

How Cocaine, Corruption Led To The Maduro Indictment

NEW YORK (AP) — A newly unsealed U.S. Justice Department indictment accuses captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro of running a “corrupt, illegitimate government” fueled by an extensive drug-trafficking operation that flooded the U.S. with thousands of tons of cocaine.

The arrest of Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, in a stunning military operation early Saturday in Venezuela sets the stage for a major test for U.S. prosecutors as they seek to secure a conviction in a New York courtroom against the longtime leader of the oil-rich South American nation.

Attorney General Pam Bondi said in a post on X that Maduro and Flores “will soon face the full wrath of American justice on American soil in American courts.”

Here’s a look at the accusations against Maduro and the charges he faces:

Drug and weapons charges
Maduro is charged alongside his wife, his son and three others. Maduro is indicted on four counts: narco-terrorism conspiracy, cocaine importation conspiracy, possession of machine guns and destructive devices and conspiracy to possess machine guns and destructive devices.

Maduro is facing the same charges as in an earlier indictment brought

against him in Manhattan federal court in 2020, during the first Trump presidency. The new indictment unsealed Saturday, which adds charges against Flores, was filed under seal in the Southern District of New York just before Christmas.

Maduro is due to make his first appearance Monday in federal court in Manhattan. A video posted Saturday night on social media by a White House account showed Maduro, smiling, as he was escorted through a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration office in New York by two federal agents grasping his arms. He was expected to be detained while awaiting trial at a federal jail in Brooklyn.

‘Cocaine-fueled corruption’ flourished

The indictment accuses Maduro of partnering with “some of the most violent and prolific drug traffickers and narco-terrorists in the world” to allow for the shipment of thousands of tons of cocaine into the U.S.

Authorities allege powerful and violent drug-trafficking organizations, such as the Sinaloa Cartel and Tren de Aragua gang, worked directly with the Venezuelan government and then sent profits to high-ranking officials who helped and protected them in exchange.

But a U.S. intelligence assessment published in April, which drew on



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro gestures as he walks with his wife Cilia Flores in Red square after the Victory Day military parade in Moscow, May 9, 2025, during celebrations of the 80th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany during the World War II. (AP Photo/Pavel Bednyakov, Pool, File)

input from the 18 agencies that comprise the intelligence community, found no coordination between Tren de Aragua and the Venezuelan government.

Maduro allowed “cocaine-fueled corruption to flourish for his own

benefit, for the benefit of members of his ruling regime, and for the benefit of his family members,” the indictment alleges.

U.S. authorities allege that Maduro and his family “provided law enforcement cover and logistical

support” to cartels moving drugs throughout the region, resulting in as much as 250 tons of cocaine trafficked through Venezuela annually by 2020, according to the indictment.

Drugs were moved on go-fast

vessels, fishing boats and container ships or on planes from clandestine airstrips, the indictment says.

“This cycle of narcotics-based corruption lines the pockets of Venezuelan officials and their families while also benefiting violent narco-terrorists who operate with impunity on Venezuelan soil and who help produce, protect, and transport tons of cocaine to the United States,” the indictment says.

Successive U.S. administrations have warned about Venezuela’s role as a transit point for cocaine and a haven for criminal gangs, terrorist groups and drug-smuggling leftist rebels from neighboring Colombia. While reliable data is hard to ascertain, the vast majority of cocaine departs South America from Colombia and Ecuador, making its way northward through the eastern Pacific Ocean, not the Caribbean.

Allegations of kidnappings and murders ordered

The U.S. accuses Maduro and his wife of ordering kidnappings, beatings and murders “against those who owed them drug money or otherwise undermined their drug trafficking operation.” That includes the killing of a local drug boss in Caracas, according to the indictment.

Maduro’s wife is also accused of

(See **MADURO** P. 2)

GOP Lawmakers’ Power Transfers Are Reshaping Everything

ProPublica-North Carolina voters have chosen Democrats in three straight elections for governor; the state’s Republican-led legislature has countered by siphoning off some of the powers that traditionally came with the job.

These power grabs have had a profound effect on both democracy in the state and on the everyday lives of North Carolina residents, Democrats argue.

The changes are “weakening environmental protections, raising energy costs, and politicizing election administration,” Josh Stein, North Carolina’s governor, said in a text message responding to questions from ProPublica.

Republican leaders in the General Assembly did not respond to requests for comment or emailed questions about the power shifts. In the past, they have defended these actions as reflecting the will of voters,

with the senate president describing one key bill as balancing “appointment power between the legislative and executive branches.”

Former state Sen. Bob Rucho, a Republican picked to sit on the state elections board after lawmakers shifted control from Stein to the Republican state auditor, said the changes would fix problems created by Democrats.

“Republicans are very proud of what’s been accomplished,” Rucho said. Shifting authority over the elections board, he argued, would “re-establish a level of confidence in the electoral process” that Democrats had lost.

ProPublica recently chronicled the nearly 10-year push to take over the board, which sets rules and settles disputes in elections in the closely divided swing state. Decisions made by the board’s new leadership — particularly on the locations and num-



bers of early voting sites — could affect outcomes in the 2026 midterms.

