

Top Minnesota corrections official denies DHS claim that the state is releasing dangerous criminals

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January 21, 2026 / 9:49 PM EST / CBS News

A top Minnesota law enforcement official is rejecting repeated accusations by the Department of Homeland Security that state authorities have been releasing hundreds of dangerous criminals into the streets, rather than turning them over to federal immigration agents.

Paul Schnell, the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Corrections, called the claims "fundamentally false" and warned that such federal messaging risks undermining public trust in both immigration enforcement and public safety.

"We cooperate with ICE and ICE detainers," Schnell told CBS News in an interview on Wednesday. "We have, as a matter of policy, done that for a long, long time. How they can say otherwise is unbelievable."

It came after Marcos Charles, ICE's acting executive associate director for Enforcement and Removal Operations on Tuesday accused Minnesota officials of failing to turn people over to federal custody — and claimed there were more than 1,360 pending ICE detainers statewide.

Those are federal requests to local law enforcement to detain individuals for up to 48 hours after they're set to be released from criminal confinement — which gives ICE time to decide whether to take them into custody to begin deportation proceedings.

"The best solution is to turn them over to us in a safe, controlled setting like a jail or prison instead of releasing them back onto the streets," Charles said at a news conference in St. Paul, Tuesday, warning that releases put communities "where your children go to school" at risk.

But the Department of Corrections commissioner said those coordinated turnovers are already happening — and have been for years, as a matter of policy and state law. Schnell said his department routinely communicates with ICE in the weeks before an incarcerated person's release to arrange handoffs if a detainer is in place. And according to Minnesota corrections data, 84 people were transferred directly from state prisons to ICE custody in 2025.

To better understand the scope of the issue, Schnell said his department conducted a statewide survey. They found 207 individuals in state prisons and 94 in county jails are subject to ICE detainers — 301 total. This is far short of the 1,360 cited by federal officials.

"We cannot explain how those numbers square," Schnell said. "And nobody is sitting down with us to explain it."

Schnell told CBS News his agency has repeatedly asked DHS to reconcile the discrepancy but has received no documentation showing missed transfers or failures to comply.

"If we made a mistake, we would own it," he said. "But to date, no one has shown us where we failed."

Asked for comment on Schnell's remarks, a DHS spokesperson reiterated the agency's assertions that hundreds of criminals have been released across Minnesota and that 1,360 people in custody statewide are subject to active ICE detainers.

The spokesperson did not address the discrepancies raised by Schnell, but pointed to a list of six people with criminal charges or convictions that DHS says were released in Minnesota, and called on Gov. Tim Walz to "commit to honoring all ICE detainers."

In some cases, Schnell said, it is ICE that chooses not to detain individuals any longer, releasing them under federal supervision or into the community. He emphasized that this is a decision made by federal authorities, not the state.

"We didn't release them into the community," he said. "We released them to ICE."

Schnell also pushed back against the Department of Homeland Security's regular publication of so-called "worst of the worst" lists, which highlight individuals with serious criminal convictions ICE claims to have arrested. But Schnell insisted Minnesota corrections had coordinated with ICE to transfer custody of many of those people and called the lists "propaganda, in many instances." He added that in multiple cases, federal authorities opt to release detainees after they're in ICE custody.

"These weren't people swept up on Minneapolis streets," he said. "They were released to ICE. What happened after that was not our decision."

Schnell acknowledged that compliance with civil ICE detainers varies at the county level — particularly in large jurisdictions like Hennepin County, which includes Minneapolis. But he also stressed that the Department of Corrections' authority is limited to the state prison system, not local jails.

Despite the sharp disagreements, Schnell emphasized that day-to-day cooperation between Corrections Department staff and ICE officers on the ground remains strong.

"Staff to staff, operationally, this is working exactly the way it should," he said. "Which is why I think their staff are probably equally confused."

What he wants now, Schnell said, is a direct conversation at senior levels of DHS to reconcile data and messaging — not public accusations.

"It's in the best interest of public safety to get this right," he said. "Rhetoric doesn't solve anything. Facts do."

As immigration enforcement continues to be a flashpoint nationally and locally, the dispute underscores a deeper challenge: a fragmented system in which federal, state, and local entities operate under different authorities, with access to varying data systems — often speaking past one another in the process.

"We care deeply about public safety," Schnell said. "That's why we follow this policy. And we will continue to coordinate the transfer of custody — period."

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