

Eyes on illegal immigrants; Cobb looks to deport lawbreakers

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

October 26, 2006 Thursday, Main Edition

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

Section: EDITORIAL; Pg. 19A

Length: 938 words

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Body

It is testimony to the utter impotence of Congress and the federal immigration bureaucracy that it falls on the **Cobb** County Sheriff's Department to ensure that people in the country illegally who are convicted of crimes are **deported**.

While Congress wasted time over the last year debating how long and how fancy a new fence on the border with Mexico should be --- and how many National Guard units would be needed to help the Border Patrol get control of it --- it paid little attention, and appropriated too few dollars, to track down those **illegal immigrants** already here who are committing mayhem in communities and overcrowding local jails.

Federal immigration law severely restricts what local police agencies can and can't do regarding **illegal immigrants**, and rightfully so. The courts have ruled that enforcing immigration laws is the federal government's responsibility.

Local police agencies shouldn't be wasting time and money checking the paperwork on day laborers. Trouble is, Congress prefers to concentrate its efforts on catching potential landscapers and busboys crossing the border than spend what it will take to track down the drug runners, methamphetamine sales agents and human traffickers who are the real threats to communities that have been hard hit by **illegal** immigration.

So the **Cobb** County sheriff wants his deputies trained in how to get the **deportation** process started when **illegal immigrants** show up in the county jail charged with local crimes. The county will use a little-known provision of federal immigration law that allows for a limited role for local law enforcement --- working in coordination with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency --- to make sure **illegal immigrants** charged with local crimes don't get sprung from jail, never to be heard from again.

Cobb is one of the first local police agencies in the state to utilize the power --- encouraged by a bill approved by the 2006 General Assembly --- to deal with immigration issues. The Georgia State Patrol has also indicated it wants the training. That's because even when **illegal immigrants** are convicted of crimes in state courts and have served their sentences in state prisons, many of them are released and relocate before federal officials get around to **deporting** them.

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The subject of crime in **illegal immigrant** communities is always a touchy one. Advocates hate to deal with it, preferring instead to paint a picture of low-paid, hard-working folks who come to America to eke out a living they can't get for themselves and their families in their home countries. That's not a false perception. Most **illegal immigrants** come here exactly for that reason.

Unfortunately, many do not. A Government Accountability Office study in 2005 found that **illegal immigrants** jailed in this country, on average, are arrested eight times before being **deported**. And as homicides and other serious crimes rise in metro Atlanta counties --- fueled, at least in part by **immigrant-on-immigrant** crime and gang violence --- perceptions change. Residents of affected neighborhoods are demanding that something be done.

Federal prosecutors and state law enforcement authorities now talk openly about metro Atlanta being the largest hub of **illegal** drug activity in all the Southeast --- including Miami. Much of the drug trade here originates out of Central and South America and Mexico. Georgia Attorney General Thurbert Baker calls the manufacturing and distribution of methamphetamine in the Atlanta area the most serious crime problem the state faces.

On Tuesday, federal officials arrested three "Mexican citizens" --- to use the newspaper's description of the trio --- in a raid on a house in a quiet Clayton County neighborhood where they discovered 145 pounds of crystal methamphetamine and 72 kilograms of cocaine valued at \$27 million.

A week ago, two men convicted of running a meth "superlab" out of a home in a Smyrna neighborhood were each sentenced to 15 years in federal prison. Another man awaits sentencing in connection with the same lab, where Drug Enforcement Administration officials in February 2005 found 35 pounds of pure d-pseudoephedrine hydrochloride --- enough to yield 20 or more pounds of pure meth. All three men were in the country illegally.

Six months earlier, the same house was the scene of a raid where federal agents seized 400 pounds of marijuana, as well as chemicals and equipment to make meth. The house is owned by a Hispanic couple who claim to have been unaware of what was happening there.

Busting a superlab attracts some press attention. But much of the crime connected to **illegal immigrants** comes in smaller doses --- armed robberies of cab drivers and convenience stores, assaults by rival gang members, hit-and-run accidents by unlicensed drivers.

Many incidents don't even make the police blotter. But every arrest is felt in county jails, where those charged with the crimes eventually wind up and are processed through the state judicial system. (Last year, voters in **Cobb** County approved spending \$130 million to expand the jail, which has become overcrowded, in part, by the number of **illegal immigrants** there awaiting trial.)

That's why getting the sheriff's deputies trained is important. **Cobb** jail officials will know, immediately, which of their inmates are already facing **deportation** orders for previous crimes. More importantly, they will be in a position to start that complicated process for others convicted of crimes locally --- rather than having to wait on an unresponsive federal bureaucracy to do it.

* Mike King is a member of the editorial board. His column runs Thursdays.

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Graphic

Photo: ANDY SHARP / StaffCrowding at the **Cobb** County jail is compounded by the number of **illegal immigrants** arrested for crimes. **Cobb** is one of the first local police agencies in the state to utilize the power to deal with immigration issues.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: Column

Publication-Type: Newspapers

Subject: IMMIGRATION (94%); **ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS** (92%); CORRECTIONS (90%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (90%); POLICE FORCES (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); SHERIFFS (90%); **DEPORTATION** (89%); BORDER CONTROL (89%); CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS (89%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (89%); PRISONS (89%); CRIMINAL OFFENSES (89%); SENTENCING (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); ARRESTS (78%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (78%); APPROPRIATIONS (78%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (78%); JAIL SENTENCING (77%); GOVERNMENT CONTROLLERS & AUDITORS (73%); HOMICIDE (72%); **ILLEGAL** DRUGS (71%); APPROVALS (69%); METHAMPHETAMINE (66%); HUMAN TRAFFICKING (51%)

Industry: GOVERNMENT CONTROLLERS & AUDITORS (73%)

Geographic: GEORGIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: October 26, 2006