by citizens concerned about plaintiff’s compliance with IRS laws were compiled for “civil law enforcement purposes”), aff’d sub nom. Jud. Watch, Inc. v. United States, 84 F. App’x 335 (4th Cir. 2004); Youngblood v. Comm’r, No. 99-9253, 2000 WL 852449, at *10 (C.D. Cal. Mar. 6, 2000) (holding that IRS “investigations or proceedings in the civil or criminal context” satisfy threshold); Mavadia v. Caplinger, No. 95-3542, 1996 WL 592742, at *2 (E.D. La. Oct. 11, 1996) (finding that both civil and criminal investigations of possible violations of immigration laws satisfy threshold); Cappabianca v. Comm’r., U.S. Customs Serv., 847 F. Supp. 1558, 1565 (M.D. Fla. 1994) (stating that records of internal investigation focusing specifically on alleged acts that could result in civil or criminal sanctions were compiled for law enforcement purposes).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Beard v. Espy, No. 94-16748, 1995 WL 792071, at *1 (9th Cir. Dec. 11, 1995) (unpublished disposition) (protecting complaint letter and notes compiled during criminal investigation involving USDA loans); Ortiz v. HHS, 70 F.3d 729, 730 (2d Cir. 1995) (holding that unsigned, unsolicited letter used to launch criminal investigation by SSA meets threshold for law enforcement purposes); Dalal v. DOJ, No. 16-1040, 2022 WL 17092863, at *19 (D.D.C. Nov. 21, 2022) (concluding that law enforcement threshold was met for documents compiled “in connection with ‘the FBI’s criminal investigation into [] crimes involving religious discrimination, use of force and/or violence, acts of terrorism, and domestic terrorism’” (quoting agency declaration)); Stanko v. BOP, 842 F. Supp. 2d 132, 138 (D.D.C. 2012) (noting that criminal investigation into inmate’s threats of filing liens against BOP staff satisfies law enforcement requirement); Johnson v. DOJ, No. 06-1248, 2007 WL 3408458, at *3 (E.D. Wis. Nov. 14, 2007) (noting that statements “taken in preparation for a criminal prosecution” were compiled for law enforcement purposes).

authorizing administrative (i.e., regulatory) proceedings.²⁰ In addition to federal law enforcement, Exemption 7 also has been found to apply to records compiled to enforce state law²¹ and even foreign law.²²

²⁰ See, e.g., Jefferson v. DOJ, 284 F.3d 172, 178 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (reiterating that Exemption 7 “covers investigatory files related to enforcement of all kinds of laws,” including those involving ‘adjudicative proceedings’ such as those OPR conducts if such inquiries are for “violations of law” and not for “oversight of the performance of duties” (quoting Rural Hous. All., 498 F.2d at 81 n.46)); Ctr. for Nat’l Pol’y Rev. on Race & Urban Issues v. Weinberger, 502 F.2d 370, 373 (D.C. Cir. 1974) (holding that administrative determination concerning government benefit eligibility has “salient characteristics of ‘law enforcement’ contemplated” by Exemption 7 threshold requirement); Knight First Amendment Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. DHS, 407 F. Supp. 3d 334, 354 (S.D.N.Y. 2019) (concluding that USCIS properly withheld terrorism-related inadmissibility grounds exemption qualifications pursuant to Exemption 7(E)), rev’d and remanded on other grounds sub nom. Knight First Amendment Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. USCIS, 30 F.4th 318 (2nd Cir 2022); Gray v. U.S. Army Crim. Investigation Command, 742 F. Supp. 2d 68, 73 (D.D.C. 2010) (holding that “administrative disciplinary action” qualifies as law enforcement proceeding); Carter, Fullerton & Hayes v. FTC, 637 F. Supp. 2d 1, 9 (D.D.C. 2009) (explaining that FTC’s “law enforcement investigation of possible anticompetitive effects of state liquor control board regulations falls within its authority under the FTC Act”); Schoenman v. FBI, 573 F. Supp. 2d 119, 146 (D.D.C. 2008) (noting that Exemption 7 threshold applies to “files related to enforcement of all kinds of laws,” including “administrative matters”); Env’t Prot. Services, 364 F. Supp. 2d at 587 (explaining that records compiled in EPA’s administrative proceeding satisfy law enforcement threshold because Exemption 7 applies to “enforcement of civil laws, such as regulations”); Schiller v. INS, 205 F. Supp. 2d 648, 659 (W.D. Tex. 2002) (stating that “law enforcement” for purposes of FOIA includes regulatory proceedings (citing Rugiero, 257 F.3d at 550)); McErlean v. DOJ, No. 97-7831, 1999 WL 791680, at *8 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 30, 1999) (noting that “it is well-settled that documents compiled by the INS in connection with the administrative proceedings authorized by the Immigration and Naturalization Act are documents compiled for ‘law enforcement purposes’”).

²¹ See Hopkinson v. Shillinger, 866 F.2d 1185, 1222 n.27 (10th Cir. 1989) (holding that Exemption 7 applies “to FBI laboratory tests conducted at the request of local law enforcement authorities”), overruled on other grounds by Sawyer v. Smith, 497 U.S. 227 (1990); Shaw v. FBI, 749 F.2d 58, 64 (D.C. Cir. 1984) (explaining that authorized federal investigation into commission of state crime constitutes valid criminal law enforcement investigation); Antonelli v. ATF, No. 04-1180, 2005 WL 3276222, at *4 (D.D.C. Aug. 16, 2005) (declaring that records “compiled during the course of an investigation by a local police department, with ATFE assistance,” satisfy threshold); Palacio v. DOJ, No. 00-1564, 2002 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 2198, at *16 (D.D.C. Feb. 11, 2002) (explaining that records of investigation conducted by city task force were “created or compiled” for law enforcement purposes and thus satisfy threshold), summary affirmance granted, No. 02-5247, 2003 U.S. App. LEXIS 1804 (D.C. Cir. Jan. 31, 2003); Wojtczak v. DOJ, 548 F. Supp. 143, 146-48 (E.D. Pa. 1982) (“This Court must therefore interpret the statute as written and concludes that Exemption 7 applies to all law enforcement records, federal, state, or local, that lie within the possession of the federal government.”).

When determining whether a record was “compiled for law enforcement purposes” under Exemption 7, the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit has distinguished between agencies which have as their principal function the enforcement of criminal law and those agencies which have both law enforcement and administrative functions.²³

Criminal Law Enforcement Agencies

For those agencies whose principal function is criminal law enforcement, the D.C. Circuit has established a “less exacting” standard.²⁴ The D.C. Circuit applies this “less

²² See, e.g., Bevis v. Dep’t of State, 801 F.2d 1386, 1388 (D.C. Cir. 1986) (finding no distinction between foreign and domestic enforcement purposes in language of statute); Sanders v. FBI, No. 20-3672, 2022 WL 888191, at *3 (D.D.C. Mar. 25, 2022) (concluding that “records relating to the FBI’s potential coordination with a foreign law enforcement agency” were “compiled for law enforcement purposes”); Shem-Tov v. DOJ, 531 F. Supp. 3d 102, 111 (D.D.C. 2021) (determining that law enforcement purpose was met when information was provided to federal agency to assist with foreign investigation because agency “needed information from the foreign NCB [National Center Bureau] ‘for the purpose’ of guiding and coordinating the U.S. efforts to obtain the requested information for the foreign NCB”); Miller v. DOJ, 562 F. Supp. 2d 82, 117-18 (D.D.C. 2008) (reiterating that FBI records were compiled for law enforcement purposes because agency assisted foreign police; concluding that records located at Criminal Division’s Office of International Affairs concerning events in foreign country met law enforcement purpose because office is charged with extraditing international fugitives as well as international evidence gathering; finding that DEA files pertaining to its foreign activity were compiled for law enforcement purposes because DEA is authorized to investigate trafficking in controlled substances, dangerous drugs, and precursor chemicals at interstate and international levels); Donovan v. FBI, 579 F. Supp. 1111, 1119-20 (S.D.N.Y. 1983) (stating that FBI investigation undertaken and laboratory tests performed in support of foreign government’s efforts to identify and prosecute perpetrators of crimes satisfy threshold, and reasoning that “refusing to apply Exemption 7 to foreign law enforcement might have the practical effect of interfering with cooperation and information sharing”).

²³ See, e.g., Birch v. USPS, 803 F.2d 1206, 1209 (D.C. Cir. 1986) (“At the onset, it is important to distinguish an agency serving principally the cause of criminal law enforcement from one having [a mixture] of law enforcement and administrative functions.”); Pratt v. Webster, 673 F.2d 408, 416 (D.C. Cir. 1982) (explaining that “[w]hile FOIA makes no distinction on its face between agencies whose principal function is criminal law enforcement and agencies with both law enforcement and administrative functions, it would be unnecessarily wooden to treat both groups identically”); see also Dalal v. DOJ, No. 16-1040, 2022 WL 17092863, at *19 (D.D.C. Nov. 21, 2022) (noting that higher level of scrutiny required for agency with mixed-functions); Advancement Project v. DHS, No. 19-52, 2022 WL 4094061, at *8 (D.D.C. Sept. 7, 2022) (explaining that “[e]valuating whether [an agency] has made [a] showing [of a law enforcement purpose] begins with classifying the agency”); cf. Raher v. BOP, No. 09-526, 2011 WL 2014875, at *8 (D. Or. May 24, 2011) (describing difference between law enforcement agency and mixed-function agency).

²⁴ Pratt, 673 F.2d at 418 (describing “less exacting judicial scrutiny” of criminal law enforcement agency).

exacting” standard by using a “rational nexus” test.²⁵ This two-part threshold test, which was broadened by the 1986 FOIA amendments to include non-investigatory records,²⁶ requires courts to determine: (1) whether the agency’s activities that give rise to the documents sought are related to the enforcement of federal laws or to the maintenance of national security; and (2) whether the nexus between the activities and one of the agency’s law enforcement duties is based on information sufficient to support at least a colorable claim of rationality.²⁷ To demonstrate that a colorable claim of rationality exists, the D.C. Circuit explained in Pratt v. Webster that “an agency must establish that its investigatory activities are realistically based on a legitimate concern that federal laws have been or may be violated or that national security may be breached.”²⁸

The Courts of Appeals for the Third and Ninth Circuits also apply the rational nexus test to law enforcement agencies to determine whether the records at issue meet

²⁵ Id.

²⁶ See, e.g., Tax Analysts v. IRS, 294 F.3d 71, 79 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (noting that “the legislative history makes it clear that Congress intended the amended exemption to protect both investigatory and non-investigatory materials, including law enforcement manuals and the like”); Keys v. DOJ, 830 F.2d 337, 340 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (reaffirming usage of Pratt test in light of 1986 amendments, noting that “Pratt requires simply that the nexus between the agency’s activity (under the old scheme, an ‘investigation’) and its law enforcement duties ‘must be based on information sufficient to support at least ‘a colorable claim’ of its rationality’” (quoting Pratt, 673 F.2d at 421)).

