

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION; Feds deport 5,000 from Ga.

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Body

Georgia ranks sixth among states for the number of **illegal** immigrants **deported** through a **federal** fingerprint-sharing program now used in jails across the country, public records show.

Since the November 2009 start of the Secure Communications program in **Georgia**, 5,044 **illegal** immigrants caught in the state have been **deported** or have voluntarily left the United States, according to U.S. **Immigration** and Customs Enforcement figures.

These **deportations** are happening amid a fierce debate over **illegal immigration** in **Georgia**, which enacted a tough **immigration** enforcement law last year. Parts of that law are being challenged in **federal** court.

The numbers underscore **Georgia**'s large population of **illegal** immigrants --- and they raise questions about which ones the government is focusing on for **deportation**.

They also point to a surprise: Nearly half of those **deported** --- or 1,968 **illegal** immigrants involved people who were booked into Gwinnett County's jail.

That is more than twice the total of any other **Georgia** county.

The analysis by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the Austin American-Statesman, both of Cox Media Group, found that of the more than 2,100 counties participating in the fingerprint-sharing program, Gwinnett ranked 16th for **deportations**.

Georgia's high ranking is not surprising, given that the Pew Hispanic Center estimated there were 425,000 **illegal** immigrants in **Georgia** as of 2010, seventh-highest among the states.

Gwinnett Sheriff Butch Conway said his county's high ranking makes sense to him. "I'm not surprised by that because we have such a heavy **illegal** immigrant population in Gwinnett," he said.

Conway pointed out that Gwinnett also participates in the **federal** 287(g) program, which empowers sheriff's deputies to investigate the **immigration** status of people jailed for other crimes.

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The sheriff credited the deportations with helping reduce the costs to county taxpayers of incarcerating illegal immigrants. His office provided statistics showing the county has spent \$233,020 since January of last year on medical care for jail inmates who have been considered for deportation by ICE.

In contrast to Gwinnett, only 331 people who spent time behind bars in Fulton County have been deported through Secure Communities, even though Fulton is the most populous county in the state. Fulton started participating in the program in September 2010.

A Fulton Sheriff's Office spokeswoman wrote in an email that her county's jail "processes a relatively small percentage of non-citizens. Names of all non-citizens who are flagged for their immigration status are submitted to Immigration (ICE) as required by law."

The closest county to Gwinnett in deportations is DeKalb, with 852 since October 2009.

Millions of prints

Under Secure Communities, people booked into a jail are fingerprinted, and those prints are checked against millions of others in a U.S. Homeland Security Department database. The federal government collects fingerprints from a variety of people, including those caught crossing the U.S. border illegally.

When the federal government finds matches, it could seek to deport people held in a participating jail. But under federal policy that would be done only after charges have been adjudicated and they have completed sentences for any crimes committed in the U.S.

Three-quarters of all counties nationwide now use the program, which has been phased in since Harris County, Texas, home of the city of Houston, started participating in October 2008. The goal is for it to be up and running in all counties nationwide by 2013.

California holds the No. 1 spot among states, with 65,738 deportations, followed by Texas, Arizona, Florida and North Carolina.

Counties in all five of those states started participating in the fingerprint system months before Georgia's counties did.

The program, though, has its critics.

Critics claim injustice

Civil and immigrant rights activists have demonstrated against Secure Communities in Georgia and called on the Obama administration to scrap it.

They complain the program is tearing families apart, distracting police from more important priorities and funneling people who have committed minor crimes --- including traffic offenses --- into the deportation system.

Nationally, the largest single group of people deported through the system had committed the least serious offenses --- those punishable by less than one year behind bars, the records show.

In Georgia, for example, 34 percent of the inmates deported through the program fell into that category. Nineteen percent had committed the most serious crimes, such as murder, rape or the sexual abuse of a minor.

Teodoro Maus, president of the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, is one of the leading critics of the program in Georgia.

"If it is going to exist, it should be totally overhauled," said Maus, a former Mexican consul general in Atlanta. "Let's get rid of the dangerous criminals who are walking our streets, but those are not the ones who are driving without a driver's license."

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Citing limited resources, ICE officials say they are focusing on deporting people who have committed violent crimes, including killers, rapists and robbers.

They are also targeting people who have recently crossed the nation's borders illegally, have repeatedly violated immigration laws or are fugitives from immigration courts.

An ICE spokesman said his agency's deportation statistics don't reflect some people who have been convicted of more serious crimes and who are still serving their sentences behind bars in the United States.

"ICE has adopted common-sense policies," ICE spokesman Vincent Picard said, "that focus our limited resources in a way that best enhances public safety, border security and the integrity of the immigration system."

Deportations

Here are the top 10 states by deportations connected to the Secure Communities program. This also reflects when counties in those states started participating in the program and when the system was operating in all counties in those states.

State Startup Operating Deported

date statewide

California 5/26/2009 2/23/2011 65,738

Texas 10/27/2008 9/28/2010 38,751

Arizona 12/23/2008 10/26/2010 19,250

Florida 1/22/2009 6/22/2010 10,668

North Carolina 11/12/2008 3/15/2011 5,155

Georgia 11/17/2009 12/6/2011 5,044

Virginia 3/9/2009 6/15/2010 3,578

Nevada 7/13/2010 * 1,715

Utah 3/23/2010 12/20/2011 1,682

South Carolina 9/8/2010 9/20/2011 1,489

Georgia County Startup Date Deported

Gwinnett 11/17/2009 1,968

DeKalb 11/17/2009 852

Clayton 11/17/2009 500

Cobb 9/8/2010 482

Fulton 9/8/2010 331

Cherokee 11/16/2010 74

Forsyth 12/14/2010 45

*Three Nevada counties had not started participating in Secure Communities as of March 6.

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Estimates of illegal immigrants as of 2010

California 2,550,000

Texas 1,650,000

Florida 825,000

Georgia 425,000

Arizona 400,000

North Carolina 325,000

Virginia 210,000

Nevada 190,000

Utah 110,000

South Carolina 55,000

Sources: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Pew Hispanic Center

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