

Fugitive illegal immigrants targeted in federal sweeps

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Body

In recent months, newly created teams of **federal** agents have arrested thousands of **illegal immigrants** who have lived and worked in the United States for years without interference. Most have been deported immediately.

Since October, 13,089 **immigrants** have been detained, a more than 60 percent increase from the same period in 2004-05. The arrests peaked in May, when agents picked up a record 1,600 people nationwide, including in New Jersey, Nevada, Texas and California, which have large **immigrant** populations.

Immigrant-rights advocates called the **sweeps** excessive and heavy-handed, while supporters of tougher enforcement said that even more must be done to discourage **illegal** immigration.

"Whenever we do any sort of enforcement action, we get praise and criticism," said Dean Boyd, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which is overseeing the arrests. "Immigration is a polarizing and divisive issue."

The spike in deportations comes as the Bush administration is under pressure to improve its detection of **illegal immigrants** inside the country, rather than concentrating its efforts largely at the U.S.-Mexico border.

ICE officials said they were arresting more **immigrants** because more agents had been assigned full time to find them. Since October, the number of **fugitive**-search teams assigned to finding **immigrants** where they live has increased from 18 to 38. The agency plans 14 more teams by the end of September.

"It's a higher priority," said John Torres, the director of ICE's detention and removal operations.

Some **immigrants** complain of being treated harshly.

Nancy Arseno, a U.S. citizen, said her husband, Mario, was arrested two weeks ago at the family's home in Las Vegas by a team of 15 armed officers. The officers handcuffed him even though he wasn't resisting, and they refused to allow him to say goodbye to the couple's six children, she said.

Arseno said that the officers were polite, but that she thought they should have given her husband a chance to turn himself in voluntarily.

"It didn't need to be so dramatic," she said. "They acted like he had killed someone."

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Mario Arseno, 31, came to the United States legally in 1993 on a work visa. A traveling musician from Peru, he forgot to renew his visa, his wife said, and an immigration judge ordered him deported in 1995. She said he never received any deportation notice and he missed his chance to challenge it in court.

Nancy Arseno said immigration officers could have found her husband easily because the family had lived at the same address for years.

"I don't understand why they waited until now," she said. "If they really didn't want people like my husband in the country, why did they allow him to work, pay taxes, and marry a U.S. citizen?"

Immigrant-rights advocates said that many of the **immigrants** had been living in communities for years and that their only crime was living illegally in the United States.

"The show of force is so over the top," said Cheryl Little, executive director of the Florida **Immigrant** Advocacy Center in Miami. "These **sweeps** are conducted so fast and so unexpectedly that those ensnarled have no chance to prepare for their departure."

But John Keeley, a spokesman for the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, which favors tougher immigration enforcement, called the **sweeps** "largely symbolic."

"The administration is responding belatedly and under intense pressure to do more about interior enforcement," Keeley said. "But you would need thousands of more officers to put a dent in the numbers."

Each year, the list of **fugitive immigrants** grows by more than 40,000. According to government estimates, more than 500,000 **immigrants** remain in the country even after being ordered to leave.

Torres said officers were not arbitrarily arresting people off the streets, but rather **targeting immigrants** who had been ordered deported after exhausting all appeals. Of the 45,728 **immigrants** arrested since March 2003, when the first **fugitive**-search teams were created, 21,367 had criminal records.

"The people we're arresting have already been afforded all of their due-process rights," Torres said.

In the past, finding **fugitives** was a much lower priority because of a lack of resources.

The agency notified **immigrants** they'd been ordered deported with the expectation that they would turn themselves in. But agents called the deportation orders "run letters" because few **immigrants** showed up. Most simply disappeared.

Once **immigrants** became **fugitives**, officers were supposed to research locations where they might be living. But the research could take hours, and officers often weren't given the time to find the **immigrants**.

In 2003, ICE began forming special **fugitive**-search teams in regions with the highest concentrations of **illegal immigrants**. Officers are assigned to the teams full time and given special training.

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Fugitive illegal immigrants targeted in federal sweeps

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