²⁷ See, e.g., Pratt, 673 F.2d at 420-21; see also, e.g., Blackwell v. FBI, 646 F.3d 37, 40 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (reiterating that to “show that the disputed documents were ‘compiled for law enforcement purposes,’ the FBI need only ‘establish a rational nexus between the investigation and one of the agency’s law enforcement duties and a connection between an individual or incident and a possible security risk or violation of federal law’” (quoting Campbell v. DOJ, 164 F.3d 20, 32 (D.C. Cir. 1998))); Ctr. for Nat’l. Sec. Stud. v. DOJ, 331 F.3d 918, 926 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (holding that declarations must establish (1) rational nexus between investigation and one of agency’s law enforcement duties and (2) connection between individual or incident and a possible security risk or violation of federal law).

²⁸ 673 F.2d at 421 (concluding that while FBI’s “COINTELPRO activities included the use of questionable, and at times illegal, methods[,]” “we cannot conclude therefrom that the COINTELPRO activities involved in this case lacked any law enforcement purpose”); see also Quiñon v. FBI, 86 F.3d 1222, 1228-29 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (explaining that agency’s connection between target and asserted law enforcement duty cannot be pretextual or wholly unbelievable); King v. DOJ, 830 F.2d 210, 229-30 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (stating that “agency must establish that its investigatory activities are realistically based on a legitimate concern . . . and have a rational connection to the object of the agency’s investigation” (quoting Pratt, 673 F.2d at 421)); Taylor v. DOJ, 257 F. Supp. 2d 101, 108 (D.D.C. 2003) (reiterating that investigations must be “‘within the agency’s law enforcement authority’” (quoting Whittle v. Moschella, 756 F. Supp. 589, 593 (D.D.C. 1991))).

Exemption 7's threshold.²⁹ Both Circuits have specifically clarified the scope of the rational nexus test to reflect the 1986 FOIA Amendments.³⁰

Other Courts of Appeals, by comparison, specifically the First, Second, and Eighth Circuits, apply an even more deferential standard for criminal law enforcement agencies by declaring that all "investigative" records of criminal law enforcement agencies satisfy the law enforcement purposes threshold of Exemption 7.³¹ However, several decisions of

²⁹ See, e.g., ACLU of N. Cal. v. FBI, 881 F.3d 776, 778 (9th Cir. 2018) (applying "rational nexus" test to FBI records while clarifying that this test does not require law enforcement agencies to connect such records to specific investigations or to enforcement of specific statutes); Abdelfattah v. DHS, 488 F.3d 178, 184-85 (3d Cir. 2007) (noting that agencies are required "to demonstrate that the relationship between its authority to enforce a statute or regulation and the activity giving rise to the requested documents is based upon information sufficient to support at least a colorable claim of the relationship's rationality"); Davin v. DOJ, 60 F.3d 1043, 1056 (3d Cir. 1995) (stating that "simple recitation of statutes, orders and public laws is an insufficient showing of a rational nexus to a legitimate law enforcement concern"); Rosenfeld v. DOJ, 57 F.3d 803, 808 (9th Cir. 1995) (explaining that because FBI has "clear law enforcement mandate," government "need only establish a rational nexus between enforcement of a federal law and the document for which [a law enforcement] exemption is claimed" (quoting Church of Scientology v. U.S. Dep't of Army, 611 F.2d 738, 748 (9th Cir. 1979))); see also Rad v. EOUSA, No. 15-2415, 2017 WL 436260, at *4 (D.N.J. Jan. 31, 2017) (finding that records compiled by FBI as part of securities fraud investigation met rational nexus test); Council on Am.-Islamic Relations v. FBI, 749 F. Supp. 2d 1104, 1117-18 (S.D. Cal. 2010) (reiterating that agencies with clear law enforcement purpose need only establish rational nexus between their law enforcement duties and document as they "need only be held to a minimal showing"); Gordon v. FBI, 388 F. Supp. 2d 1028, 1035 (N.D. Cal. 2005) (stating that FBI "need only establish a rational nexus" (quoting Rosenfeld, 57 F.3d at 808)).

³⁰ See ACLU of N. Cal., 881 F.3d at 779-81 (noting that 1986 FOIA amendments "were intended 'to resolve any doubt'" that Exemption 7 can encompass law enforcement manuals and other non-investigatory records (quoting S. Rep. No. 98-221, at 23 (1983))); Abdelfattah, 488 F.3d at 184-85 (modifying Third Circuit's earlier standard by emphasizing that while 1986 FOIA amendments "broadened the applicability of Exemption 7 by expressly removing the requirement that the records be 'investigatory,' . . . amendments did not affect that portion of the Pratt test which requires a 'nexus'" and thus, use of modified "two-prong 'rational nexus' test" is proper); see also Samahon v. FBI, 40 F. Supp. 3d 498, 522 (E.D. Pa. 2014) (observing that to satisfy Exemption 7 threshold, agency must demonstrate rational nexus between records and "legitimate law enforcement concern"); Finkel v. U.S. Dep't of Lab., No. 05-5525, 2007 WL 1963163, at *10 (D.N.J. June 29, 2007) (explaining that while Third Circuit clarified rational nexus test to reflect 1986 FOIA amendments, agency must still demonstrate that relationship between its authority to enforce statute or regulation and activity giving rise to requested documents is based upon information sufficient to support at least colorable claim of rationality).

³¹ See First Circuit: Curran v. DOJ, 813 F.2d 473, 475 (1st Cir. 1987) (holding that investigatory records of law enforcement agencies are "inherently" compiled for law enforcement purposes); Irons v. Bell, 596 F.2d 468, 474-76 (1st Cir. 1979) (holding that "investigatory records of law enforcement agencies are inherently records compiled for 'law

the District Court for the Southern District of New York seem to go beyond this deferential standard by focusing on whether there is a rational nexus between the records at issue and a law enforcement duty.³²

enforcement purposes’ within the meaning of Exemption 7”); Second Circuit: Halpern v. FBI, 181 F.3d 279, 296 (2d Cir. 1999) (applying rule that when records are compiled in course of law enforcement investigation, purpose of investigation is not subject to review by court); Ferguson v. FBI, 957 F.2d 1059, 1070 (2d Cir. 1992) (finding that there is “no room for [a] district court’s inquiry into whether the FBI’s asserted law enforcement purpose was legitimate”); Williams v. FBI, 730 F.2d 882, 886 (2d Cir. 1984) (holding that “FBI investigatory records are protected from disclosure so long as they fall within one of the six protected subcategories of Exemption 7”); Radar Online LLC v. FBI, No. 17-3956, 2023 WL 6122691, at *9 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 19, 2023) (concluding that records “plainly were ‘compiled for law enforcement purposes’” (citing to Halpern, 181 F.3d at 296)); Peltier v. FBI, No. 03-905S, 2005 WL 735964, at *14 (W.D.N.Y. Mar. 31, 2005) (explaining that “legitimacy of the investigation is immaterial [because] the rule in this Circuit is that the Government need only show that the records were compiled by a law enforcement agency in the course of a criminal investigation”); Eighth Circuit: Kuehnert v. FBI, 620 F.2d 662, 666 (8th Cir. 1980) (discussing and applying standard of First Circuit to determine that FBI need not show law enforcement purpose of particular investigation as precondition to invoking Exemption 7); Guillen v. DHS, No. 20-1713, 2021 WL 4482985, at *8 (D. Minn. Sept. 30, 2021) (finding ICE to be law enforcement agency and thereby “entitled to the benefit of the Eighth Circuit’s rule that FOIA Exemption 7 ‘extends to all investigative files’ of law enforcement agencies without any need to consider ‘the purpose of a particular investigation’” (quoting Kuehnert, 620 F.2d at 666)).

³² See, e.g., Austin Sanctuary Network v. USCIS, No. 20-01686, 2022 WL 4356732, at *28 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 19, 2022) (noting that “courts in this District require ‘an agency [to] establish a rational nexus between the agency’s activity in compiling the documents’” and law enforcement duties (quoting ACLU v. DOJ, 563 F. Supp. 3d 183, 196 (S.D.N.Y. 2021)); ACLU v. DOJ, 563 F. Supp. 3d at 196 (finding that agency “[has] drawn a rational nexus to the activity in compiling the documents [related to the grant programs] and law enforcement”); Freedom of Press Found. v. DOJ, No. 17-9343, 2020 WL 5992282, at *10 (S.D.N.Y. Oct. 9, 2020) (reviewing applicability of FBI’s Exemption (7)(E) withholdings for “‘a rational nexus between the agency’s activity in compiling the documents and ‘its law enforcement duties’” (internal citations omitted); Gonzalez v. USCIS, 475 F. Supp. 3d 334, 350 (S.D.N.Y. 2020) (concluding that documents had “rational nexus with the agencies’ law enforcement activities”); Gonzalez v. USCIS, 475 F. Supp. 3d 334, 350 (S.D.N.Y. 2020) (concluding that ICE established rational nexus between its enforcement activities and records concerning plaintiff’s interaction with agency); Behar v. DHS, 403 F. Supp. 3d 240, 247-48 (S.D.N.Y. 2019) (finding that declaration submitted by Secret Service established rational nexus between records and law enforcement duty of protecting President), rev’d in part on other grounds, 39 F.4th 81 (2d Cir. 2022); Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. DHS, 407 F. Supp. 3d 334, 350-51 (S.D.N.Y. 2019) (explaining that “just because ICE is the Executive Branch’s designated immigration enforcement arm does not mean ICE compiles all its documents for law enforcement purposes,” and finding that “the Court is unaware of the rational nexus ICE attempts to make between a memo regarding social media practices and the perceived threats of immigration”), rev’d & remanded on other grounds sub nom., Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. USCIS, 30 F.4th 318 (2d Cir. 2022); N.Y. Times Co.

The Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit applies an even broader per se standard, clarifying that, in light of the 1986 Amendments, all investigatory and non-investigatory records compiled by an agency whose primary function is law enforcement are compiled for law enforcement purposes.³³ The Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit has seemingly

v. DOJ, 390 F. Supp. 3d 499, 514 (S.D.N.Y. 2019) (finding that agency met burden of establishing rational nexus for records “created in the course of ensuring compliance with [Foreign Agents Registration Act]”); Brennan Ctr. for Just. at N.Y. Univ. Sch. of L. v. DHS, 331 F. Supp. 3d 74, 97 (S.D.N.Y. 2018) (noting that because “an agency must establish a rational nexus between the agency’s activity in compiling the documents and ‘its law enforcement duties[]’ . . . [f]rom this premise, it follows a fortiori that information may hold a rational nexus to law enforcement even though it does not relate to a particular investigation or prosecution” (quoting Keys v. DOJ, 830 F.2d 337, 340 (D.C. Cir. 1987))); N.Y. Times Co. v. DOJ, No. 14-03776, 2016 WL 5946711, at *7 (S.D.N.Y. Aug. 18, 2016) (determining that report on counterterrorism investigation properly withheld as “[i]nformation is compiled for law enforcement purposes where the ‘withheld record has a rational nexus to the agency’s law-enforcement duties, including the prevention of terrorism and unlawful immigration’” (quoting Bishop v. DHS, 45 F. Supp. 3d 380, 387 (S.D.N.Y. 2014))); Human Rights Watch v. BOP, No. 13-7360, 2015 WL 5459713, at *5 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 16, 2015) (rejecting argument that all records compiled by BOP “are per se comp[il]ed for law enforcement purposes” and noting that “[t]o the extent that *Williams* stands for that broad proposition, the Second Circuit has not repeated it in the last thirty years, and the Government cites no case from this district applying it”); see also CLEAR v. U.S. Customs & Border Prot., No. 19-7079, 2022 WL 16636686, at *9 (E.D.N.Y. Nov. 2, 2022) (concluding that records related to Custom and Border Patrol’s Tactical Terrorism Response Teams meet “rational nexus standard”).

