

## **Vast Negligence Reported In Granting of Citizenship**

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### **Body**

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The Clinton Administration allowed about 180,000 immigrants to become American citizens before checks for criminal records had been completed, two House Republicans said today.

In a drive that Republicans say was motivated by election-year politics, 1.3 million legal immigrants applied to become citizens from August 1995 to September 1996. The Justice Department briefed the legislators on early results of an audit the department ordered last year, which is now trying to determine how many of the 180,000 unchecked immigrants had convictions for felonies like murder or rape that would have disqualified them.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service has said it rejected 18 percent of the more than one million applicants in background checks last year. Those rejected included people with criminal convictions. So in theory several thousand convicted felons could have been among the 180,000 who were naturalized without proper screening.

Of the remaining immigrant applications checked, the Justice Department has told Congress that 71,557 people with arrest records became citizens, as well. Of that total, 10,800 were arrested for felonies; if further checking finds that some were convicted of felonies, they may be disqualified from **citizenship**, said Carole Florman, a Justice Department spokeswoman. The remaining 60,757 were found to have been arrested for administrative violations or misdemeanors that would not disqualify an applicant for **citizenship**.

Republican lawmakers have said the Administration disregarded procedural safeguards to meet its goal of naturalizing 1.3 million people in time to vote in November.

"In its unprecedented push to rush through a million new citizens, potential voters all, the I.N.S. may have allowed dangerous criminals on to our streets," said Representative Dennis Hastert, the Illinois Republican who heads the Government Reform and Oversight subcommittee investigating the immigration service's handling of the matter.

The immigration service has denied the accusations, saying its **Citizenship** USA program had tried to deal with a surge in applications that had tripled from 342,000 in 1992.

Agency officials today cautioned against drawing too many conclusions from what they said were preliminary audit figures, but they pledged to take away the **citizenship** of anyone who did not deserve it.

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"In any cases we find where someone was wrongly naturalized, we'll revoke that **citizenship**," said Eric Andrus, a spokesman for the immigration agency.

That may be easier said than done. In the 1995 fiscal year, the latest year with available figures, the agency revoked the **citizenship** of 20 people in procedures that typically took months to complete. If the **citizenship** of hundreds or thousands of people need to be revoked, that could pose an administrative nightmare.

The immigration service acknowledged last fall that tens of thousands of immigrants became citizens before the requisite checks were completed, including 30,000 in New York City.

But the numbers released today by two House Republicans far surpassed the estimates that even the Administration's harshest critics had made.

"It's worse than I expected," said Representative Lamar Smith, the Texas Republican who heads the Immigration Subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee. "This is a complete outrage and a travesty of what should be a completely honest, straightforward and nonpolitical process."

The panels led by Mr. Hastert and Mr. Smith plan a hearing on March 5 to investigate the problem.

Those figures were **reported** by Copley News Service today.

In response to the Congressional criticism in the fall, the immigration service took steps intended to correct the problem. In December, the agency announced that **citizenship** would not be **granted** until the Federal Bureau of Investigation had completed an applicant's fingerprint check. In the past, the bureau had 60 days to complete the task, a deadline that was extended to 120 days in June. If the F.B.I. had not returned the fingerprints within that time, the immigration service assumed the applicant had no problems and was cleared to become a citizen.

But in the last several months, employees of the immigration service have complained that the system was badly flawed. A clerk in Los Angeles **reported** that the fingerprint cards of 4,000 to 6,000 **citizenship** applicants had been thrown in the garbage. The clerk's supervisor denied her accusation.

As a result of the criticisms, the Justice Department ordered the immigration service to review the more than one million applications processed since the **citizenship** program started. KPMG Peat Marwick, the accounting firm, along with the inspector general of the Justice Department and the General Accounting Office, were directed to oversee the review.

The Assistant Attorney General for administration, Stephen R. Colgate, is supervising the review and has briefed the Congressional committees two times, Justice Department officials said.

Of the 180,000 cases with insufficient background verifications, fingerprint checks were never completed on 113,126 because the forms were improperly completed or the prints were smudged. In 66,398 cases, the immigration service has found no record that it had ever asked the F.B.I. to check the applicants' backgrounds.

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