

## *On the Lam by the Thousands, Pursued by the Dozens*

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### **Body**

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THE math isn't pretty.

As of February, there were an estimated 636,000 "fugitive aliens" in the United States -- foreigners who have ignored orders to leave the country. They may have entered illegally and been caught (about 60 percent of all fugitives), or they may have visited legally but then overstayed their visas or committed crimes.

In any case, they are on the government's list and the government wants them out. Taken together, they would rank as America's 18th-largest city, ahead of Baltimore, Boston and Seattle.

Washington (the 27th-largest city) has deputized a force of about 318 officers in the Department of Homeland Security to track and apprehend the fugitives -- a backlog of roughly 2,000 fugitives per officer.

Last week, Homeland Security's inspector general said the department was not on course to overcome that backlog. The number of fugitives nearly doubled in five years after the September 2001 attacks.

John P. Torres, the director of detention and removal operations for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said his workers were making progress. That effort began in 2003 with a few dozen officers, and with time and resources, he says, it can tackle the backlog.

Last year, officials ended their practice of "catch and release," in which only about a third of alleged immigration violators caught were detained, for lack of housing. Most of those released did not show up for court dates and became fugitives. Now, Mr. Torres said, virtually all are detained.

No one really knows how many fugitives there are, since the government's tracking software -- the Deportable Alien Control System, or DACS -- is about 25 years old and considered unreliable. It is supposed to be replaced by January of next year.

<http://www.nytimes.com>

### **Graphic**

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ChartAt LargeEach figure represents 10,000 fugitive aliens in the United States.  
SEPTEMBER 2001 -- An estimated 332,000 fugitives.  
FEBRUARY 2007 -- An estimated 636,000 fugitives, up 92 percent since 2001.  
CapturedSince the

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first enforcement teams were established in 2003, they and other officials have apprehended about 45,000 fugitives: There are now 53 teams. Each has about six officers to track and arrest fugitives, according to the Homeland Security inspector general. (Officials won't release exact staffing numbers.) Another 22 teams are supposed to begin work by year's end. Their goal: 1,000 apprehensions per team yearly, about 167 per officer. If the new teams were in place now, the current backlog would equal about 1,413 fugitives per officer. (Sources by Department of Homeland Security and Office of the Inspector General)

Census Bureau [city population figures])

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