Below, we examine how other power transfers driven by North Carolina’s Republican legislature are reshaping everything from the regulations that protect residents’ drinking water to the rates they pay for electricity to the culture of their state university system.

Environmental Management Commission

What it is: The Environmental Management Commission adopts rules that protect the state’s air and water, such as those that regulate industries discharging potentially carcinogenic chemicals in rivers.

Power transfer: In October 2023, Republican legislators passed a law shifting the power to appoint the majority of the commission’s members from the governor to themselves and the state’s commissioner of agriculture, who is a Republican.

What’s happened since: The Republican-led commission has stymied several efforts by the state’s Department of Environmental Quality to regulate a potentially harmful chemical, 1,4-dioxane, in drinking water.

Advocates for businesses, including the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce, had criticized some regulations and urged the commission to intervene. “Clean water is worth the cost, but regulators should not arbitrarily establish a level that is low for the sake of being low,” the chamber said in a press release.

The Southern Environmental Law Center, which has pressed the state to regulate the chemical, has said the commission’s rulings are “crippling the state’s ability to protect its waterways, drinking water sources, and communities from harmful pollution.”

(See **POWER** P. 2)

Trump Administration Agrees To Drop Anti-DEI Criteria For Research Grants

NC Newsline-The Trump administration will review frozen grants to universities without using its controversial standards that discouraged gender, race and sexual orientation initiatives and vaccine research.

In a settlement agreement filed in Massachusetts federal court Monday, the National Institutes of Health and a group of Democratic attorneys general who’d challenged the new criteria for grant funding said the NIH would consider grant applications made up to Sept. 29, 2025, without judging the efforts

related to diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, or vaccines.

The settlement provides an uncontested path for the agency while courts decide whether the administration can use its controversial analysis. The administration did not agree to permanently ditch its campaign to evaluate health research funding decisions based on schools’ DEI programs.

NIH officials “will complete their consideration of the Applications in the ordinary course of NIH’s scientific review process, without applying the Challenged Directives,”

the settlement said, adding that the agency would “evaluate each application individually and in good faith.”

The settlement was signed by U.S. Department of Justice lawyers and the attorneys general of Massachusetts, California, Maryland, Washington, Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island and Wisconsin.

In a Tuesday statement, Massachusetts Attorney General Andrea Joy Campbell said the agreement

commits the Department of Health and Human Services to resume “the usual process for considering NIH grant applications on a prompt, agreed-upon timeline.”

The 17 attorneys general sued in April over \$783 million in frozen grants.

A trial court and appeals court in Massachusetts sided with the states, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in August that the trial judge lacked the authority to compel the grants to be paid, especially in light of a similar decision involving the Education Department.

Coco Gauff Makes A Social Media Gaffe

PERTH, Australia (AP) — Coco Gauff dropped a post on social media just before she started her United Cup singles match Monday, hoping to add context to her recent comments about American tennis fans.

The match didn’t go well for the No. 4-ranked Gauff, who lost the first five games and struggled in a 6-1, 6-7 (3), 6-0 loss to No. 42 Jessica Bouzas Maneiro in Perth.

It gave Spain a 1-0 lead over the defending champion U.S. team in the Group A contest. But then Taylor Fritz saved a match point on the way to winning the men’s singles match and Gauff combined with Christian Harrison in the mixed doubles to clinch victory for the Americans.

“I’m going to clarify because people are dragging this out of context,” Gauff said in the pre-match morning social media post, referring to the “worst” comment she made earlier at the tournament when comparing support for players from smaller countries with the kind of support American players receive on foreign soil.



“Those from smaller countries come with their colors and flags and it is clear on who they are supporting,” Gauff said in her post. “I was just speaking from my perspective. I understand the financial aspect of things and know tennis is not accessible for everyone, it was more of a

comment for those who are already attending and how I wish they were as passionate as those from other countries.”

The 21-year-old Gauff, a two-time major winner, said her initial comments were in response to a question at a news conference.

“I was asked and it was simply an observation I noticed about other countries vs. mine that is all,” she said. “Nevertheless I am grateful for any support no matter how big or small it is.”

In a clip of the news conference posted on X, Gauff said: “I feel like we’re definitely in the tennis department the worst when it comes to that.”

She added that at previous team events she’d noticed that players from other countries get more animated support from their fans than the American tennis players do, but attributed that to the U.S. sports fans having so many successful teams and athletes to support.

Gauff said there was always good support for the Americans from fans who travel to the Australian Open in Melbourne, “but I would like to see some more Americans if we make it to Sydney (United Cup finals) in Sydney than there were last year.”

The U.S. team is 2-0 after wins

(See **COCO GAUFF** P. 2)



USPS SAYS MAIL-IN BALLOTS MIGHT NOT GET POSTMARK ON SAME DAY THEY’RE DROPPED OFF

The U.S. Postal Service has adopted a new rule that could create doubt about whether some ballots mailed by voters by Election Day will receive postmarks in time to be counted.

