

# **Border crossers get caught, slip away; NO PLACE TO HOLD ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS**

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## **Body**

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Beefed-up enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico **border** since Sept. 11, 2001, has substantially increased the number of arrests of **illegal immigrants**, but tens of thousands of captured non-Mexicans continue to be released into the United States because there is **no place** to **hold** them, according to experts and immigration officials.

The vast majority simply **slip away** inside the country after being issued a "notice to appear" for a deportation hearing -- documents known to **Border** Patrol agents as "notices to disappear." The success of **border crossers** who stay in the United States through this "**catch**-and-release" process has encouraged others who hope to enter the country the same way.

In a dozen speeches since October, President Bush has vowed to replace **catch**-and-release with the "**catch**-and-return" of 160,000 "other than Mexican" (OTM) **immigrants** arrested each year. The goal is to deny court hearings to all but asylum-seekers, speed deportations and make the most of limited detention space in jails, prisons and immigration centers.

But as Washington debates the overhaul of the nation's immigration laws and Bush prepares to address the nation on **border** protection Monday, the persistent **catch**-and-release problem is a reminder of costly and unintended consequences of past enforcement efforts.

Even if authorities overcome operational and legal hurdles to curb the flow of people from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and other countries, experts say they will be addressing only a tiny sliver of the **illegal** immigration problem. The U.S. **Border** Patrol arrested nearly 1.2 million people last year -- the vast majority of them Mexicans who were returned across the **border** -- and estimates that 500,000 others evaded capture.

"What Congress has built is one of the most expensive revolving doors in the world," said Victor Cerda, former chief of staff of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. Without broader changes, he said, "You're going to be here in 10 years, with another 20 million aliens."

Since the founding of the Department of Homeland Security, which sought to deter **illegal** crossings with a show of force, arrests of non-Mexican **border crossers** have tripled, from 49,545 in 2003 to 155,000 in 2005. But there has not been a corresponding support for detention beds, courts, inland enforcement or diplomatic and administrative reforms.

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As a result, the spike in arrests backfired, because there was no place to put the tens of thousands of new detainees. Overwhelmed immigration courts have been unable to keep up.

Nor could the Border Patrol immediately send non-Mexicans back to Mexico, like most of the people it catches each year, who are free to simply try to cross the border again. Mexico does not accept other countries' nationals, forcing the agency to house them at an annual cost of \$35,000 per bed.

As arrests climbed last year, Border Patrol agents released 70 percent of non-Mexicans into the country. Of those released and later ordered to leave the country, only 18 percent do.

Federal statistics show the result, which has enraged border communities. Once arrested and released, the number of illegal immigrants who failed to appear in court more than tripled from 29,550 in 2003 to 97,868 in 2005, or 60 percent of cases, up from 32 percent.

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