

Deportations on the rise in Florida

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The number of immigrants deported from Florida has jumped nearly 50 percent so far this year -- signaling the federal government's continuing enforcement push after a firestorm of public opinion derailed an immigration overhaul in Congress last year.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement deported 5,889 illegal immigrants from the state in the first six months of 2008 to their home countries, including Colombia, Haiti, Jamaica and Mexico. During the same period last year, authorities deported 3,942 immigrants.

If deportations in Florida continue at this pace, they could surpass the highest level in a decade. In 2003, immigration authorities deported 7,695 people from Florida, according to the Office of Immigration Statistics.

Most likely, the deportations will intensify. Within the next month, two more teams will deploy in Florida to find and detain immigrants who have ignored final orders of deportation, officials said. The agency currently has seven fugitive operations teams in the state.

About 20 percent -- 1,251 -- of those deported in 2008 had criminal records in the United States. Their offenses included aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, fraud, kidnapping and money laundering.

To catch more immigrants with criminal records, federal immigration agents have partnered more with state and local law enforcement agencies, said Michael Rozos, field officer director for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office of detention and removal in Florida.

"Criminal aliens have a very high rate of recidivism and often victimize the community in which they live," Rozos said in a press release. "ICE is improving public safety by enhancing partnerships . . . to remove all criminal aliens held in custody."

"We will continue to remove from our country individuals that have tarnished the integrity of our immigration system including illegal aliens who have committed egregious offenses against our citizens," the statement said.

Local immigrant advocacy groups reacted with sadness and frustration to the jump in deportations.

"We understand this is a land of laws, we support the deportation of criminals, but that should be the focus," said Jose Lagos, head of Honduran Unity. "Penalizing innocent people because of a broken immigration system, that's just not the right thing to do. It affects them, their families, and our economy as a whole."

Nora Sandigo, executive director of American Fraternity, said the deportations often most hurt the vulnerable children of immigrants.

"It's tragic, because so many kids are basically turned into orphans when their parents are deported," said Sandigo, who has filed lawsuits on behalf of the U.S.-born children of immigrants. The deportations "are the result of a growing anti-immigrant sentiment that is having terrible affects on hard-working families," she said.

The jump is no surprise, said Cheryl Little, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center.

"I have no doubt that the numbers will continue to increase," Little said. "If anything, we're going to see enforcement activities on the rise. I don't see any indication that's about to slow down."

Sending criminals back home remains a serious matter for Caribbean leaders, who are experiencing an unprecedented crime wave in their tiny island-nations and say deportees are to blame. The U.S. government refutes the claim.

Immigrant advocates called the deportations problematic on many fronts, saying they shatter families and encourage house foreclosures.

"The problem is it's counter-productive," said Steve Forester, senior policy advocate for Haitian Women of Miami.

"When you deport somebody who's been here, say, 10 years, who has maybe two children and is sending several thousands dollars a year to Haiti to support 10 people there," Forester said, "you are actually endangering our borders by making 10 more people desperate as well as traumatizing the lives of two U.S.-born children. That's the reality."

One immigration attorney said she found deportations to Haiti to be contradictory given that the State Department currently has a travel warning for the Caribbean nation. The attorney, Candace Jean, added she believes the deportations have contributed to many home foreclosures in South Florida.

"So many of my clients have lost their houses because they've had family members been deported," said Jean

Miami Herald staff writers Alfonso Chardy and Jacqueline Charles contributed to this report.