A USPS rule that took effect on Dec. 24 says mail might not receive a postmark on the same day the agency takes possession of it. The postal service says it isn’t changing its existing postmark practices and is merely clarifying its policy, but some election officials have looked to postmarks as a guarantee that mail ballots were cast before polls closed.

The new rule holds implications for 14 states and Washington, D.C., that count ballots arriving after Election Day if they are postmarked on or before that day — commonly called a “ballot grace period.” In these states, ballots placed in the mail by voters before the deadline may not be counted if the postal service applies a postmark after Election Day.

The USPS rule says that “the postmark date does not necessarily indicate the first day that the Postal Service had possession of the mailpiece.”

The USPS rule comes as the U.S. Supreme Court prepares to consider a case that could eliminate ballot grace periods nationwide. The court’s decision, expected late this spring or next summer, could render the issues raised by the postmark rule moot.

Mail-in voting surged in 2020’s general election amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when 43% of voters cast their votes by mail. The percentage of voters mailing their ballots has fallen from that peak but remains above pre-pandemic levels. About 30% of voters cast mail ballots in 2024, according to data gathered by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

While the vast majority of mail ballots were successfully cast last year, hundreds of thousands weren’t counted. During the 2024 election, 584,463 mail ballots returned by voters were rejected by election officials — 1.2% of returned mail ballots. About 18% of those ballots were rejected because they didn’t arrive on time.

The USPS defended the change in a lengthy response to criticisms published in the Federal Register. The agency emphasized that it does not administer elections and doesn’t advocate for or against voting by mail.

The postal service repeated its advice that voters mail their completed ballots at least a week before Election Day. And it noted that voters may request a manual postmark at their local post office free of charge.

“If customers are aware that the postmark date may not align with the date on which the Postal Service first accepted possession of a mailpiece, they will be better equipped to adjust their plans accordingly,” the response reads.

“And if policymakers or other entities that create rules utilizing the postmark date are aware of what the postmark date signifies, they are better equipped to determine whether their rules adequately serve their purposes.”

Don Davis Joins NC Republicans In Praising Raid In Venezuela; Ross Questions Constitutionality Of Action

(AP)-Saturday's news that the United States has captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and will run the country during a transition is being met with mixed emotions by North Carolina's elected officials.

U.S. Sen. Ted Budd, a Republican, said in a statement Saturday that President Trump's decisive action to capture Maduro and bring him to justice is monumental and will save American lives from the drugs brought to our shores.

"Maduro was an illegitimate dictator who has long been wanted in the U.S. on charges of narco-terrorism, corruption, & drug trafficking," Budd shared on the social media platform X.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Deborah Ross (NC-02) said Trump's military operation was carried out without regard for the U.S. Constitution and without considering the long-term consequences for U.S. security.

"To be clear, Maduro is a despot who stole elections, imprisoned his political opponents, and trampled on the rights and dignity of his people. But the Trump administration

cannot unilaterally impose regime change and push the United States to the brink of war. This action endangers our citizens and democracy around the world," Ross said in a statement.

Ross also criticized the administration for failing to consult with Congress ahead of the military action.

"Using military force to remove a foreign head of state unquestionably requires congressional authorization. Trump ignored that requirement, once again thumbing his nose at our Constitution and Congress. At a minimum, Congress must be fully and transparently briefed and then take appropriate action," Ross said.

Budd said the actions were within the president's authority, and praised those responsible for Maduro's capture.

"God bless our Special Operations Forces who carried out this daring mission, the Air Force, all those with our armed forces & intelligence community who provided support," said Budd, who serves on the Senate Armed Services committee.

During Saturday's press briefing, Trump said that the United States



REP DEBORAH ROSS



REP DON DAVIS

will run Venezuela during the transition, and he did not rule out the involvement of American troops.

"We're not afraid of boots on the ground."

Republican U.S. Rep. Richard Hudson, whose district includes Fort Bragg, praised the arrest of Maduro.

"Accountability finally came. Parents in our community can rest easier knowing a major peddler of fentanyl is off the streets. I'm grateful for the heroes who carried out this mission and praying for their safe return home," said Hudson on social media.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Don Davis (NC-01) praised the operation, but also expressed a desire for more information about what comes in the weeks ahead.

"Protecting American families

and ending narcotics trafficking are essential to our national security," said Davis, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force. "The use of military force demands accountability and transparency, and Congress must be kept fully informed to ensure proper oversight. I expect continued briefings as the situation in Venezuela evolves."

Protests were planned for downtown Raleigh and other cities on Saturday afternoon.

Mickey Brigham, an organizer with the Party for Socialism and Liberation, called the military action a war for oil.

"Venezuela has the largest reserves of oil in the world, and the U.S. government is using military aggression to try to steal that wealth," Brigham said.

MADURO

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accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes in 2007 to arrange a meeting through "a large-scale drug trafficker" and the director of Venezuela's National Anti-Drug Office. In a corrupt deal, the drug trafficker then agreed to pay a monthly bribe to the director of the anti-drug office as well as about \$100,000 for each cocaine-carrying flight "to ensure the flight's safe passage." Some of that money then went to Maduro's wife, the indictment says.

