

5,000 deported from Georgia

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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 Secure Communities program started here in November of 2009, 5,044 noncitizens have been deported or have voluntarily left the United States, according to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement figures.

Nearly half – 1,968 -- involved people booked into Gwinnett County's jail. That is more than twice the total in any other Georgia county.

Gwinnett ranks 16th for deportations among more than 2,100 counties that were participating in the program as of Jan. 31, according to an analysis of ICE's records by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the Austin American-Statesman, both part of Cox Media Group.

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.

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

Under Secure Communities, everyone booked into a jail is fingerprinted and those prints are checked against millions of others held 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 federal authorities find matches, they could seek to deport people held in a participating jail. But that would be done only after their criminal charges have been adjudicated and after they have completed sentences for any crimes they committed in the U.S.

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 also made 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 participate in the federal 287(g) program, which empowers sheriff's deputies to investigate the immigration status of people jailed for other crimes.

The sheriff credited the deportations with helping reduce the county’s taxpayer costs to incarcerate 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, 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 of 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.

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 of those expelled had committed the most serious crimes, including murder, rape, or sexual abuse of a minor.

This week, the AJC sent a Freedom of Information Act request to ICE for records detailing the convictions for all 169,329 people who have been expelled or have voluntarily left the country through Secure Communities.

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.”

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

have recently illegally crossed the nation's borders, 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 commonsense 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 Date/Operating Statewide/Deported

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

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

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

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

<http://www.ajc.com/news/gwinnett/5-000-deported-from-1385741.html>