³³ Jordan v. DOJ, 668 F.3d 1188, 1197 (10th Cir. 2011) (concluding that “the per se rule is the proper approach,” and adding that “although the development of the per se rule was based, at least in part, on Exemption 7’s former use of the term ‘investigatory records,’ the deletion of the word ‘investigatory’ from the statute in 1986 broadened the scope of the exemption”); see also Friends of Animals v. Bernhardt, 15 F.4th 1254, 1267 (10th Cir. 2021) (noting that per se rule applies to law enforcement agencies “whereby all information compiled by such an agency is inherently compiled for law enforcement purposes”); Living Rivers, Inc. v. U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 272 F. Supp. 2d 1313, 1319 (D. Utah 2003) (noting that “standard for establishing a law enforcement purpose” is “lower [for per se law enforcement agency] than it is for . . . mixed-function agency”).

adopted that approach as well.³⁴ The Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit has so far declined to expressly adopt either test.³⁵

Mixed Function Agencies

By contrast, courts have held that an agency whose functions are “mixed,” encompassing both law enforcement duties and non-law enforcement functions, has a higher standard to satisfy³⁶ in that it has to show that the records at issue involved the

³⁴ See Rugiero v. DOJ, 257 F.3d 534, 550 (6th Cir. 2001) (“This court has adopted a per se rule under which any documents compiled by a law enforcement agency fall within the first part of the section 552(b)(7).”); see also Detroit Free Press, Inc. v. DOJ, 73 F.3d 93, 96 (6th Cir. 1996) (holding that “mug shots” are created for law enforcement purpose, and applying per se rule adopted previously in Sixth Circuit), overruled on other grounds by Detroit Free Press, Inc. v. DOJ, 829 F.3d 478 (6th Cir. 2016); Jones v. FBI, 41 F.3d 238, 245 (6th Cir. 1994) (applying the per se rule and explaining that the “per se rule comports more fully with the policies Congress enacted in FOIA” and “concern about overbroad withholding should . . . be addressed by proper scrutiny of the claimed exemptions”).

³⁵ See Arenberg v. DEA, 849 F.2d 579, 581 (11th Cir. 1988) (declining to adopt either per se or rational nexus test, but suggesting that courts should be “hesitant” to reexamine law enforcement agency’s decision to investigate if there is plausible basis for agency’s decision). But see Van Bilderbeek v. DOJ, No. 08-1931, 2010 WL 1049618, at *4 (M.D. Fla. Mar. 22, 2010) (stating that “[t]o establish a law enforcement purpose, [an agency’s] declarations must establish (1) ‘a rational nexus between the investigation and one of the agency’s law enforcement duties;’ and (2) ‘a connection between an individual or incident and a possible security risk or violation of federal law’” (quoting Ctr. for Nat’l. Sec. Stud. v. DOJ, 331 F.3d 918, 926 (D.C. Cir. 2003))), aff’d, 416 F. App’x 9 (11th Cir. 2011).

³⁶ See, e.g., Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. USCIS, 30 F.4th 318, 328 (2d Cir. 2022) (explaining that “an agency that performs both administrative and law-enforcement functions is ‘subject to an exacting standard when it comes to the threshold requirement of Exemption 7’” (quoting Tax Analysts v. IRS, 294 F.3d 71, 77 (D.C. Cir. 2002))); Tax Analysts, 294 F.3d at 77 (noting that IRS is “mixed-function agency, subject to an exacting standard when it comes to the threshold requirement of Exemption 7”); Pratt v. Webster, 673 F.2d 408, 418 (D.C. Cir. 1982) (noting “more exacting scrutiny of Exemption 7 claims by agencies whose principal function is not law enforcement”); Advancement Project v. DHS, No. 19-52, 2022 WL 4094061, at *8 (D.D.C. Sept. 7, 2022) (explaining that “[a]n agency with ‘mixed law enforcement and administrative functions’ [] must describe the records with enough specificity to satisfy a skeptical court’s scrutiny” (quoting Pub. Emps. for Env’t Resp. v. U.S. Section, Int’l Boundary & Water Comm’n, U.S.-Mex., 740 F.3d 195, 203 (D.C. Cir. 2014))); Raher v. BOP, No. 09-526, 2011 WL 2014875, at *7 (D. Or. May 24, 2011) (stating that agencies having mixed function have higher standard to meet); United Am. Fin. v. Potter, 531 F. Supp. 2d 29, 46 (D.D.C. 2008) (explaining that “this Circuit’s admonition” mandates that courts give thoughtful consideration to whether mixed-function agencies satisfy law enforcement purpose); Moye, O’Brien, O’Rourke, Hogan & Pickert v. Nat’l R.R. Passenger Corp., No. 02-126, 2003 WL 21146674, at *17 (M.D. Fla. May 13, 2003) (reiterating that agency “with mixed law enforcement and non-law enforcement functions requires the Court to consider the purpose of the investigation and to determine whether the information was

enforcement of a statute or regulation within its authority and that the records were compiled for law enforcement purposes.³⁷ However, at times, courts have found that such a law enforcement purpose is apparent from the circumstances surrounding the documents at issue.³⁸

gathered as part of an inquiry about a potential violation of the law, rather than in the course of the agency's administrative function of overseeing compliance with its rules and regulations"), rev'd and remanded on other grounds, 376 F.3d 1270 (11th Cir. 2004).

³⁷ See, e.g., Xanthopoulos v. IRS, 35 F.4th 1135, 1139 (8th Cir. 2022) (reversing and remanding for in camera inspection after finding agency declaration "erroneously characterize[d] the IRS as only a law enforcement agency" and agency manual contained "several sections relating to solely administrative matters"); Bernhardt, 15 F.4th at 1268 (observing that court has "never identified the precise burden required for a mixed-function agency to prove that certain information was compiled for a law enforcement purpose" and ultimately adopting test proposed by agency: "whether '(1) the information was collected by an office that enforces federal law, and (2) the office uses that information to enforce the law'" (quoting agency brief)); Cooper Cameron Corp. v. Dep't of Lab., 280 F.3d 539, 545 (5th Cir. 2002) (finding that because OSHA acted pursuant to its statutory mandate to inspect workplaces, question employees, and cite employers regarding safety and health regulations, records were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Lewis v. IRS, 823 F.2d 375, 379 (9th Cir. 1987) (holding that threshold met when IRS "had a purpose falling within its sphere of enforcement authority in compiling particular documents"); Birch v. USPS, 803 F.2d 1206, 1210-11 (D.C. Cir. 1986) (explaining that threshold was met because "Postal Service has statutory authority to investigate and enforce laws regarding use of mails and other postal matters"); Am. Ctr. for L. & Just. v. DOJ, 334 F. Supp. 3d 13, 18 (D.D.C. 2018) (concluding that agency failed to "make a specific statement" as to law enforcement purpose behind record, nor was one "obvious from the face" of document), appeal dismissed, No. 18-5309, 2019 WL 10892222 (D.C. Cir. Oct. 8, 2019); Ameren Mo. v. EPA, 897 F. Supp. 2d 802, 813 (E.D. Mo. 2012) (concluding that data and calculations from power plant emissions were compiled for law enforcement purpose because agency has "statutory responsibility" under Clean Air Act for "enforcement of those laws and regulations"); Laws' Comm. for C.R. v. U.S. Dep't of the Treasury, No. 07-2590, 2008 WL 4482855, at *11 (N.D. Cal. Sept. 30, 2008) (finding that threshold satisfied when agency's purpose for compiling petitions filed by individuals acknowledging and possibly challenging placement on Specially Designated Nationals list "is in conjunction with the administration of its sanction-based list programs"); Stanley v. U.S. Dep't of the Treasury, No. 06-072, 2007 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 49737, at *8-9 (N.D. Ind. July 9, 2007) (noting that threshold satisfied because "records arose from an investigation related to the enforcement of the tax laws, and the investigation was part and parcel of [agency's] law enforcement duties"); Finkel v. U.S. Dep't of Lab., No. 05-5525, 2007 WL 1963163, at *10 (D.N.J. June 29, 2007) (concluding that records were compiled for law enforcement purpose "because they were collected in the course of OSHA acting pursuant to its statutory authority" to inspect, question, and cite businesses regarding safety and health regulations); L.A. Times v. Dep't of the Army, 442 F. Supp. 2d 880, 898 (C.D. Cal. 2006) (explaining that mixed-function agency must demonstrate purpose falling within its sphere of enforcement authority in compiling records).

³⁸ See Houser v. Church, No. 16-1142, 2020 WL 5518214, at *14 (D.D.C. Sept. 14, 2020) (noting that "[a]lthough the IRS's supporting declarations devote no appreciable attention to

Further, the D.C. Circuit has explained that the standard in “this circuit has long emphasized that the focus is on how and under what circumstances the requested files were compiled” and whether the records relate to anything that can fairly be characterized as an enforcement proceeding, adding that if the activity “is for a possible violation of law, then the inquiry is for law enforcement purposes.”³⁹ Thus, the phrase “law enforcement purpose” has been interpreted broadly by courts in assessing whether records compiled by agencies with mixed functions satisfy Exemption 7’s threshold, especially, for example, when records are used by mixed-function agencies in furtherance of their duties to prevent violence and safeguard the public.⁴⁰

the agency’s law enforcement functions, it is apparent from the plaintiff’s criminal convictions, the language of the plaintiff’s FOIA request, and the nature of responsive records sought by the plaintiff that the IRS was engaged in law enforcement activities” when conducting its investigation); Abdeljabbar v. ATF, 74 F. Supp. 3d 158, 178 (D.D.C. 2014) (explaining that “[i]n light of the substance of the plaintiff’s FOIA request, demanding ‘all investigative material’ regarding his prosecution” agency sufficiently demonstrated rational nexus existed (quoting agency declaration)); McRae v. DOJ, 869 F. Supp. 2d 151, 164 (D.D.C. 2012) (finding law enforcement purpose “apparent from plain language of plaintiff’s FOIA requests and his criminal history” despite agency failing to “affirmatively link [] the relevant records and an investigation of plaintiff’s activities” to its law enforcement authority); Roberts v. FBI, 845 F. Supp. 2d 96, 103 (D.D.C. 2012) (“It is apparent from the nature of plaintiff’s FOIA request that the information he seeks was compiled for law enforcement purposes, namely, the criminal prosecution of plaintiff.”).