Nephews of Maduro's wife were heard during recorded meetings with confidential U.S. government sources in 2015 agreeing to send "multi-hundred-kilogram cocaine shipments" from Maduro's "presidential hanger" at a Venezuelan airport. The nephews during the recorded meetings explained "that they were at 'war' with the United States," the indictment alleges. They were both sentenced in 2017 to 18 years in prison for conspiring to send tons of cocaine into the U.S. before being released in 2022 as part of a prisoner swap in exchange for seven imprisoned Americans.

Rubio calls operation a 'law enforcement function'

During a news conference, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cast the military raid that captured Maduro and his wife as an action carried out on behalf of the Department of Justice. Caine said the operation was made "at the request of the Justice Department."

Rubio, as he responded to a question about whether Congress had been notified, said the U.S. raid to get the couple was "basically a law enforcement function," adding that it was an instance in which the "Department of War supported the Department of Justice." He called Maduro "a fugitive of American justice with a \$50 million reward" over his head.

COCO GAUFF

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over Spain and Argentina and has clinched a spot in the quarterfinals.

It was close call against Spain. Fritz, struggling with knee pain, produced a 7-6 (4), 3-6, 7-6 (6) win over No. 38 Jaume Munar. He missed two match points on Munar's serve in the 12th game of the third set and then saved one in the tiebreaker before sealing the win to level the contest.

Gauff and Harrison won the doubles 7-6 (5), 6-0 and finished the session signing autographs and posing for photographs with fans, including some waving the American flags.

At a later news conference Gauff was asked if the reaction to her comments on social media had put her off her game.

"No," she said. "And I don't think it was piling on. I was just trying to clarify what I meant. I wrote everything that I had to say on that."

Fritz supported Gauff, saying the reaction to his teammate's comments were an example of people wanting to "assume the absolute worst."

"I was here and I know exactly what she meant," Fritz said. "And she said nothing wrong."

Power Transfers Are

—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Utilities Commission

What it is: The North Carolina Utilities Commission regulates the rates and services of the state's public utilities, which include providers of electricity, natural gas, water and telephone service. The commission also oversees movers, brokers, ferries and wastewater.

Power transfer: In June 2025, a trial court sided with the General Assembly in allowing a law passed in 2024 to take effect, removing the governor's power to appoint a majority of the commission's members and transferring that power to legislative leaders and the state treasurer, who is a Republican.

What's happened since: The state's primary utility, Duke Energy, has backed off from some plans to rely more on clean energy and retire coal-fired power plants. In November, the company said it would seek

the commission's approval to raise rates by 15%.

In response to a new resource plan the company filed in October, the executive director of NC WARN, a climate and environmental justice nonprofit, said in a statement that Duke's actions would cause "power bills to double or triple over time" and increase carbon emissions. The state's governor and attorney general, both Democrats, have said they oppose the rate hike.

Garrett Poorman, a spokesperson for Duke Energy, said that the company is "focused on keeping costs as low as possible while meeting growing energy needs across our footprint" and that the company had recently lowered its forecasted costs.

The commission will decide whether to approve the proposed rate hikes in 2026.

University of North Carolina System

What it is: The University of North Carolina System encompasses 17 institutions and more than 250,000 students, including at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, considered one of the best in the nation.

Power transfer: Though the legislature has traditionally appointed the majority of the trustees for individual schools, the governor also made a share of these appointments.

In 2016, the legislature passed a law that eliminated the governor's ability to make university trustee appointments.

In 2023, changes inserted into the state budget bill gave the legislature power to appoint all of the members of the state board that oversees community colleges and most of those colleges' trustees. The governor had previously chosen some board members and trustees.

What's happened since: The sys-

tem has created a center for conservative thought, repealed racial equity initiatives, suspended a left-leaning professor, gutted a civil rights center led by a professor long critical of Republican lawmakers and appointed politically connected Republicans to the boards.

Republicans say the moves are reversing the system's long-term leftward drift.

"Ultimately, the board stays in for a while, and you change administrators, and then start to moderate the culture of the UNC schools," said David Lewis, a former Republican House member who helped drive the changes to the university system.

Democrats, including former Gov. Roy Cooper, have criticized the board changes as partisan meddling. "These actions will ultimately hurt our state's economy and reputation," Cooper said in a 2023 press release.

Charter Review Board Closes New School Two Months After Opening

A Guilford County charter school faced closure less than two months after opening its doors to students. Triad International Studies Academy (TISA) in High Point had its charter revoked by the Charter Schools Review Board (CSRB) due to under-enrollment on Monday, Oct. 6, the first of the CSRB's two-day meeting.

With just 42 students, TISA fell short of the 80-student minimum specified in state statute. While the law permits lower enrollment for a "compelling reason," CSRB members did not believe explanations presented by TISA leaders warranted an exemption.

The school had until the end of December to close.

During discussion, CSRB members expressed disappointment over TISA's enrollment predicament as well as leaders' decision not to seek a delay.

"I hate to see that you guys are in the position even to have to be here today," CSRB Vice Chair John Eldridge said.

