



ICE raids net 95 immigrants in Houston region

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April 25, 2017

Immigration agents in Houston last week arrested 95 immigrants here illegally - 86 percent with prior criminal convictions - in the region's first targeted operation under the Donald Trump administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials announced Monday.

It's the latest in a series of publicized raids across the country that the government says show that it is focusing on dangerous criminals, not tearing families apart, and included immigrants convicted of murder and aggravated assault.

"The importance is to secure our communities," said Bret Bradford, acting field office director for Houston. "There's bipartisan support for getting these folks off the street."

Few details were provided about the Houston area raids, which were conducted over a five-day period beginning April 17, but federal agents said the operation was in line with similar efforts in the past, which occur about quarterly.

Immigrants were arrested in Brazoria, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Matagorda, Montgomery, and Wharton counties.

Of the 95 immigrants arrested last week, 82 had criminal histories, including convictions for burglary, child abuse, cocaine and weapons possession, and for re-entering the country after previously being deported, which is a felony.

The agency did not detail the backgrounds of the immigrants it detained, including only short summaries of five arrests. They ranged from a 55-year-old Salvadoran who had been convicted of manslaughter and had previously been deported 30 years ago to a 25-year-old Mexican with a conviction for indecency with a child by exposure.

The last large-scale sweep in Texas, part of a national effort in February, detained more than 680 people across the country, though none in Houston. That included 51 people in the Austin region, which encompasses San Antonio and Laredo, more than half of whom had committed no other crimes beyond being here illegally.

Federal statistics from mid-January through mid-March show that immigration agents arrested 21,362 immigrants, about a third more than in the same period last year under the administration of former President Barack Obama. Arrests of immigrants with no criminal records more than doubled to 5,441 in that time frame.

Advocates have blasted the Trump administration for going after immigrants who have been here for years and haven't committed crimes. They've pointed to a series of highly publicized incidents, including the deportation of Jose Escobar, a Houston father who had been here for nearly two decades and had a provisional work permit from the federal government until agents suddenly revoked it at a routine check-in.

"They are saying they're going after bad hombres and it's increasingly clear that they're not," said Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice Education Fund, an advocacy group in Washington D.C. "We see it increasingly as a PR strategy designed to provide cover for a very hard-edged strategy where virtually anyone is eligible for deportation."

But the federal statistics, first obtained by the Washington Post, show that the number of total arrests, including how many non-criminal immigrants have been detained, are actually more than a quarter lower than in the same time frame in 2014. In that period, 29,238 immigrants were arrested, 7,483 of whom had no previous criminal convictions.

The Obama administration later that year enacted new priorities to focus on deporting immigrants who had been convicted of violent crimes or those who had recently crossed the border, lowering the number of overall deportations.

In total, Obama deported more than 5.2 million immigrants during his presidency, according to an analysis of federal statistics by the Migration Policy Institute, a think tank in Washington D.C.

In an interview Sunday with ABC News, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said the administration's first priority is deporting criminals.

"We don't have the ability to round up everybody and there's no plans to do that," he said. "(But) I believe that everyone who enters the country illegally is subject to being deported."

The idea that immigrants here illegally jeopardize public safety has been a mainstay of both Trump's campaign and his presidency so far.

He began his campaign by criticizing Mexican immigrants for bringing crime after a woman was shot dead on a San Francisco pier by an immigrant who had been deported five times and had several felony convictions. Throughout his race, Trump surrounded himself with the families of victims who have been killed by immigrants, inviting them on stage and making frequent references to their plight.

An executive order Trump signed in January said that people who enter the country illegally pose a "significant threat" and he directed the Department of Homeland Security to publish a weekly list of crimes committed by immigrants who were released from local jails under so-called sanctuary city policies. The report was temporarily suspended this month after including numerous errors.

The president also created a special office in the Department of Homeland Security called Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement, which will be tasked with recording crimes committed by immigrants here illegally and supporting their victims.

The idea was pushed by a once obscure Houston group known as The Remembrance Project, which has since relocated to Washington D.C. and has the close ear of the Trump administration.

Its founder, Maria Espinoza, has said she became interested in immigrant crimes after the 2006 death of Houston Police officer Rodney Johnson. The case sparked nationwide fury, as his killer, an immigrant from Mexico with a long rap sheet who had previously been deported, seemed like the poster child of cracks in the immigration system. He shot Johnson several times in the head while sitting handcuffed in the back of the squad car.

Supporters have praised Trump for bringing the topic to the forefront after years of silence from other politicians.

But critics say he has grossly misrepresented how often immigrants commit crimes.

An analysis of Census data in March by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington D.C., found immigrants here illegally are 44 percent less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans.

Roughly 1.6 percent of immigrant men between 18-39 are in custody, compared with 3.3 percent of those born in the United States, found a similar 2015 analysis of Census data by the American Immigration Council, an advocacy group also in Washington.

The Migration Policy Institute has estimated that there are 820,000 people with criminal convictions in the country illegally, including 300,000 with felony convictions.

The federal government currently has the resources to deport about 400,000 immigrants a year.

Three of those counties targeted in the latest raids - Montgomery, Brazoria and Galveston - are among 19 across Texas that have applied to partner with immigration agents in a controversial jail screening program called 287(g). The Harris County sheriff's office dropped its partnership earlier this year because of costs.