³⁹ Jefferson v. DOJ, 284 F.3d 172, 176-77 (D.C. Cir. 2002); see also, e.g., Rural Hous. All. v. USDA, 498 F.2d 73, 82 (D.C. Cir. 1974) (noting that purpose of investigatory files is critical factor in establishing law enforcement threshold); 100REPORTERS v. U.S. Dep’t. of State, 602 F. Supp. 3d 41, 77 (D.D.C. 2022) (noting that “it is not the nature of the agency that controls, but the character of the records withheld” (quoting Elkins v. FAA, 99 F. Supp. 3d 90, 98 (D.D.C. 2015))); Miller v. DOJ, 872 F. Supp. 2d 12, 24-25 (D.D.C. 2012) (explaining that focus is on circumstances of compilation and whether records relate to enforcement proceeding (citing Jefferson, 284 F.3d at 176-77)); Pub. Emps. for Env’t Resp. v. U.S. Sec’y. Int’l Boundary & Water Comm’n, 839 F. Supp. 2d 304, 324 (D.D.C. 2012) (explaining that in “assessing whether records were compiled for law enforcement purposes, the ‘focus is on how and under what circumstances the requested files were compiled, and whether the files sought relate to anything that can fairly be characterized as an enforcement proceeding’” (quoting Jefferson, 284 F.3d at 176-77)), aff’d in pertinent part & rev’d on other grounds, 740 F.3d 195 (D.C. Cir. 2014).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Dalal v. DOJ, No. 16-1040, 2022 WL 17092863, at *19 (D.D.C. Nov. 21, 2022) (concluding that FEMA documents about federal security grants met threshold given that program “provides support for target hardening and other physical enhancements to nonprofit organizations at high risk of terrorist attack’ and fosters ‘coordination and collaboration in emergency preparedness activities among public and private community representatives, as well as state and local government agencies’” (quoting agency filing)); Miller, 872 F. Supp. 2d at 24-25 (finding that State Department records satisfy law enforcement threshold because records were created to facilitate agency’s extradition of fugitive felon wanted in investigation for violent crimes); Pub. Emps. for Env’t Resp., 839 F.

Applying the Threshold

Courts have held that Exemption 7's law enforcement purpose encompasses a wide variety of records and information.⁴¹ As such, records compiled as part of violent crime

Supp. 2d at 311, 324-26 (explaining that mixed-function agency is responsible for "boundary and water treaties" as well as federal programs, policies, and guidelines on dam safety, and finding that emergency action plans and inundation maps were compiled for law enforcement purposes given potential for threats against dams, "harm to public safety," and agency's activities related to dam safety), aff'd in pertinent part & rev'd on other grounds, 740 F.3d 195 (D.C. Cir. 2014); Ruston v. DOJ, No. 06-0224, 2007 WL 809698, at *4 (D.D.C. Mar. 15, 2007) (explaining that psychological evaluations were compiled for law enforcement purposes because prison staff "used those records" to determine inmate's competency to stand trial for threatening federal official); L.A. Times, 442 F. Supp. 2d at 898 (stating that mixed-function component's database falls within cognizable law enforcement mandate because it was compiled to "improve intelligence information that will enhance security" in Iraq); Living Rivers, Inc. v. U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 272 F. Supp. 2d 1313, 1318-20 (D. Utah 2003) (explaining that while standard for establishing law enforcement purpose is high for mixed-function agency, here, inundation maps were directly related to agency's statutory mandate to "maintain law and order and protect persons and property within Reclamation projects and on Reclamation lands," thus, standard was satisfied (quoting 43 U.S.C.A. § 373b(a)(2006))).

⁴¹ See, e.g., ACLU v. BOP, No. 20-2320, 2022 WL 17250300, at *14 (D.D.C. Nov. 28, 2022) (noting that records concerning BOP's COVID-19 response and execution process were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Citizens for Resp. & Ethics in Wash. v. DOJ, No. 20-0212, 2022 WL 4598537, at *5 (D.D.C. Sept. 30, 2022) (rejecting argument that spreadsheets containing information about members of review group investigating possible violations of federal law was created for administrative and not law enforcement purposes); Codrea v. ATF, No. 21-2201, 2022 WL 4182189, at *6 (D.D.C. Sept. 13, 2022) (concluding that records related to handgun incident met threshold as "ATF's sole focus with regard to alleged firearms violations is to determine whether violations of law occurred" (quoting agency brief)); 100REPORTERS v. U.S. Dep't of State, 602 F. Supp. 3d 41, 78-79 (D.D.C. 2022) (explaining that "[a]lthough a novel question, the Court is persuaded that the Department compiles Leahy vetting records for law enforcement purposes" as "the purpose of the Leahy Laws and the State Department's enforcement efforts is to prevent grave violations of international, foreign, and (at times) domestic law, including acts of torture, murder, and rape"); Poitras v. DHS, 303 F. Supp. 3d 136, 154 (D.D.C. 2018) (rejecting plaintiff's claims that FBI investigation concerning potential involvement in "an ambush that resulted in the death of one American soldier and serious injury to several others" was only "conducted for intelligence gathering purposes"); Sharkey v. DOJ, No. 16-2672, 2018 WL 838678, at *7 (N.D. Ohio Feb. 13, 2018) (concluding that investigatory records concerning FBI investigation into insider trading and fraud complaints "clearly were compiled for law enforcement purposes"); Mount v. Nielsen, No. 16-2532, 2018 WL 707485, at *2 (D.D.C. Feb. 5, 2018) (explaining that records related to investigation into loss of agent's credentials were compiled for law enforcement purpose); Shapiro v. DOJ, 239 F. Supp. 3d 100, 113-14 (D.D.C. 2017) (noting that while FBI had not established that all FOIA search slips are compiled for law enforcement purposes, because "absence of a record can reflect 'information' compiled by the agency just

investigations⁴² or drug trafficking investigations,⁴³ including records pertaining to the use of informants,⁴⁴ have been found to meet Exemption 7's threshold. Furthermore,

as much as the existence of a record," release of certain search slips "would risk disclosing information compiled for law enforcement purposes"); Higgins v. DOJ, 919 F. Supp. 2d 131, 146 (D.D.C. 2013) (finding that Secret Service records compiled as part of counterfeit investigation satisfy law enforcement threshold); Vazquez v. DOJ, 887 F. Supp. 2d 114, 117 (D.D.C. 2012) (noting that records maintained in FBI's National Crime Information Center are compiled for law enforcement purposes), aff'd, No. 13-5197, 2013 WL 6818207 (D.C. Cir. 2013); Balderrama v. DHS, No. 04-1617, 2006 WL 889778, at *1, *7-9 (D.D.C. Mar. 30, 2006) (explaining that "Pre-Sentencing Investigation Reports," which are routinely prepared for all convicted felons during prosecution process, are part of law enforcement file and thus satisfy law enforcement requirement); Ray v. FBI, 441 F. Supp. 2d 27, 33-34 (D.D.C. 2006) (determining that documents generated by FBI efforts to prevent distribution of pornography, combat insurance fraud, and battle drug trafficking meet law enforcement threshold); Antonelli v. ATF, No. 04-1180, 2005 WL 3276222, at *4 (D.D.C. Aug. 16, 2005) (stating that records "maintained in the Prisoner Processing and Population Management/Prison Tracking System and in the Warrant Information Network" were compiled for ATF's law enforcement purposes of processing and transporting prisoners, executing arrest warrants, and investigating fugitive matters, and "therefore satisfy . . . [the] threshold requirement").

⁴² See Clemente v. FBI, 867 F.3d 111, 120 (D.C. Cir. 2017) (holding that records regarding Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act ("RICO") organized crime investigation satisfied law enforcement purposes threshold); Roth v. DOJ, 642 F.3d 1161, 1173 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (finding that request for information about "real killers" is confirmation that requester sought information "compiled for law enforcement purposes"); Evans v. BOP, No. 16-2274, 2018 WL 707427, at *4 (D.D.C. Feb. 5, 2018) (concluding that video footage of inmate assault met threshold), aff'd in part, vacated in part, remanded on other grounds, 951 F.3d 578 (D.C. Cir. 2020); Anderson v. BOP, 806 F. Supp. 2d 121, 126-27 (D.D.C. 2011) (concluding that statutory duty to manage federal correctional institutions satisfies threshold where, after incident at prison, "BOP determines that it is necessary to transfer an inmate to prevent future violence"); Holt v. DOJ, 734 F. Supp. 2d 28, 41 (D.D.C. 2010) (holding that records maintained in criminal case file pertaining to prosecution for murder and firearms violations were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Baez v. FBI, 443 F. Supp. 2d 717, 724 (E.D. Pa. 2006) (declaring that "there is no question" that documents pertaining to "investigation of crimes," including murder, were compiled for law enforcement purposes).

⁴³ See, e.g., Roberts v. FBI, 845 F. Supp. 2d 96, 103 (D.D.C. 2012) (stating that it "is apparent from the nature of plaintiff's FOIA request that the information he seeks was compiled for law enforcement purposes, namely, the criminal prosecution of plaintiff" for drug and organized crime offenses); Skinner v. DOJ, 744 F. Supp. 2d 185, 207 (D.D.C. 2010) (declaring that joint investigation into drug production and distribution "easily meets exemption 7's threshold requirement"), overruled on other grounds by Milner v. Dep't of the Navy, 562 U.S. 562 (2011); Ray, 441 F. Supp. 2d at 34 (noting that records related to drug trafficking investigation were compiled for law enforcement purpose).

⁴⁴ See Clemente, 867 F.3d at 120 (concluding that records regarding FBI's monitoring of organized crime informant were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Robinson v. Att'y

Gen. of the U.S., 534 F. Supp. 2d 72, 81 (D.D.C. 2008) (explaining that “it is clear” that records pertaining to “alleged confidential informants and information they provided . . . would have been compiled for law enforcement purposes”); Ray, 441 F. Supp. at 33-34 (stating that law enforcement threshold was met for records concerning investigation in which “plaintiff [] served as a confidential source and cooperating witness in FBI investigations conducted pursuant to federal law”); Hogan v. Huff, No. 00-6753, 2002 WL 1359722, at *11 (S.D.N.Y. June 21, 2002) (explaining that records concerning “information provided by a confidential source” satisfy Exemption 7’s threshold).

records compiled as part of investigations into non-violent illegal activity have been found to satisfy the threshold,⁴⁵ as have records used in efforts to prevent wrongful activity⁴⁶ and records concerning immigration matters.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Sorin v. DOJ, 758 F. App'x 28, 32 (2d Cir. 2018) (per curiam) (agreeing that investigation into scheme to backdate options met threshold) (summary order); Pitts v. DOJ, No. 19-1784, 2021 WL 4551807, at *3 (D.D.C. Oct. 5, 2021) (explaining that prosecution determination made by agency that enforces statutes prohibiting discrimination was made for law enforcement purpose); Butler v. U.S. Dep't of Lab., 316 F. Supp. 3d 330, 336 (D.D.C. 2018) (noting that records regarding OSHA investigation of workplace safety violations in wake of accident were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Concepcion v. U.S. Customs & Border Prot., 907 F. Supp. 2d 133, 140-41 (D.D.C. 2012) (explaining that passenger activity reports compiled as part of agency's mission to secure borders of U.S. by collecting and reviewing travel information satisfies law enforcement threshold), aff'd per curiam, 550 F. App'x 1 (D.C. Cir. 2013); Ameren Mo. v. EPA, 897 F. Supp. 2d 802, 813 (E.D. Mo. 2012) (finding that records compiled as result of "statutory responsibility" to enforce Clean Air Act were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Miller v. DOJ, 872 F. Supp. 2d 12, 25 (D.D.C. 2012) (agreeing that documents created for extradition proceedings were compiled for law enforcement); Gerstein v. CIA, No. 06-4643, 2011 WL 89337, at *2 (N.D. Cal. Jan. 11, 2011) (holding that documents compiled in "OPR investigation into potentially illegal release of information" satisfy law enforcement threshold); Faiella v. IRS, No. 05-238, 2006 WL 2040130, at *4 (D.N.H. July 20, 2006) (observing that "an IRS audit is a law enforcement activity"); Small v. IRS, 820 F. Supp. 163, 166 (D.N.J. 1992) (agreeing that IRS audit guidelines satisfy threshold).

