



It is time to stop mass deportation

By: Tanya Golash-Boza- March 11, 2013

The United States has witnessed a tremendous rise in the number of people detained and deported since 1997.

Between 1892 and 1997, there were 2.1 million deportations from the US. Since then, there have been nearly twice as many: the sum total of deportations between 1998 and 2012 is over 4.1 million. At current rates, Obama is on track to deport more people in his first six years as President than all deportations prior to 1997.

Alongside deportation rates, detention rates have skyrocketed, from a daily average of 5,532 in 1994 to upwards of 30,000 today.

Mass deportation and detention has cost the US billions of dollars a year. It has taken a budget crisis for the federal government to reconsider its policies. In light of impending budget cuts, the federal government is considering releasing thousands of detainees.

The federal government should reconsider its entire detention and deportation regime because it is misguided and costly.

The most recent escalation in deportations has not been because of a new influx of undocumented immigrants. In fact, fewer people are crossing the border illegally now than when mass deportation began in 1997.

The primary reason we are seeing unprecedented numbers of deportees is that the federal government is spending extraordinary amounts of money on immigration law enforcement. And, it is doing that in the name of keeping the US safe from terrorists and criminals.

There is very little evidence that mass deportation is making the country safer. There may be some credence to the appeal to public safety, but the appeal to terrorism is entirely unfounded. When the government finds terror suspects, it does not deport them. They may be sent to Guantanamo or prosecuted, but they are not among the 400,000 deportees sent almost exclusively to Latin America and the Caribbean each year.

Deporting criminals

According to US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) removal data, 97.5 percent of deportees are sent to the Americas. DHS almost never deports people to countries that the US Department of State identifies as sponsoring terrorism: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Cuba, North

Korea and Sudan. In 2010, for example, 387,242 people were deported. Among these were 55 Iranians, 54 Iraqis, 48 Syrians, 95 Cubans and 21 Sudanese.

Children caught in the middle of
US deportation case

President Obama often touts the fact that he is deporting criminals. However, according to ICE removal data, less than 10 percent of deportees are sent to their countries of birth after being convicted of a violent offence. The other 90 percent either have no criminal conviction or have been convicted of a non-violent offence.

Deportation does not make us safer, but it does destroy families. Last year, 100,000 parents of US citizens were deported - representing a 10-fold increase over the previous decade. Vern, a Guatemalan citizen, is one example.

Vern entered the US in 1991 and applied for political asylum. He received a work permit while waiting for his case to be processed. He found a job in a frozen food processing plant in Ohio where he met Maria, a Honduran woman who was also applying for political asylum.

Each year, they received work permits that allowed them to continue working. Hopeful their cases would eventually be resolved, Vern and Maria married, and had their first child in 1996.

In 1998, Vern received notice he should leave the US - his asylum application had been denied. Vern was devastated - he had established a life in the US, and had few ties to Guatemala. He decided to stay, hoping his wife's application would be approved, and that she could apply for him to legalise his status.

However, before that could happen, in 2009, immigration agents raided his home, took him to detention, and he was deported to Guatemala, leaving behind his wife and two children. Because Vern ignored his deportation order, he was a fugitive alien and thus subject to a raid on his home

Americans may find comfort reading headlines that criminal, fugitive and illegal aliens are being deported. But, the government does not have unlimited resources and deporting people is tremendously expensive. Thus, we must ask: at what cost?

Mass deportation may seem to be the logical solution when we have large numbers of undocumented immigrants. However, it is not the way the country has usually dealt with this issue. It has been much more common historically to find ways to legalise undocumented immigrants.

Mass deportation has been the exception. Why now? Why is the US spending so much money on immigration law enforcement? The reason is that immigration law enforcement has been wrongly conceived of as part of the "War on Terror".