"You just would have been in a much better place if you had just said we needed a year delay," CSRB Chair Bruce Friend said. "You knew going in this summer that... the

numbers just weren't there."

During its October meeting, the CSRB also approved an accelerated Wake County applicant, Focus Academy Charter School, which plans to open in 2026. But the board denied two other applicants: Preparatory Leadership Academy in Gaston County and Encompass Montessori in Wake County. Both schools hoped to open in 2027.

In addition, CSRB members reviewed an academic report from the Office of Charter Schools (OCS) with new 2024-25 data, disaggregated to show charter performance. Similar to overall public school data released last month, charter figures revealed some encouraging news: 71% of charter schools earned a school performance grade of C or better.

Other metrics showed 29% of charters exceeded growth, while 44% met growth and 28% did not. The percentage of schools failing to meet growth is the lowest in several years, according to OCS.

School leaders from TISA appeared in person to request an enrollment exemption until fall 2026. During questioning, they cited renovation delays as a key challenge as well as an incident of student aggres-

sion at an open house that deterred families from enrolling.

Leaders said the school's high population of exceptional children (EC) offered a compelling reason for an exemption. EC students comprise around one-third of TISA's enrollment, which is a larger proportion than at most charter schools.

Chaowei Zhu, TISA's board chair, sought to reassure the CSRB that TISA would be sustainable financially if the school could enroll 50 students, due to rent deferral, cost management, and other measures. In his presentation, Zhu also outlined plans to ramp up marketing efforts targeting enrollment.

CSRB members questioned TISA's decision to move ahead with opening in the first place.

"Delays are unfortunate. Many of us have experienced that," Friend said. "But as you get closer to the... opening day of school, and it was apparent you weren't going to meet 80 students, why did you not ask for a year delay?"

The school had several plans around renovations and modulars, Zhu said. "We thought we were able to make it," he said.

But bad weather fueled renovation

delays, he said. However, the school opened on time on Aug. 13, with students meeting in the auditorium.

Citing an earlier enrollment number TISA had provided of 109 students, Friend asked, "If you opened on time, why did half of the parents leave?"

An autistic student hit some other students while families were onsite for an open house in August, another TISA leader said. The student's parents had not shared records relevant to their child's autism, so school leaders were unprepared.

Around 90 students attended that open house, and the incident had a dramatic impact on student enrollment, according to TISA leadership.

Friend expressed skepticism that weather or the open house could have caused such a substantial drop in enrollment.

"More students chose not to come than have come," he noted. "There's a bigger reason than this."

"I, too, am extremely concerned about these numbers," said CSRB member Lindalyn Kakadelis. "I wish... that you had gotten another year delay. That would have solved a lot of these issues, especially with the open house."

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USMC Training For Small Aerial Systems

Last week they released MAR-ADMIN, "Approved Training Requirements for Small Unmanned Aerial Systems" which announces six courses open to all Marines:

Basic Drone Operator (BD-O) Course: "Provide the foundational skills required to assemble, maintain and operate both full-acro and stabilized non-lethal drones in an operational environment."

Attack Drone Operator (AD-O) Course: "Provide the foundational

skills required to tactically employ lethal attack drones."

Attack Drone Leader (AD-L) Course: "Provide the instructional understanding of Fire Support Plan integration, threat assessment, system capabilities and coordination with maneuver and fires."

Payload Specialist (PS) Course: "Provide the foundational skills and basic knowledge for safe explosive handling and preparation of pre-fabricated warheads used to arm lethal

drones in an operational environment."

Attack Drone Instructor (AD-I) Course: "Provide the instructional skills required to administer and certify Marines in the BD-O, AD-O, and AD-L courses."

Payload Specialist Instructor (PS-I) Course: "Provide the instructional skills required to administer and certify Marines in the PS course."

There is also additional training which is MOS specific.



NC Man Arrested By FBI For Allegedly Planning New Year's Eve Terrorist Attack

(AP)-Federal law enforcement officials announced Friday that they had foiled a planned attack "in support of ISIS" in Mint Hill, North Carolina, on New Year's Eve.

According to Russ Ferguson, U.S. Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina, the suspect is 18-year-old Christian Sturdivant, an American citizen and Mint Hill resident.

Ferguson said the man had been in contact with ISIS members in Tiktok chatrooms and "had pledged allegiance to ISIS" while planning a New Year's Eve terrorist attack on a grocery store and a fast-food restaurant in Mint Hill.

"He started reading ISIS material, started going to ISIS websites, making Tiktok videos, and eventually reached out to what he thought was a member of ISIS. In reality, it was

an undercover agent with NYPD in New York," Ferguson said. "He was preparing for jihad, and innocent people were going to die, and we were very, very fortunate they did not."

Ferguson said Sturdivant intended to use knives and hammers and planned to wear a Kevlar vest, but also planned to die in the attack. He was under surveillance for two weeks before his arrest on New Year's Eve, Ferguson said. "At no time was the public in harm's way."

James Barnacle, the FBI special agent in charge of the Charlotte field office, said Sturdivant had been under psychological care in recent years. He said Sturdivant's grandfather had stopped him from attacking neighbors when the suspect was 14.