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. USCIS, 30 F.4th 318, 328 (2d Cir. 2022) (explaining that "[w]hile some aspects of visa adjudication might fall outside the common understanding of 'law enforcement' . . . the detection and prevention of terrorism are archetypal law-enforcement purposes"); Friends of Animals v. Bernhardt, 15 F.4th 1254, 1268-69 (10th Cir. 2021) (determining that threshold was met where agency collects information in part to prevent illegal wildlife trade as "[v]erifying compliance with the law and preventing illegal activity is as much a part of law enforcement as is investigating violations of the law"); Sack v. DOD, 823 F.3d 687, 694 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (finding that records concerning government's use of polygraphs for background investigations and for evaluation of credibility of witnesses and criminal defendants satisfies preventative law enforcement purpose (quoting Milner, 562 U.S. at 582-83 (Alito, J., concurring))); Elec. Priv. Info. Ctr. v. DHS, 777 F.3d 518, 522-23 (D.C. Cir. 2015) (holding that protocol for shutdown of wireless networks "was created to prevent crime and keep people safe, which qualif[ies] as [a] law enforcement purpose[]"); Pub. Emps. for Env't Resp. v. U.S. Section, Int'l Boundary & Water Comm'n, U.S.-Mex., 740 F.3d 195, 203-04 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (noting that prevention of terror attacks is valid preventative law enforcement purpose); Fogg v. IRS, No. 19-03006, 2023 WL 2044327, at *4 (D. Minn. Feb. 16, 2023) (concluding that portions of manual meant to prevent criminal activity by "address[ing] how IRS employees identify situations that present a greater likelihood of fraudulent manipulation of sensitive taxpayer information" met threshold); Citizens for Resp. & Ethics in Wash. v. DHS, 525 F. Supp. 3d 181, 189 (D.D.C. 2021) (noting that "[u]ncontroverted evidence in the record shows that Exemption 7 shields the number of Secret Service personnel who accompanied" President on trip because "[t]here can be no doubt . . . that the Secret Service acts with a law enforcement purpose when it protects federal officials from attack, even though no investigation may be ongoing" (quoting

Milner, 562 U.S. at 583 (Alito, J., concurring)); Behar v. DHS, 403 F. Supp. 3d 240, 248 (S.D.N.Y. 2019) (concluding that records compiled by Secret Service as part of protective duties “satisfied” threshold), rev’d in part on other grounds, 39 F.4th 81 (2d Cir. 2022); Allen v. BOP, No. 16-0708, 2019 WL 498804, at *5 (D.D.C. Feb. 8, 2019) (explaining that “BOP engages in a law enforcement function when it takes steps to detect or prevent criminal conduct by an inmate”); ACLU v. DOJ, No. 11-2553, 2012 WL 4660515, at *8, *10 (D.N.J. Oct. 2, 2012) (concluding that maps of New Jersey, “used as a tool by special agents to pinpoint areas of concern, by analysts to establish areas of focus and by the field office to allocate resources” to gather intelligence necessary to prevent crime and terrorist activity by extremist groups, satisfy law enforcement threshold); Banks v. DOJ, 757 F. Supp. 2d 13, 17 (D.D.C. 2010) (stating that BOP’s mission includes protecting society and victims; thus, “records compiled in order to effect notice to crime victims” are compiled for law enforcement purpose); Thomas v. DOJ, No. 04-112, 2006 WL 722141, at *2 (E.D. Tex. Mar. 15, 2006) (reiterating that inmate telephone calls are monitored “to preserve the security of the institution and to protect the public” and that recordings thus satisfy law enforcement requirement), aff’d, 260 F. App’x 677 (5th Cir. 2007); see also Milner, 562 U.S. at 582 (Alito, J., concurring) (explaining that “law enforcement includes not just the investigation and prosecution of offenses that have already been committed, but also proactive steps designed to prevent criminal activity and to maintain security”).

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ., 30 F.4th at 328 (reversing lower court determination that records related to application of Immigration and Nationality Act were not compiled for law enforcement purposes); Advancement Project v. DHS, No. 19-52, 2022 WL 4094061, at *9 (D.D.C. Sept. 7, 2022) (concluding that guidance on visa adjudication was compiled for law enforcement purpose as “‘administrative determination’ of one’s [] eligibility’ possesses the ‘salient characteristics of “law enforcement” contemplated by the wording of exemption 7” (quoting Ctr. for Nat’l Pol’y Rev. on Race & Urban Issues v. Weinberger, 502 F.2d 370, 373 (D.C. Cir. 1974))); Asian Ams. Advancing Just. – Asian L. Caucus v. DHS, No. 21-02844, 2022 WL 3579886, at *3 (N.D. Cal. Aug. 19, 2022) (stating that Memorandum of Understanding and agency declaration “amply establish that there is a ‘rational nexus’ here between the MOU and DHS-ICE’s ‘authorized law enforcement activities’ under the federal immigration laws” (quoting ACLU of N. Cal. v. FBI, 881 F.3d 776, 781 (9th Cir. 2018))); Guillen v. DHS, No. 20-1713, 2021 WL 4482985, at *8 (D. Minn. Sept. 30, 2021) (declaring ICE to be law enforcement agency, but still noting that “[e]ven if the Court did not consider ICE to be a law enforcement agency, the records at issue were compiled for law enforcement purposes because they were created in the course of an ICE investigation related to enforcement of federal immigration laws”); Advancement Project v. DHS, 549 F. Supp. 3d 128, 144 (D.D.C. 2021) (finding that “connection between ICE’s law enforcement duties and records created to manage its efforts to detain and remove noncitizens is self-evident”); Nikaj v. U.S. Dep’t. of State, No. 19-0496, 2019 WL 2602520, at *3 (W.D. Wash. June 25, 2019) (noting that visa application determinations have “salient characteristics of “law enforcement” contemplated” (quoting Ctr. for Nat’l Pol’y Rev. on Race & Urban Issues, 502 F.2d at 371)); Rojas-Vega v. ICE, 302 F. Supp. 3d 300, 309 (D.D.C. 2018) (concluding that records related to enforcement of immigration and naturalization laws met threshold); McErlean v. DOJ, No. 97-7831, 1999 WL 791680, at *8 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 30, 1999) (finding that records “compiled in connection with the INS’s initial investigation [] and the subsequent institution of deportation proceedings” met Exemption 7 threshold); Mavadia v. Caplinger, No. 95-3542, 1996 WL 592742, at *2 (E.D. La. Oct. 11, 1996) (finding that law enforcement

Courts have also recognized that “law enforcement” within the meaning of Exemption 7 can extend beyond the traditional realms of civil and criminal proceedings and into the realms of national security and homeland security-related government activities.⁴⁸ For example, the D.C. Circuit explained that the names of post-9/11 detainees found on documents that traditionally have been public were properly withheld because they were compiled for the law enforcement purpose of pursuing a “violation of federal law as well as a breach of national security.”⁴⁹

purpose behind documents compiled “during an investigation to determine whether plaintiff’s resident status should be terminated or whether he should be criminally prosecuted”).

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Milner v. Dep’t of the Navy, 562 U.S. 562, 582-83 (2011) (Alito, J., concurring) (explaining that steps “to prevent terrorism surely fulfill ‘law enforcement purposes’”); Elec. Priv. Info. Ctr. v. DHS, 777 F.3d 518, 523 (D.C. Cir. 2015) (concluding that protocol for shutdown of cellular networks during critical emergencies such as terror attacks was compiled for law enforcement purpose); Pub. Emps. for Env’t Resp., 740 F.3d at 203-04 (finding that preventing terror attacks constitutes law enforcement purpose, and protecting emergency action plans and dam inundation maps); Ctr. for Nat’l Sec. Stud. v. DOJ, 331 F.3d 918, 926 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (determining that law enforcement threshold met for records compiled in course of investigation into “breach of this nation’s security”); Pratt v. Webster, 673 F.2d 408, 421 (D.C. Cir. 1982) (explaining that “to pass the FOIA Exemption 7 threshold,” agencies must establish that activities are based on concern that “federal laws have been or may be violated or that national security may be breached”); Louise Trauma Ctr. LLC v. DHS, No. 20-01128, 2022 WL 1081097, at *8 (D.D.C. Apr. 11, 2022) (holding that training material for asylum officers met law enforcement threshold as their denial decisions sometimes hinge on national security concerns); Bloche v. DOD, 414 F. Supp. 3d 6, 33 (D.D.C. 2019) (finding that records concerning reevaluation of policies related to interrogation of detainees compiled by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, whose mission “centers on matters of counterterrorism and national security,” met threshold); L.A. Times v. Dep’t of the Army, 442 F. Supp. 2d 880, 898 (C.D. Cal. 2006) (ruling that incident reports from private security contractors in Iraq meet law enforcement threshold because purpose is to improve intelligence information, thus enhancing security); Gordon v. FBI, 388 F. Supp. 2d 1028, 1036 (N.D. Cal. 2005) (extending law enforcement threshold to include memoranda and email messages created by FBI in its handling of various aviation “watch lists” created to “protect the American flying public from terrorists”); Living Rivers, Inc. v. U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 272 F. Supp. 2d 1313, 1319-21 (D. Utah 2003) (explaining that agency has “statutory law enforcement mandate” to maintain law and order and to protect persons and property; its use of “inundation maps” to carry out its mandate satisfies Exemption 7’s threshold); Coastal Delivery Corp. v. U.S. Customs Serv., 272 F. Supp. 2d 958, 960, 963-65 (C.D. Cal. 2003) (finding law enforcement purpose behind charts containing number of examinations performed at seaports to evaluate its border security responsibilities as agency has mandate to protect commerce and borders).

⁴⁹ Ctr. for Nat’l Sec. Stud., 331 F.3d at 929 (“While the name of any individual detainee may appear innocuous or trivial, it could be of great use to al Qaeda in plotting future terrorist attacks or intimidating witnesses in the present investigation.”).