The federal government has an enormous budget, and the citizenry has given the government authorisation to spend a substantial proportion of it on national security. And so it has, primarily through one government agency: DHS.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created in 2003. Since then, it has grown into a massive government agency. The FY 2011 budget for DHS was \$56bn. To put this \$56bn in

perspective, the Department of Education FY 2011 budget was \$77.8bn and the Department of Justice \$29.2bn.

'War on terror'

The rise in detention and deportation over the past decade primarily stems from Executive Branch decisions to expand immigration law enforcement, as part of the broader project of the "War on Terror".

Fully 30 percent of the DHS budget in FY 2011 was directed at immigration law enforcement through Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP). Another 18 percent of the total went to the US Coast Guard and five percent to US Citizenship and Immigration Services - meaning over half of the DHS budget is directed at border security and immigration law enforcement.

A recent report by the Migration Policy Institute found that the US government spends more on federal immigration enforcement than on all other principal federal criminal law enforcement agencies combined. My calculations confirm this: immigration enforcement spending heavily outweighs domestic law enforcement spending.

In FY 2011, the US government spent \$27bn on ICE, CBP and the US Coast Guard. In contrast, the US government spent a total of \$13.7bn on domestic law enforcement, including the FBI, the DEA, the Secret Service, the US Marshal, and Alcohol, Firearms and Tobacco.

Thus, while some detractors may shout "deport them all", we have to realise that the US is spending unprecedented amounts of money and we still have 10 million undocumented immigrants in this country. A much saner approach would be to legalise undocumented immigrants. This is what was done historically, and it is the right thing to do.

The federal government has made it clear what they are capable of: they can set a quota of 400,000 deportees a year and meet it. They can detain over 400,000 people a year.

Fault Lines

Punishment and Profits: Immigration Detention

Now that we have seen that they can do this, it is time to stop. Zealous enforcement of immigration laws over the past decade has barely put a dent in the population of undocumented immigrants in the US. This population has declined from 11 million to 10 million people, yet most experts attribute this decline to the economic recession.

With projections for immigration reform this year, it is time to stop mass deportation. Instead of detaining and deporting people who are in the country without authorisation, DHS could redirect its resources towards legalisation programmes.

A recent report from the Cato Institute found that "comprehensive immigration reform would raise wages, increase consumption, create jobs and generate additional tax revenue". The author, Raul Hinojosa-Ojeda, estimates that "comprehensive immigration reform would yield at least \$1.5 trillion in added US gross domestic product (GDP) over 10 years".

Continuing to enforce immigration laws at the current rate is a colossal waste of resources. In a time of budget crisis, the best thing to do is to stop deporting and detaining people and work on legalisation.

Thousands of immigrant detainees awaiting their hearings can be put on supervised release until their hearing happens. Advocates such as Human Rights First have long fought for more alternatives to detention. Cost-saving is one reason.

Alternative programmes

ICE spends \$2bn a year on detention. Human Rights First calculates that "ICE's alternatives to detention programmes cost 30 cents to \$14 per day, as compared to \$164 per day for detention".

The good news here is that the federal government can easily stop detaining immigrants and quickly save a lot of money. This is because the vast majority of immigrant detainees are not held in federal buildings. Instead, they are held in private detention centres and in county jails which contract out bed space to the federal government.

Relying on private prisons has made it more feasible for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to achieve its quota of 34,000 beds a day.

There are many critiques one could make of the privatisation of prisons. However, the upside of privatisation is that the federal government could cancel its contracts with these detention centres and save a bundle of money. Leslie Berestein calculates that the federal government could save \$3.4m a month for each 1,000 detainees it releases.

Since 84 percent of ICE's detained immigrants are housed in either contracted facilities owned by private companies or in state or local facilities where ICE rents space on contract, it should be relatively seamless for ICE to release them.

Of course, this will be bad news for Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and the GEO Group - the two private prison companies that hold the largest numbers of immigrant detainees. However, that is their problem, not the problem of the federal government.

Mass detention and deportation are costly, ineffective and harmful policies, and must stop.