"His family actively hid knives and weapons from him," Barnacle

said.

Barnacle said the FBI had been watching Sturdivant during that period in 2022, but stopped its investigation when the teen entered mental health treatment.

But last month, when Sturdivant turned 18, Barnacle said, he resumed trying to contact members of ISIS and was immediately flagged by a number of law enforcement agencies.

Barnacle said Sturdivant was seen as a credible threat. "He wrote a manifest. He stole two hammers out of the storage shed and hid them in his house. He reached out to an undercover agent and requested guns."

Ferguson said the FBI first tried to have Sturdivant involuntarily committed, but a state magistrate denied the petition. So they obtained a war-

rant and arrested him for "providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization," a charge that can carry a prison sentence of 20 years.

Sturdivant is currently being held without bail in the Gaston County jail. No attorney or public defender was listed for him at midday Friday.

Governor Josh Stein said in a statement, "Thanks to the work of the FBI and vigilant law enforcement, this potential attack was stopped before anyone was hurt. I am grateful to the brave officers who keep us safe every day."

The case will be prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Gleason for the Western District of North Carolina and DOJ Trial Attorney Elisa Poteat with the National Security Division's Counterterrorism Section, according to a statement from the U.S. Department of Justice.

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Business & Finance

Last Year's Odd Economy And What To Watch For In 2026

WASHINGTON (AP) — The economy in 2025 was filled with contradictions, as growth was healthy while hiring slowed, inflation stayed elevated and unemployment rose.

Last year's odd outcomes raise a host of questions for the upcoming year: Will a growing economy eventually boost the sluggish job market? Or are last year's weak job gains a sign of a stumbling economy that could get worse?

There is another uncomfortable possibility: The economy could keep growing without much hiring, as technology — particularly artificial intelligence — enables more companies to step up their production of goods and services without adding more workers, leading to a "jobless expansion."

Adding to the complications, the six-week government shutdown last fall disrupted the collection and publication of economic data, leaving policymakers at the Federal Reserve with a cloudier view of the economy that will only slowly clear up this year.

"2026 begins at a time when it is hard to say how 2025 ended," Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Santander, an investment bank, said in a note to clients.

Sharp inequality has also meant that wealthier U.S. households account for a rising share of spending, so that even healthy growth figures mask underlying weaknesses among lower-income families — what many economists refer to as the "K-shaped" economy.



Still, Stanley, like many economists, is somewhat optimistic: He expects that hiring will pick up on the back of stronger growth fueled by large tax refunds early this year, a result of President Donald Trump's tax cut legislation. Companies may also step up hiring because they face much less uncertainty this year from tariffs.

This year "could turn out to be a better year," said Federal Reserve governor Christopher Waller last month. "Now whether that pulls the labor market along with it, I certainly hope it does."

Growth accelerated after a weak start

Surveys suggest Americans have a gloomy outlook on the economy,

but that hasn't kept many of them from spending at a healthy clip. Solid consumer spending — likely fueled mostly by higher-income Americans — boosted growth to a 4.3% annual pace in the July-September quarter, a much better than expected showing and the biggest increase in two years.

The healthy gain followed two quarters where Trump's tariffs distorted the economy. A surge in imports in the first three months of the year caused the economy to shrink as businesses sought to bring in products from overseas ahead of the duties.

Growth likely continued in the final three months of the year, but the government shutdown almost

certainly weighed on output, reducing growth by one percentage point, economists forecast.

Hiring stayed weak and unemployment rose

Even as the economy picked up, hiring did not — in fact job gains weakened after Trump's announcement of sweeping tariffs in early April, which he dubbed "Liberation Day."

The economy even shed jobs in June, August, and October. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, rose from 4% in January to 4.6% in November, highest in four years. December's figures will be released Jan. 9.

There were several reasons hiring likely slowed: The uncertainty

around tariffs, which Trump imposed, then in some cases lowered or removed, or delayed, led many companies to put hiring on hold. Still, layoffs remain low, in what has been a "low-hire, low-fire" job market.

At the same time, the ongoing adoption of artificial intelligence may have led many firms to hold off on adding workers, as they sort out what the new technology can do for them.

"AI, AI, AI, AI -- that is all I have heard since this summer," Waller said last month, referring to comments he has heard from business executives explaining why they are reluctant to add jobs.

Still, there are signs of improvement: Employers cut 105,000 jobs in October, but that was mostly because of a large drop in federal government jobs stemming from the Trump administration's purge of government workers, which didn't formally take effect until that month. Excluding government, businesses added an average of 75,000 jobs a month in the three months ended in November, a significant increase from just 13,000 in the three months ending in August.

However, most of the hiring this year has been heavily concentrated in just a few sectors — health care, restaurants and hotels, and government (outside of October). Most

large private industries have shed jobs.

Inflation remained stubbornly high

Even though inflation fell sharply in 2023 and 2024 from a four-decade high, there was little improvement last year. Annual inflation, according to the Federal Reserve's preferred measure, actually ticked higher to 2.8% in September — the latest data available — from 2.7% in December 2024.