Additionally, courts have found the threshold satisfied for non-investigatory records provided they involve a law enforcement purpose,⁵⁰ such as law enforcement

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Karantsalis v. DOJ, 635 F.3d 497, 502 (11th Cir. 2011) (explaining that “it is clear the booking photographs were compiled for law enforcement purposes” because Marshals Service is “tasked” with receipt, processing, and transportation of prisoners, and photographs “were taken pursuant to this duty”); Citizens for Resp. & Ethics in Wash. v. DOJ, 567 F. Supp. 3d 204, 215-217 (D.D.C. 2021) (noting that “the D.C. Circuit has explained that ‘enforcement of the law fairly includes . . . the detection and punishment of violations of law’” and thereby “[t]he effectuation of the death penalty is unquestionably a punishment for violating the law” (quoting Mittleman v. OPM, 76 F.3d 1240, 1243 (D.C. Cir. 1996))), rev’d and remanded on other grounds, 58 F.4th 1255 (D.C. Cir. 2023); Hawkinson v. ICE, 554 F. Supp. 3d 253, 273-74 (D. Mass. 2021) (determining that records related to enforcement of ruling in immigration case were compiled for law enforcement purpose); Wash. Post Co. v. Special Inspector Gen. for Afg. Reconstruction, No. 18-2622, 2020 WL 5530308, at *11 (D.D.C. Sept. 15, 2020) (concluding that while information-gathering program of law enforcement agency was “not necessarily operating in pursuit of a criminal investigation,” threshold was met as program did “help serve the law enforcement goals of the agency as a whole”); Humane Soc’y Int’l v. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Serv., 394 F. Supp. 3d 67, 75 (D.D.C. 2019) (finding that records held in Law Enforcement Management database had “rational nexus” to agency’s “duty to enforce laws governing the import and export of wildlife products”); Humane Soc’y of the U.S. v. Animal & Plant Health Inspection Serv., 386 F. Supp. 3d 34, 48-49 (D.D.C. 2019) (noting that while agency’s “inspection reports are routinized oversight not necessarily related to an investigation of alleged wrongdoing . . . they may nonetheless qualify as law enforcement records” as “there is a ‘rational nexus’ between the reports and the [agency’s] law enforcement duties”); Sluss v. DOJ, No. 17-00064, 2019 WL 2493447, at *6 (D.D.C. June 14, 2019) (concluding that records concerning international prisoner transfer request met threshold as “determinations concerning an individual offender’s rehabilitation and reintegration into society, which includes weighing public safety. . . . fall within the heartland of law enforcement duties and responsibilities”); Levinthal v. FEC, 219 F. Supp. 3d 1, 7 (D.D.C. 2016) (finding that study assessing IT system vulnerabilities of law enforcement database met threshold as “[t]he Court of Appeals consistently has held that records do not have to be linked to a specific investigation to be properly withheld under Exemption 7(E)”); Griffin v. EOUSA, 774 F. Supp. 2d 322, 326 (D.D.C. 2011) (finding that “Individual Custody/Detention Report” satisfies threshold because it was compiled to assist Marshals Service in carrying out its responsibilities for execution of federal arrest warrants, housing, transportation, and safekeeping of federal prisoners); see also [Attorney General’s 1986 Amendments Memorandum](#).

manuals,⁵¹ but have denied protection when the agency failed to establish a sufficient connection between the records and any law enforcement function.⁵²

⁵¹ See Tax Analysts v. IRS, 294 F.3d 71, 79 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (explaining that “legislative history makes it clear that Congress intended the amended exemption to protect both investigatory and non-investigatory materials, including law enforcement manuals and the like”); see also Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ., 30 F.4th at 329 (holding that Foreign Affairs Manual providing “specific guidance to [State Department] employees on how to detect ties to terrorism” met threshold requirement of Exemption 7); PHE, Inc. v. DOJ, 983 F.2d 248, 249, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1993) (holding that portions of FBI’s Manual of Investigative Operations and Guidelines properly withheld pursuant to Exemption 7(E)); Sussman v. USMS, No. 03-610, 2005 WL 3213912, at *9 (D.D.C. Oct. 13, 2005) (finding that “administrative and operational guidelines and procedures” that are used to investigate threats against federal court employees satisfy law enforcement requirement), motion for summary affirmance granted in pertinent part, 494 F.3d 1106 (D.C. Cir. 2007); Church of Scientology Int’l v. IRS, 845 F. Supp. 714, 723 (C.D. Cal. 1993) (concluding that parts of IRS Law Enforcement Manual were exempt from disclosure pursuant to Exemption 7(E)).

⁵² See, e.g., Bartko v. DOJ, 898 F.3d 51, 66 (D.C. Cir. 2018) (rejecting assertion that internal employee discipline records were compiled for law enforcement purpose as responsibilities of agency lay closer to “‘internal agency monitoring’ end of the spectrum” and remanding to determine if Exemption 6 applies) (alteration in original); Ecological Rts. Found. v. EPA, No. 19-980, 2021 WL 535725, at *30 (D.D.C. Feb. 13, 2021) (explaining that “[a]llowing agencies to claim that withheld records are ‘compiled for law enforcement purpose’ because they implicate nebulous ‘high security concerns,’ without offering any specification of the law enforcement ends to which the records relate or indeed, any evidence that the records were even used by or made available to law enforcement, would deprive Exemption 7’s threshold inquiry of all meaning”) (alteration in original), opinion vacated in part on reconsideration, 541 F. Supp. 3d 34 (D.D.C. 2021); Am. Ctr. for L. & Just. v. DOJ, 334 F. Supp. 3d 13, 19 (D.D.C. 2018) (finding that FBI failed to connect email discussing scheduling of meeting with law enforcement purpose), appeal dismissed, No. 18-5309, 2019 WL 10892222 (D.C. Cir. Oct. 8, 2019); Pubian v. EOUSA, No. 18-172, 2018 WL 5923917, at *4 (D.D.C. Nov. 13, 2018) (concluding that “it strains credulity to suggest that the information compiled about grand-jury dates over a decade after it was impaneled and discharged created in response to FOIA request” was compiled for law enforcement purpose); ACLU v. Dep’t of Educ., 320 F. Supp. 3d 270, 276-77 (D. Mass. 2018) (rejecting argument that attempt to collect student loan debt is law enforcement activity as default borrower cannot be penalized criminally or civilly); Henderson v. DOJ, 157 F. Supp. 3d 42, 49-50 (D.D.C. 2016) (denying Exemption 7 protection to stenographic expense records related to criminal case because connection of such records to any law enforcement purpose “is highly attenuated”); Kubik v. BOP, No. 10-6078, 2011 WL 2619538, at *10 (D. Or. July 1, 2011) (explaining that because BOP failed to connect records of inmate’s “transfer, his behavior issues and the riot” to violations of law, these documents were not created for law enforcement purpose); Raher v. BOP, No. 09-526, 2011 WL 2014875, at *9 (D. Or. May 24, 2011) (finding that although disclosure of information pertaining to security electronics, security inspection system, and staffing vulnerabilities raises security concerns with respect to BOP’s custodial functions, agency had not explained how withheld documents pertain to law enforcement functions); Maydak v. DOJ, 254 F. Supp. 2d 23, 38 (D.D.C. 2003) (finding that BOP failed to satisfy law enforcement threshold for

Furthermore, while courts grant agencies wide latitude in defining their law enforcement purposes, they have denied protection under Exemption 7 when the agency did not adequately demonstrate that the records were compiled as part of the agencies' stated law enforcement purposes and duties;⁵³ the records existed independently of the

records in its Inmate Central Records System, which it described as concerning day-to-day activities and events occurring during inmates' confinement).

⁵³ See, e.g., Pratt, 673 F.2d at 420-21 (reiterating that Exemption 7 is not intended to "include investigatory activities wholly unrelated to law enforcement agencies' legislated functions of preventing risks to the national security and violations of the criminal laws and of apprehending those who do violate the laws"); Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ., 407 F. Supp. 3d at 351-52 (determining that threshold not met for memorandum about "targeted 'social media platforms' and 'possible security risks'" as agency's "descriptions suggest the withheld information was compiled less for law enforcement purposes and more to facilitate the 'generalized snooping of individuals' lives'" (quoting Long v. ICE, 149 F. Supp. 3d 39, 50 (D.D.C. 2015))), rev'd & remanded on other grounds sub nom., Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. USCIS, 30 F.4th 318 (2d Cir. 2022); Am. Ctr. for L. & Just., 334 F. Supp. 3d at 18 (concluding that agency failed to meet "burden of making a connection between the email and an enforcement proceeding"), appeal dismissed, No. 18-5309, 2019 WL 10892222 (D.C. Cir. Oct. 8, 2019); Am. Immigr. Council v. U.S. Customs & Border Patrol, 590 F. Supp. 3d 306, 339 (D.D.C. 2022) (concluding that law enforcement purpose of email containing names of CBP officers participating in credible fear assessment program "remains unclear"); N.Y. Legal Assistance Grp. v. Dep't of Educ., No. 15-3818, 2017 WL 2973976, at *9 (S.D.N.Y. July 12, 2017) (determining that records concerning agency efforts to prevent violations of terms of student loan contracts were not compiled for law enforcement purposes because student loan defaults constitute breach of contract rather than violation of law); Rosenfeld v. DOJ, No. 07-3240, 2012 WL 710186, at *3-4 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 5, 2012) (finding that agency's assertion that document generated in 1975 shows subject's connection to Communist Party is "wholly unbelievable" and "does not constitute a sufficient law enforcement purpose"); Grandison v. DOJ, 600 F. Supp. 2d 103, 113 (D.D.C. 2009) (rejecting agency's attempt to tie deposition transcripts and interrogatories pertaining to current Federal Torts Claim Act lawsuit to underlying murder conviction; stating that information pertaining to tort claim was not "compiled for law enforcement purposes"); Cawthon v. DOJ, No. 05-0567, 2006 WL 581250, at *4 (D.D.C. Mar. 9, 2006) (explaining that malpractice records for two BOP doctors "appear to come from personnel records" and therefore do not meet Exemption 7's law enforcement threshold); Leadership Conf. on C.R. v. Gonzales, 404 F. Supp. 2d 246, 257 (D.D.C. 2005) (finding "no evidence that the paralegal names and work numbers" appearing in communications related to monitoring federal elections were "compiled for law enforcement purposes"); Maydak v. DOJ, 362 F. Supp. 2d 316, 321-23 (D.D.C. 2005) (concluding that psychological test maintained in BOP files, documents pertaining to accidents and injuries sustained in recreation department at prison, law library logs, and list of staff names and titles of prison employees were not compiled for law enforcement purposes); Phillips v. ICE, 385 F. Supp. 2d 296, 306 (S.D.N.Y. 2005) (finding that law enforcement requirement not met for report involving immigration status of two former military officials from El Salvador accused of atrocities because report "was prepared for Congress").

stated law enforcement purpose;⁵⁴ the connection to law enforcement was pretextual;⁵⁵ or the associated investigation was conducted for an improper purpose.⁵⁶ Accordingly, courts require some detail as to the law enforcement purpose behind the compilation of

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Lardner v. DOJ, No. 09-5337, 398 F. App'x 609, 611 (D.C. Cir. 2010) (discussing that there is “a distinction between the list of the names of persons denied a pardon or commutation of sentence” and records compiled as part of Office of the Pardon Attorney’s investigation, and finding that list of names “exists independently” and is “unrelated to any law enforcement investigation”); Shapiro v. DOJ, 153 F. Supp. 3d 253, 272 (D.D.C. 2016) (rejecting FBI’s reliance on Exemption 7 threshold to encompass entirety of large number of FOIA request search slips because while search slips often contain law enforcement information, they are compiled for FOIA request processing purposes rather than for law enforcement purposes, and thereby do not always contain law enforcement information).

