

US sweep for illegal immigrants: Is Obama searching for a middle ground?; The roundup of 2,901 illegal immigrants with substantial criminal records was the result of the widest net ever thrown by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

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Byline: Patrik Jonsson Staff writer

Body

A seven-day **sweep** that rounded up 2,901 **illegal immigrants** with substantial **criminal** records could be a sign that the Obama administration is trying to find a middle ground on immigration policies.

The roundup was the result of the widest net ever thrown by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the number of **illegal immigrants** nabbed is one of the largest totals.

Since this summer in particular, the Obama administration has come under criticism from Hispanic groups and some Democrats who say it's too concerned with **arresting** and deporting **illegal immigrants** for minor offenses. Yet on the other hand, tea party groups and other conservatives say that the administration has not taken nearly a hard enough line on **illegal** immigration.

Obama officials appear to be navigating between these positions. This summer, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) ordered that immigration agents use "prosecutorial discretion" to focus on actual **criminals** rather than law-abiding **illegal immigrants**, including students and the elderly, who have been **swept** up on technicalities or by local authorities under the Secure Communities program.

And the seven-day **sweep**, which ended this week, is part of the White House's focus on deporting **criminals** and "egregious immigration law violators," according to ICE. Among those rounded up were people convicted of manslaughter, sex-crime offenders, and drug traffickers.

"The administration is making a finer distinction with these **sweeps** - that we're focusing less on the kind of residual category of **immigrants** and more on **criminals**," says John Garcia, an immigration policy expert at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "For the administration, it becomes more of a calculation: What policy carries the lesser damage?"

The **sweep**, which went across all 50 states and four US territories, was part of Operation Cross Check, which has steadily been building steam since it carried out its first raid in December 2009. So far, "Cross Check" has resulted in a total of 7,400 **arrests** - the majority of which have come in the **past** three months.

In all, ICE has **arrested** or deported more than 109,700 **criminal immigrants** this year alone. One million **illegal immigrants** with **criminal** records are in US, ICE estimates.

"You are going to see a sustained focus on **criminal** offenders from this agency," ICE Director John Morton said at a press conference Wednesday. "These are not the kind of people we want walking our streets."

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More than 1,600 of those arrested in the most recent sweep had felony convictions, and an additional 1,282 had multiple convictions, ICE says. A total of 386 were people who had been deported previously and had reentered the country.

Law enforcement hailed the sweep as a victory for communities across the United States.

"When we focus on the arrest and removal of convicted criminal aliens we get an immediate payback in our communities," Vincent Archibeque, acting field office director of ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations in New England, said in a statement.

But there is some resistance to the magnitude and breadth of the sweeps, even as they've become more focused on whom they target. This year, advocacy groups took notice as Hispanics became the No. 1 minority population being sent to federal prison, largely because of sweeps like Cross Check. Hispanics now make up 16 percent of the US population.

This week's sweep also comes on the heels of conflict within DHS over the Secure Communities program, which allows local law enforcement to check the immigration status of suspects against a national database. Earlier this month, Arturo Venegas, former police chief in Sacramento, Calif., resigned from a Secure Communities task force, saying that recommendations to reform the initiative did not go far enough to ensure that those detained by ICE for minor offenses would not be deported.

Governors of states like Illinois, New York, and Massachusetts have threatened to ignore federal mandates that municipalities adopt Secure Communities, largely because of concerns that too many noncriminal immigrants are being caught up in immigration courts.

The raids have also raised some concerns. Even though their aim is to capture convicted criminals, "they're still unsettling for areas where people live - to the point where some law enforcement have articulated that [the sweeps] affect how they do their job" in terms of maintaining healthy relationships with Hispanic communities, says Mr. Garcia of the University of Michigan.

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