Elevated costs became a potent political issue in races as diverse as governors' contests in Virginia and New Jersey and New York City's mayoral race. All were won by Democrats as Trump found himself grappling with issues of "affordability," which he referred to as a "hoax."

Inflation cooled in November, according to the more widely-followed consumer price index, though economists said the figures were distorted by the government shutdown. Prices were mostly collected in the second half of November, after the shutdown ended, when holiday discounts were more likely to be in effect.

Some economists worry inflation will worsen in early 2026, as companies implement annual price changes and pass through more tariff costs. But most expect inflation will continue to slowly cool in 2026 and move closer to the Fed's 2% target.

Classifieds

PUBLIC HEARING WAKE COUNTY AFFORDABLE HOUSING 2026 ANNUAL ACTION PLAN

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT Wake County will hold a public hearing on Tuesday, January 20, 2026 at 2:00 PM in the Wake County Justice Center, 300 S. Salisbury Street, Raleigh, 2nd Floor, Room 2700. To sign up to speak, submit a comment, or livestream the meeting, please visit: <https://www.wakegov.com/departments-government/board-commissioners/meetings-schedules-materials/meeting-schedule>

The purpose of the public hearing is to receive input on Wake County's affordable housing, community development, and homeless service needs. Public feedback will be used to inform the 2026 Annual Action Plan, which is required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for Wake County to receive federal entitlement funding. The plan outlines the proposed use of funds for the period July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027.

For more information, please contact Wake County Department of Housing Affordability & Community Revitalization at (919) 856-5689 or at housing.info@wake.gov. Speech or hearing-impaired persons may contact 1-800-735-2962 (TT) or 1-800-735-8262 (voice).

STUDENT LOAN BORROWERS IN DEFAULT MAY SEE WAGES GARNISHED IN 2026

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration said on Tuesday that it will begin garnishing the wages of student loan borrowers who are in default early next year.

The department said it will send notices to approximately 1,000 borrowers the week of January 7, with more notices to come at an increasing scale each month.

Millions of borrowers are considered in default, meaning they are 270 days past due on their payments. The department must give borrowers 30 days notice before their wages can be garnished.

The department said it will begin collection activities, "only after student and parent borrowers have been provided sufficient notice and opportunity to repay their loans."

In May, the Trump administration ended the pandemic-era pause on student loan payments, beginning to collect on defaulted debt through withholding tax refunds and other federal payments to borrowers.

How Much Aid Will Farmers Receive From The Trump Administration Pkg

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Farmers are now learning how much aid they can expect to receive from a \$12 billion package that President Donald Trump announced.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture released the figures Wednesday for how much aid per acre farmers can plan on for each row crop. The details arrived after most farmers have already met with their bankers to arrange financing for next year's crops and placed orders for the seed and fertilizer they will need. But officials have promised that the payments should arrive by the end of February.

Soybean farmers have been hit especially hard by Trump's trade war with China, which stopped buying any American crops after Trump announced his tariffs this spring. China is the world's largest buyer of soybeans. This aid package is expected to help farmers weather the trade disruptions until China buys more soybeans under an agreement announced in October and until provisions of Trump's massive budget bill take effect later this year.

Soybean farmers will get \$30.88 per acre while corn farmers will receive \$44.36 per acre. Another crop hit hard when China stopped buying was sorghum, and those farmers will get \$48.11 per acre. The amounts are based on a USDA formula on the cost of production.

Farmers say they need more buyers for their crops

But farmers say the aid won't solve all their problems as they continue to deal with the soaring costs of fertilizer, seeds and labor that make it hard to turn a profit right now. Some agricultural trade groups have said they worry that thousands of farmers could go out of business, but others



have said they believe most farmers have the financial resources and equity needed to survive.

Kentucky soybean farmer Caleb Ragland, who was president of the American Soybean Association until recently, said the aid is "a Band-Aid on a deep wound. We need competition and opportunities in the market to make our future brighter."

The President of the National Corn Growers Association Jed Bower also urged the Trump administration to focus on cultivating additional uses for their crops. Farmers will benefit from having more buyers whether it is for ethanol and animal feed at home or for international markets.

"Corn growers have been sounding the alarm about the fact that farmers have been faced with multiple consecutive years of low corn prices and high input costs," Bower said. "While this financial assistance is helpful and welcomed, we urgently need the administration and Congress to develop markets in the United States and abroad that will provide growers with more long-term economic certainty." Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rol-

lins said that is the goal and promised to continue working to open new markets while strengthening the safety net for farmers.

Minnesota Soybean Growers Association President Darin Johnson said the aid number for soybeans fell short of what farmers had been hoping for, so more help could be needed, though this package will help.

Most farmers remain steadfast supporters of Trump even after the disruptions caused by the trade war. They generally support many of his other policies and believe they will get a better trade deal in the end. White House and farmers encouraged by China's purchases

These aid payments will add up to \$11 billion for row crop farmers who raise corn, soybeans, wheat, sorghum and other crops. Another \$1 billion has been set aside for specialty crops and sugar, but the administration hasn't released any details of aid for those crops.