⁵⁵ See ACLU of N. Cal. v. FBI, 881 F.3d 776, 779 (9th Cir. 2018) (observing that Ninth Circuit precedents “rest on the premise” that Exemption 7 cannot be used as pretext to protect records unrelated to agency’s law enforcement duties); Rosenfeld v. DOJ, 57 F.3d 803, 808-09 (9th Cir. 1995) (concluding that there was no law enforcement purpose when “documents all support a conclusion that . . . any asserted purpose for compiling these documents was pretextual”); Samahon, 40 F. Supp. 3d at 524-25 (noting that Third Circuit requires nexus between records and “legitimate law enforcement concern” to differentiate between investigations predicated upon legitimate security concerns or suspected criminal conduct and investigations conducted for pretextual purposes).

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Shaw, 749 F.2d at 63 (stating that “mere existence of a plausible criminal investigatory reason to investigate would not protect the files of an inquiry explicitly conducted . . . for purposes of harassment”); Weissman v. CIA, 565 F.2d 692, 696 (D.C. Cir. 1977) (ruling that CIA’s actions were unauthorized; thus, “law-enforcement exemption is accordingly unavailable”); Samahon v. FBI, 40 F. Supp. 3d 498, 524-25 (E.D. Pa. 2014) (rejecting Exemption 7 protection for records regarding FBI investigation of private citizen because investigation was conducted as personal favor to President Johnson rather than out of legitimate concern for President’s safety); Rosenfeld v. DOJ, No. 07-3240, 2010 WL 3448517, at *10 (N.D. Cal. Sept. 1, 2010) (explaining that while investigation of specific individuals who advocated violent overthrow of government might be conducted for legitimate law enforcement purpose, investigation of mere association with Communist Party is not for legitimate law enforcement purpose); Rosenfeld v. DOJ, 761 F. Supp. 1440, 1445-48 (N.D. Cal. 1991) (explaining that FBI investigation of Free Speech Movement “was begun in good faith and with a plausible basis,” but ceased to have “colorable claim [of rationality] as the evidence accumulated” and became “a case of routine monitoring . . . for intelligence purposes”; holding that date at which FBI’s initial law enforcement-related suspicions were “demonstrably unfounded” was “cut-off point for the scope of a law enforcement purpose” under Exemption 7), aff’d in pertinent part, rev’d in part & remanded, 57 F.3d 803 (9th Cir. 1995); cf. Clemente v. FBI, 867 F.3d 111, 120 (D.C. Cir. 2017) (observing that even if government records were provided to informant to allow him to engage in illegal activities, those records could still have been compiled for law enforcement purposes); Carter, Fullerton & Hayes v. FTC, 637 F. Supp. 2d 1, 9 (D.D.C. 2009) (stating that contrary to assertion that investigation was not within agency’s authority, FTC has authority to investigate “anticompetitive effects of state liquor control board regulations”).

the requested records.⁵⁷ Additionally, if an agency invokes a “Glomar” response in connection with Exemption 7, in which it neither confirms nor denies the existence of responsive records, courts have held that it must still demonstrate that the requested records would meet the Exemption 7 threshold.⁵⁸ Finally, there is no requirement that the matter culminate in actual administrative, civil, or criminal enforcement.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Am. Ctr. for L. & Just., 334 F. Supp. 3d at 18-19 (finding insufficient broad statements not connecting records with specific enforcement proceedings); Parker v. EOUSA, 852 F. Supp. 2d 1, 11 (D.D.C. 2012) (explaining that, to satisfy threshold, agency “must actually provide evidence” that records were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Raher, 2011 WL 2014875, at *10 (stating that agency “has submitted nothing to explain why withheld documents pertain to law enforcement functions”); Schoenman v. FBI, 573 F. Supp. 2d 119, 162 (D.D.C. 2008) (noting that mere statement that agency document “inherently relates to a law enforcement purpose will not suffice”); Miller v. DOJ, 562 F. Supp. 2d 82, 118 (D.D.C. 2008) (finding that agency “neither explains adequately the manner and circumstances under which the telegrams were compiled nor links these telegrams to any enforcement proceeding”); United Am. Fin. v. Potter, 531 F. Supp. 2d 29, 45-46 (D.D.C. 2008) (describing agency’s explanation as “fall[ing] far short of establishing” that records were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Antonelli v. ATF, No. 04-1180, 2005 WL 3276222, at *1 (D.D.C. Aug. 16, 2005) (explaining that although records pertained to bombing of residence, initially BOP proffered no evidence from which the Court could find for them on threshold requirement; however, subsequent BOP submissions established that record was compiled as part of investigation into prisoner’s escape plans, satisfying law enforcement threshold).

⁵⁸ See Project for Priv. & Surveillance Accountability, Inc. v. DOJ, No. 20-3657, 2022 WL 4365745, at *12-13 (D.D.C. Sept. 19, 2022) (concluding that agency declarations established rational nexus between agency “law enforcement duties and any investigation that may be reflected in responsive records in the agency’s possession” while noting that “in the context of a Glomar response by an agency specializing in law enforcement and entitled to deference, the requirement that the agency show that the records, of which it cannot confirm the existence, concern a particular individual or incident does not apply”); Sanders v. FBI, No. 20-3672, 2022 WL 888191, at *3 (D.D.C. Mar. 25, 2022) (stating that “[t]o justify a Glomar response, the agency must supply the court with a detailed affidavit that explains why it cannot provide a substantive response pursuant to a FOIA exemption” and noting that “[t]o determine whether a Glomar response ‘fits a FOIA exemption, courts apply the general exemption review standards established in non-Glomar cases’” (quoting Wolf v. CIA, 473 F.3d 370, 374 (D.C. Cir. 2007))); Lindsey v. FBI, 490 F. Supp. 3d 1, 17 (D.D.C. 2020) (giving deference to FBI when considering “whether any records, should such records exist, would have been compiled for a law enforcement purpose”).

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Jordan v. DOJ, 668 F.3d 1188, 1193 (10th Cir. 2011) (explaining that FOIA “statute refers to ‘law enforcement purposes,’ not ‘law enforcement proceedings,’ and it does not mention anything about enforcing a sanction” except Exemption 7(A) “which describes one of the six possible harms to law enforcement purposes, [thus n]o ‘enforcement proceeding’ is necessary ‘to satisfy the law enforcement purpose criterion’” (quoting Pratt, 673 F.2d at 421)); Ortiz v. HHS, 70 F.3d 729, 730 (2d Cir. 1995) (holding that unsigned, unsolicited letter used to launch criminal investigation by SSA meets threshold for law enforcement purposes, although no charges filed against target); Ctr. for Nat’l Pol’y Rev. on Race & Urban Issues v. Weinberger, 502 F.2d 370, 373 (D.C. Cir. 1974) (explaining that likelihood of “adjudication is

Personnel Actions and Law Enforcement Purpose

“Background security investigations by governmental units which have authority to conduct such functions”⁶⁰ have been held by the courts to meet the threshold test under Exemption 7.⁶¹ Further, personnel investigations of government employees have also been found to have been compiled for law enforcement purposes if they focus on “specific and potentially unlawful activity by particular employees” of a civil or criminal nature.⁶²

not the decisive determinant of whether a file has been compiled for law enforcement purposes”); Nat'l Whistleblower Ctr. v. HHS, 849 F. Supp. 2d 13, 27-28 (D.D.C. 2012) (“It is of no moment that both investigations resulted in findings of no misconduct and that no sanctions were ultimately imposed by OIG.”); Berger v. IRS, 487 F. Supp. 2d 482, 489, 500 (D.N.J. 2007) (finding that records compiled during IRS civil and criminal tax investigations satisfy threshold even though “[n]o charges were ever brought against Plaintiff as a result of these investigations”), aff'd on other grounds, 288 F. App'x 829 (3d Cir. 2008).

⁶⁰ S. Rep. No. 93-1200, at 12 (1974), as reprinted in 1974 U.S.C.C.A.N. 6267, 6291.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Sack v. DOD, 823 F.3d 687, 694 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (stating that records concerning government's use of polygraphs for background investigations are compiled for law enforcement purposes); Morley v. CIA, 508 F.3d 1108, 1128-29 (D.C. Cir. 2007) (determining that “[b]ackground investigations conducted to assess an applicant's qualification . . . inherently relate to law enforcement”); Mittleman v. OPM, 76 F.3d 1240, 1241-43 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (finding that OPM background investigation satisfied threshold); Rosenfeld v. DOJ, 57 F.3d 803, 809 (9th Cir. 1995) (declaring that “FBI government appointment investigations” satisfy threshold); Wolk v. United States, No. 04-832, 2005 WL 465382, at *4 (E.D. Pa. Feb. 28, 2005) (concluding that “enforcement” encompasses conducting a “security background check” by reasoning that “enforcement of the law fairly includes not merely the detection and punishment of violations of law but their prevention” (quoting Miller v. United States, 630 F. Supp. 347, 349 (E.D.N.Y. 1986))).

