

Non-criminal immigrants increasingly caught in deportation dragnet

Jeff Ostrowski

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Gloriana Gonzalez fits nobody's idea of a dangerous immigrant. The 43-year-old Venezuelan holds a master's degree, volunteers at her church in Palm Beach Gardens and regularly competes in half-marathons.

But after a July 6 fender bender at her condo complex in Riviera Beach, the other driver called police. When the officer learned Gonzalez spoke little English and didn't have a driver's license, he summoned Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Now facing deportation after overstaying her tourist visa, Gonzalez is being held at a detention center in Pompano Beach. She illustrates the more aggressive enforcement of immigration laws since President Donald Trump entered the Oval Office in January.

Under President Barack Obama, who placed a priority on deporting illegal immigrants with criminal records, ICE typically ignored non-threatening immigrants like Gonzalez.

"She's a good girl," said Gonzalez's sister, Yenisse Gonzalez. "She never has problems."

Now, though, ICE says it is pursuing anyone who is here illegally, regardless of their criminal histories.

"There has been a significant increase in non-criminal arrests because we weren't allowed to arrest them in the past administration," Tom Homan, acting director of ICE, recently told a U.S. House of Representatives committee, according to a report by the news organization ProPublica. "You see more of an uptick in non-criminals because we're going from zero to 100 under a new administration."

The tougher stance brings both praise and criticism. Supporters of stricter immigration enforcement welcome the new trend.

"Arrests by ICE have gone up significantly," Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies. "This is certainly a return to more traditional immigration enforcement, and a distinct departure from the policies of the Obama administration. The message is being sent that the United States again is enforcing immigration laws in a serious way."

But critics say detaining Gloriana Gonzalez means fewer resources are available to pursue more threatening immigrants.

“It’s really a dangerous policy for the United States to begin focusing immigration enforcement efforts on people who have not caused any kind of problem in the United States,” said David Bier, immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. “ICE shouldn’t be wasting its time on people who aren’t threats when there are people on the loose who have actually caused problems in the United States.”

With an estimated 11 million immigrants living illegally in the United States, removing all of them would be an impossible task akin to stopping every motorist who exceeds the speed limit by just one mile per hour, Bier said.

But ICE’s top official isn’t swayed. During a White House press briefing in late June, Homan said ICE will focus on the most dangerous immigrants but also will detain anyone who’s here illegally.

“When people ask us not to arrest those who are not serious criminals I say this: Those who enter our country illegally violated our country’s laws,” Homan said. “It’s a crime to enter this country illegally.”

Milton Perez Gabriel is another undocumented worker with no criminal history who faces deportation. The 24-year-old Guatemalan was doing laundry with his girlfriend in May when their clothes disappeared from a dryer at a Riviera Beach laundromat.

Perez’s girlfriend called police to report the theft. When the officer learned Perez was here without papers, he contacted ICE. Perez also is being held at the Broward Transition Center in Pompano Beach.

Like Gonzalez, Perez has no criminal history. He worked for a tile installation company, and his detention makes immigration advocates fear that immigrants will stop reporting crimes.

“It’s completely unfair and utterly unconstitutional,” said Perez’s attorney, Heriberto Hernandez. “If they keep doing this, people are not going to call the police or file reports.”

The Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office and other local police departments have said they won’t call ICE if they encounter an illegal immigrant who seems non-threatening and doesn’t have a criminal record. A spokeswoman for the Riviera Beach Police Department didn’t respond to requests about the agency’s policy about contacting ICE.

Gloriana Gonzalez left Venezuela, a nation in the throes of an economic collapse and political meltdown, because their family faced political persecution, her sister said. During her time here, she regularly competed in the Miami Half-Marathon, finishing twice in just over 2 hours 13 minutes.

After Gonzalez was detained, her sister set up a GoFundMe account that raised \$8,500 for legal fees. Gonzalez’s attorney, Alejandro Roque, said it’s unlikely she’ll be allowed to stay.

Because Gonzalez has been in the country for more than a year, she's not eligible for asylum. Even if she did seek asylum, the immigration judges who work at the Broward Transition Center reject 95 percent of such requests, Roque said.

"We have no choice but to fight, but it's an uphill battle," Roque said.

An estimated 67,000 immigrants live in Palm Beach County illegally, and immigration attorneys say even those who lack criminal records and hew to the law now face deportation.

"If they stumble upon you and they realize you have no papers," Roque said, "you will end up in a detention center."