After Trump met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in South Korea in October, the White House said Beijing had promised to buy at least 12

million metric tons of U.S. soybeans by the end of the calendar year, plus 25 million metric tons a year in each of the next three years. Officials have said China is on track to meet the 12 million metric ton goal by the end of February.

As of Dec. 18, China had bought about 6 million metric tons of soybeans, according to the latest USDA's weekly report. Separately, the federal agency reported that China since then bought at least three more batches totaling 600,000 metric tons. Beijing has yet to confirm any commitment to buying 12 million metric tons of soybeans for this season, but the Chinese embassy in Washington said earlier this month that "agricultural trade cooperation between China and the United States is proceeding in an orderly manner."

However, the recent increase in international purchases is encouraging to farmers, said Tim Lust, CEO of the National Sorghum Producers, who has seen more than 1 million metric tons of sorghum purchased in just the past few weeks. Like soybeans, more than half of the sorghum crop is exported each year with China traditionally being the biggest buyer.

The aid payments will be capped at \$155,000 per farmer or entity, and only farms that make less than \$900,000 in adjusted gross income will be eligible. During the first Trump administration, a number of large farms found ways around the payment limits and collected millions.

The USDA says the average size of the 1.88 million farms nationwide was 466 acres last year, but many farmers are much larger than that as larger operations have continued to buy up neighboring farms over time.

Trump's Plan To Seize Venezuela's Oil Faces Major Hurdles

(AP)—President Donald Trump's plan to take control of Venezuela's oil industry and ask American companies to revitalize it after capturing President Nicolás Maduro in a raid isn't likely to have a significant immediate impact on oil prices.

Venezuela's oil industry is in disrepair after years of neglect and international sanctions, so it could take years and major investments before production can increase dramatically. But some analysts are optimistic that Venezuela could double or triple its current output of about 1.1 million barrels of oil a day to return to historic levels fairly quickly.

"While many are reporting Venezuela's oil infrastructure was unharmed by U.S. military actions, it has been decaying for many many years and will take time to rebuild," said Patrick De Haan, who is the lead petroleum analyst at gasoline price tracker GasBuddy.

American oil companies will want a stable regime in the country before they are willing to invest heavily, and the political picture remained uncertain Saturday with Trump saying that the United

States is in charge — while the current Venezuelan vice president argued, before Venezuela's high court ordered her to assume the role of interim president, that Maduro should be restored to power.

"But if it seems like the U.S. is successful in running the country for the next 24 hours, I would say there would be a lot of optimism that U.S. energy companies could come in and revitalize the Venezuelan oil industry fairly quickly," said Phil Flynn, a senior market analyst at the Price Futures Group.

And if Venezuela can grow into an oil production powerhouse, Flynn said "that could cement lower prices for the longer term" and put more pressure on Russia.

Speaking to reporters on Air Force One on Sunday, Trump said oil companies are "going to go in and rebuild this system."

A major shift in oil prices wasn't expected because Venezuela is a member of OPEC, so its production is already accounted for there. And there is currently a surplus of oil on the global market.

The price of U.S. crude oil lost 23 cents early Monday to \$57.09



per barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, gave up 18 cents to \$60.57 per barrel.

Venezuela is known to have the world's largest proven crude oil reserves of approximately 303 billion barrels, according to the U.S. En-

ergy Information Administration. That accounts for roughly 17% of all global oil reserves.

So international oil companies have reason to be interested in Venezuela. Exxon Mobil didn't immediately respond to a request for

comment Saturday. ConocoPhillips spokesperson Dennis Nuss said by email that the company "is monitoring developments in Venezuela and their potential implications for global energy supply and stability. It would be premature to speculate on any future business activities or investments."

Chevron is the only one with significant operations in Venezuela, where it produces about 250,000 barrels a day. Chevron, which first invested in Venezuela in the 1920s, does business in the country through joint ventures with the state-owned company Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., commonly known as PDVSA.

"Chevron remains focused on the safety and wellbeing of our employees, as well as the integrity of our assets. We continue to operate in full compliance with all relevant laws and regulations," Chevron spokesman Bill Turenne said.

But even with those massive reserves, Venezuela has been producing less than 1% of the world's crude oil supply. Corruption, mismanagement and U.S. economic sanctions saw production steadily decline from the 3.5 million bar-

rels per day pumped in 1999 to today's levels.

The problem isn't finding the oil. It's a question of the political environment and whether companies can count on the government to live up to their contracts. Back in 2007, then President Hugo Chávez nationalized much of the oil production and forced major players like ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips out.

"The issue is not just that the infrastructure is in bad shape, but it's mostly about how do you get foreign companies to start pouring money in before they have a clear perspective on the political stability, the contract situation and the like," said Francisco Monaldi, who is the director of the Latin American energy program at Rice University.

But the infrastructure does need significant investment.

"The estimate is that in order for Venezuela to increase from one million barrels per day — that is what it produces today — to four million barrels, it will take about a decade and about a hundred billion dollars of investment," Monaldi said.