⁶² Stern v. FBI, 737 F.2d 84, 89 (D.C. Cir. 1984); see, e.g., Perlman v. DOJ, 312 F.3d 100, 105 (2d Cir. 2002) (finding that investigation into allegations of preferential treatment and undue access and influence in INS Investor Visa Program satisfied law enforcement threshold because inquiry focused on possible violations of law and whether particular employee committed acts that could subject that employee to criminal or civil penalties), cert. granted, vacated, and remanded on other grounds, 541 U.S. 970 (2004), aff'd, 380 F.3d 110 (2nd Cir. 2004); Kimberlin v. DOJ, 139 F.3d 944, 947-48 (D.C. Cir. 1998) (concluding that investigation “to discover” whether employee had violated “any law” satisfied threshold when it “focused upon a specific, potentially illegal release of information by a particular, identified official”); Strang v. U.S. Arms Control & Disarmament Agency, 864 F.2d 859, 862 (D.C. Cir. 1989) (characterizing agency investigation into particular employee's violation of national security laws as law enforcement); Buzzfeed Inc. v. DOJ, No. 21-7533, 2022 WL 2223124, at *3 (S.D.N.Y. June 20, 2022) (finding that threshold met for OIG report about investigation into alleged misconduct that concerned potential sexual harassment and misuse of personnel resources); Neese v. DOJ, No. 19-01098, 2022 WL 898827, at *10 (D.D.C. Mar. 28, 2022) (noting that despite lack of information as to “whether the alleged ethical violations could result in civil sanctions” one “crucial detail” demonstrates OPR was not merely monitoring –

Indeed, courts have stressed repeatedly the difference between the two general categories of files on employees that “government agencies compile: (1) files in connection with government oversight of the performance of duties by agency employees, and (2) files in connection with investigations that focus directly on specific alleged illegal acts which could result in civil or criminal sanction.”⁶³ Thus, the law enforcement

employee resigned during investigation, therefore “[t]he sanctions to be imposed, if any, could only be external”); Sheppard v. DOJ, No. 17-1037, 2021 WL 4304217, at *6 (W.D. Mo. Sept. 21, 2021) (concluding that investigation into prosecutorial or investigator misconduct had law enforcement purpose “[b]ecause the investigation, and the associated records, were compiled in the furtherance of the enforcement of federal law, and because there is a nexus between the investigation and DOJ’s law enforcement mandate”); Savage v. Dep’t of the Navy, No. 19-2983, 2021 WL 4078669, at *10 (D.D.C. Sept. 8, 2021) (“Investigations into racial discrimination – especially when conducted in response to specific complaints by a particular individual and identifying particular perpetrators – have a law enforcement purpose.”); Mueller v. Dep’t of the Air Force, 63 F. Supp. 2d 738, 742 (E.D. Va. 1999) (holding that investigation into prosecutorial misconduct was for law enforcement purposes because “agency investigation of its own employees is for law enforcement purposes . . . if it focuses directly on specifically alleged illegal acts, illegal acts of a particular identified official, acts which could, if proved, result in civil or criminal sanctions” (quoting Stern, 737 F.2d at 89)); Hayes v. U.S. Dep’t of Lab., No. 96-1149, 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 14120, at *11-12 (S.D. Ala. June 19, 1998) (magistrate’s recommendation) (explaining that records of “internal agency investigations are considered to be compiled for ‘law enforcement purposes’ when the investigations focus on specifically alleged acts, which, if proved, could amount to violations of civil or criminal law”), adopted, 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 14154 (S.D. Ala. Aug. 10, 1998).

⁶³ Jefferson v. DOJ, 284 F.3d 172, 176-77 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (citing Rural Hous. All. v. USDA, 498 F.2d 73, 81 (D.C. Cir. 1974)); see, e.g., Bartko v. DOJ, 898 F.3d 51, 66 (D.C. Cir. 2018) (noting that “absence of an evidentiary record produced by OPR to support a finding that all OPR records regarding [an] AUSA are law enforcement records” and finding threshold not met when no showing that investigations could result in civil or criminal penalties (quoting Jefferson, 284 F.3d at 179)); Patterson v. IRS, 56 F.3d 832, 837-38 (7th Cir. 1995) (declaring that agency must “distinguish between internal investigations conducted for law enforcement purposes and general agency monitoring” (quoting Stern, 737 F.2d at 89)); Stern, 737 F.2d at 89 (dictum) (repeating that “it is necessary to distinguish between those investigations conducted ‘for a law enforcement purpose’ and those in which an agency, acting as the employer, simply supervises its own employees”); Rural Hous. All., 498 F.2d at 81 (distinguishing between agency oversight of performance of employees and investigations focusing on specific illegal acts of employees); Nat’l Whistleblower Ctr. v. HHS, 849 F. Supp. 2d 13, 27-28 (D.D.C. 2012) (explaining that because records at issue “were compiled to investigate allegations that specific individuals at FDA had engaged in specific acts that could constitute violations of criminal and civil laws,” rather than “a case involving personnel files maintained in the ordinary course of monitoring employees’ performance,” that records were compiled for law enforcement purposes); MacLean v. U.S. Dep’t of the Army, No. 05-1519, 2007 WL 935604, at *8 (S.D. Cal. Mar. 6, 2007) (explaining critical distinction between investigation of particular employee for particular violation of law and customary surveillance of performance of duties); Fine v. DOE, 823 F. Supp. 888, 907-08 (D.N.M. 1993) (explaining

threshold of Exemption 7 has been found to be satisfied when agencies demonstrate that they are focusing on an alleged illegal act,⁶⁴ rather than merely supervising their

difference between investigation of specific allegations that could result in sanctions and routine oversight).

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Clemente v. FBI, 867 F.3d 111, 120 (D.C. Cir. 2017) (rejecting claim that FBI's observation of informant activities constituted mere monitoring of employee where FBI was using informant to investigate alleged illegal acts by criminal enterprise); Jefferson v. DOJ, 168 F. App'x 448, 449-50 (D.C. Cir. 2005) (affirming district court's ruling that law enforcement threshold is met by investigation concerning DOJ attorney accused of failing to comply with court order); Wonders v. McHugh, No. 11-1130, 2012 WL 3962750, at *5 (D.D.C. Sept. 11, 2012) (noting that investigation into ethical violation of misrepresentation "was not limited to determining whether there was a violation of an internal agency policy or regulation" but rather involved investigation that could have resulted in civil sanctions); Nat'l Whistleblower Ctr., 849 F. Supp. 2d at 27-28 (stating that records compiled to investigate allegations that specific employees wrongfully disclosed information satisfied law enforcement threshold); McCann v. HHS, 828 F. Supp. 2d 317, 323-24 (D.D.C. 2011) (stating that law enforcement requirement is met by investigation of health care provider for HIPAA violations); Gerstein v. CIA, No. 06-4643, 2011 WL 89337, at *2 (N.D. Cal. Jan. 11, 2011) (finding that records compiled in OPR investigation into release of information by certain agency officials were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Williams v. Comm'r of Internal Revenue, No. 08-522, 2010 WL 5058505, at *2 (M.D. La. Dec. 3, 2010) (explaining that records compiled in response to allegations of misconduct regarding enforcement of tax laws by IRS employees are part of agency's law enforcement duties and are thus compiled for law enforcement purposes), aff'd, 449 F. App'x 327 (5th Cir. 2011); Stanley v. Dep't of Treasury, No. 06-072, 2007 WL 2025212, at *1, *3 (N.D. Ind. July 9, 2007) (stating that "records relating to the investigation of a complaint" against IRS employee for "fraud and intimidation" were compiled for law enforcement purposes because such records "arose from an investigation related to the enforcement of the tax laws, and [such] investigation[s are] part and parcel of [] law enforcement duties"); MacLean, 2007 WL 935604, at *8 (determining that "evidence is sufficient to show that the requested investigation-related documents did not arise from an 'internal audit' or 'customary surveillance' but instead arose from 'specifically alleged illegal acts'"; thus, information was compiled for law enforcement purposes (citing Kimberlin, 139 F.3d at 947-48)); O'Keefe v. DOD, 463 F. Supp. 2d 317, 320, 324 (E.D.N.Y. 2006) (finding that report detailing investigation of complaint alleging misconduct by commanding officers on multiple occasions was compiled for law enforcement purposes); Sakamoto v. EPA, 443 F. Supp. 2d 1182, 1194-96 (N.D. Cal. 2006) (noting that records compiled as part of internal investigation into complaints of discrimination made against specific agency employees were compiled for law enforcement purposes); Herrick's Customs & Int'l Trade Newsl. v. U.S. Customs & Border Prot., No. 04-00377, 2006 WL 1826185, at *6 (D.D.C. June 30, 2006) (discussing law enforcement threshold for portion of government manual that concerns "employee oversight and internal affairs," and explaining that information at issue satisfies standard because it pertains to "tampering with and theft of evidence and illegal contraband," actions that "violate[] the law"); Trentadue v. Integrity Comm., No. 03-339, 2006 WL 1184636, at *5 (D. Utah May 2, 2006) (finding that threshold met for documents prepared during investigation into allegations of misconduct by federal employees surrounding death of requester's brother), rev'd & remanded on other grounds, 501 F.3d 1215 (10th Cir. 2007); Dohse v. Potter, No. 04-355, 2006 WL 379901, at *1, *7 (D.

employees for performance of their assigned duties, which does not satisfy Exemption 7's threshold.⁶⁵

To meet the threshold, agencies must provide the court with sufficient detail as to the law enforcement purpose of their actions that gave rise to the documents.⁶⁶

Neb. Feb. 15, 2006) (ruling that investigation by USPS of independent contractor for "interpersonal conflicts," including "alleged threats to postal personnel," satisfies law enforcement threshold); Jud. Watch, Inc. v. U.S. Dep't of Com., 337 F. Supp. 2d 146, 179 (D.D.C. 2004) (finding that investigations of certain agency personnel for possible violations of campaign finance laws and trade mission improprieties qualify as law enforcement).

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Bartko, 898 F.3d at 66 (concluding that investigations into employee disciplinary matters were not conducted with "an eye toward law-enforcement proceedings"); Parker v. EOUSA, 852 F. Supp. 2d 1, 11-12 (D.D.C. 2012) (explaining that records created by agency acting as employer and supervising its employees do not satisfy law enforcement threshold); Nat'l Whistleblower Ctr., 849 F. Supp. 2d at 27 (observing that personnel files maintained in ordinary course of monitoring employees' performances do not satisfy law enforcement threshold); Coleman v. Lappin, No. 06-2255, 2007 WL 1983835, at *3 (D.D.C. July 3, 2007) (stating that "nothing in the BOP's motion and supporting documents establishes that the disciplinary records pertaining to a former BOP employee are law enforcement records"); Wood v. FBI, 312 F. Supp. 2d 328, 345 (D. Conn. 2004) (reiterating that "investigation conducted by a federal agency for the purpose of determining whether to discipline employees for activity which does not constitute a violation of law is not for law enforcement purposes under Exemption 7" (quoting Stern, 737 F.2d at 90)), aff'd in part & rev'd in part on other grounds, 432 F.3d 78 (2d Cir. 2005); Varville v. Rubin, No. 96-00629, 1998 WL 681438, at *14 (D. Conn. Aug. 18, 1998) (explaining that threshold was not met by report discussing possible ethical violations and prohibited personnel practices because inquiry "more closely resembles an employer supervising its employees than an investigation for law enforcement purposes").

⁶⁶ See Bartko, 898 F.3d at 66 (concluding that agency's "bare-bones declaration" was not "even in the ballpark" of demonstrating threshold was met, and noting that agency "bears the burden of showing on a case-by-case basis that any requested records were actually compiled for law-enforcement, rather than employment-supervision purposes"); Parker, 852 F. Supp. 2d at 11 (explaining that in order to evaluate whether particular disciplinary records meet law enforcement threshold, agency "must actually provide evidence that the disciplinary investigation focused on illegal activity which could result in civil or criminal sanctions"); Cotton v. Adams, 798 F. Supp. 22, 25 (D.D.C. 1992) (stating that court cannot infer law enforcement purpose); cf. Neese, 2022 WL 898827, at *9 (finding that while agency "failed to detail whether the alleged ethical violations could result in civil sanctions," OPR demonstrated law enforcement purpose behind investigation because only civil sanctions could be imposed on former employee); Patterson, 56 F.3d at 837-38 (stating that "it is not completely obvious" from IRS's "vague and unsubstantiated" explanation that its investigation of employee was for law enforcement purpose); Coleman v. Lappin, 535 F. Supp. 2d 96, 98 (D.D.C. 2008) (explaining that "vague and general references" to BOP Program Statement do not establish law enforcement purpose).