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## **Nationwide sweep nets more than 2,000 suspected illegal immigrants**

**Associated Press**

BOSTON — A swarm of federal immigration agents sped silently, headlights off, down a Boston side street early today and surrounded an apartment house.

"Police! Policia! Police!" yelled Daniel Monico, a deportation officer, holding his badge to a window where someone had pulled back the curtain. "Open the door!"

Moments later, agents led a dazed-looking Jose Ferreira Da Silva, 35, out in handcuffs. The Brazilian had been arrested in 2002 and deported, but had slipped back into the country. He now faces up to 20 years in prison.

In a blitz that began May 26, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has arrested nearly 2,100 illegal immigrants across the country. Officials said the raids are aimed at child molesters, gang members and other violent criminals, as well as people like Da Silva who sneaked back into the country after a judge threw them out.

The crackdown is called Operation Return to Sender. The operation's first arrests were announced today in Houston.

"This sends a message," said Monico, standing outside the gray Victorian apartment where Da Silva had been hiding. "When we deport you, we're serious."

An Associated Press reporter and photographer accompanied a fugitive task force as it made Operation Return to Sender raids Tuesday night and early today.

The operation has caught more than 140 immigrants with convictions for sexual offenses against children; 367 known gang members, including street soldiers in the deadly Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13; and about 640 people who had already been deported once, immigration officials said. The numbers include more than 720 arrests in California alone.

More than 800 people arrested already have been deported.

"This is a massive operation," said Marc Raimondi, a spokesman for immigration enforcement or ICE, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security. "We are watching the country's borders from the inside."

In New England, officials said the sweeps have caught more than 150, including 75 who had come back after being deported.

ICE has a network of 35 fugitive teams across the country. The 2006 budget increased that number to 52, and the Bush administration is pushing for 70 by 2007.

The challenge, agents said, is staggering.

There are more than 500,000 "fugitive aliens" who have been deported by judges and either slipped back into the country or never left. There is often a disconnect between

local and state prisons and the federal government that allows illegal immigrants to serve time and be released without being transferred to federal officials for deportation.

The work that led to the series of arrests over the past 20 days began last winter. Agents in Boston, for example, began scouting targets four months ago, conducting street surveillance and following up leads from confidential informants.

"It's a lot of preparation, and it's a lot of patience," said Jim Martin, deputy director for ICE's New England field office. "All for a couple minutes of adrenaline."

During the raid late Tuesday, the federal squad, which includes a Boston police sergeant detective, wore bulging bulletproof vests and stiff Kevlar gloves to protect their hands from needles, knives and rusty fences.

Badges dangled on chains around their necks as they passed around wanted posters and shined flashlights on the face of a 24-year-old Latvian man who had served prison time for assaulting a police officer.

The team moved in the dark, climbing fences and hiding behind parked cars to encircle a three-story house in Boston's Allston-Brighton neighborhood. All at once they emerged from the shadows. A half-dozen agents filled the front porch, their knocks on the door echoing down the block. The target had moved, the agents learned, and a team split off and caught him in Weymouth, about 15 miles south of the city.

Another man caught in the recent blitz was a Salvadoran gang member who was convicted in a stabbing that left a 13-year-old boy paralyzed. Agents caught him working at Budget Rental Car at Boston's Logan Airport.

"The problems with immigration aren't going to be solved overnight," Raimondi said as the team sped toward another raid. "You start chipping away at it ... The more teams we get up and running, the more dangerous people we are going to get off the streets."