

MORNING SUN

Under Trump, old deportation orders get new life

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For years, immigrants facing deportation have been allowed to stay in the U.S. provided they show up for regular check-ins with federal deportation agents and stay out of trouble. After a brief meeting, they're usually told to return months later to check in again.

Now, in cases spanning from Michigan to California, some of these immigrants are being told their time here is up.

Immigrants who already have deportation orders and were allowed to stay in the country under the prior administration have become a target under President Donald Trump's new immigration policies, with some getting arrested on the spot during check-ins with officers. Such arrests have dismayed family members and sent chills through immigrant communities.

In other instances, immigrants have been fitted with ankle-monitoring bracelets. Others have been released much like they were during President Barack Obama's administration in what immigration attorneys say appears to be a random series of decisions based more on detention space than public safety.

"Everywhere, people going in to report are just absolutely terrified," said Stacy Tolchin, a Los Angeles immigration attorney.

Agents still consider requests to delay deportations at immigrants' regularly scheduled check-ins if, for example, someone has a medical condition, said David Marin, who oversees enforcement and removal operations for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Los Angeles. But decisions are made on an individual basis, and efforts are being stepped up to procure travel documents from foreign countries to send people back home.

"They still have the ability to file a stay, but again, we're looking at it in a different light," Marin said. "There has to be an end game here."

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Immigration and Customs Enforcement said it is tracking nearly 970,000 immigrants with deportation orders. The majority — 82 percent — have no criminal record, the agency said. ICE declined to say how many must regularly report to authorities or are tracked by ankle monitors, and it is unclear how many are being arrested.

Trump boosted immigration arrests by 38 percent in the early days of his administration, but deportations fell from a year ago as activity on the U.S.-Mexico border slowed.

For authorities keen on showing they're beefing up immigration enforcement, immigrants who already have deportation orders are seen as an easy target. They can be removed from the country more quickly than newly arrested immigrants, whose cases can drag on for years in immigration court proceedings and appeals.

"I just assume they figure this is an easy removal. All we have to do is deport this person, and that adds to our numbers of people who are out of the United States," said Heather Prendergast, chair of the American Immigration Lawyers Association's National Immigration and Customs Enforcement Liaison Committee.

Many immigrants with old deportation orders have lived in the United States for years and set down roots here despite having no legal status, which deportation agents were known to weigh to decide who was a priority for removal.

Under the Obama administration, immigration lawyers said their clients often were told they faced no immediate risk of being deported and could temporarily remain, so long as they committed no crimes.

In Michigan, Jose Luis Sanchez-Ronquillo reported to authorities for more than four years before he was arrested at an April check-in and sent to a Louisiana detention facility. The 36-year-old father of two came into contact with police during a traffic stop and lost his immigration case in 2012. But he was then repeatedly allowed to stay, said Shanta Driver, his lawyer.

In Virginia, 33-year-old Cesar Lara was detained in May after living here for a decade. The Mexican house painter wound up with a deportation order after he was arrested in 2012, when officials stopped him for removing wood from a forest, said his mother, Maria De Lara.

"(Trump) said they were just going to deport pure criminals and bad people, and my son is not a criminal," she said. "He's working for the community."

It's hard to know how many immigrants with deportation orders are being detained. In Atlanta, immigration attorney Charles Kuck said one in five of his clients with scheduled check-ins has been detained since Trump took office, something that hardly ever happened during the prior administration.

Immigration lawyers said they tell clients they must attend required check-ins, and immigrants usually do, hoping to be allowed to stay and avoid the prospect of deportation agents showing up at their homes.

Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, said he believes deportations will rise as the Trump administration continues to arrest immigrants here illegally and that authorities will focus more on the interior of the country as activity on the southern border declines.

"These are people who have had their chance at due process, and it is just Obama decided to let them stay," said Krikorian, who wants stricter limits on immigration. "It is a perfectly defensible and perfectly appropriate use of their resources to start with these people who are already ordered deported."

While those supporting Trump see the shift as a necessary fix to a dysfunctional immigration system, critics say politics is driving the change.

Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, said authorities already are deporting immigrants from the jails, and illegal immigration from Mexico has waned, prompting the Trump administration to look for ways to satisfy campaign supporters.

“The administration ran on this phantom problem, and now they’re going to have to big-time deliver on their promises,” Nowrasteh said.