
More than 300 L.A.-area arrests made in crackdown on immigration violations

In California, the three-week operation led to the arrest of more than 900 immigrants, most of whom committed crimes, ignored deportation orders or returned to the U.S. after removal, officials say.

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Los Angeles Times
May 27, 2008

In an ongoing push to deport immigration violators, federal officers have arrested more than 300 immigrants in the Los Angeles area in the last three weeks.

The statewide operation resulted in the arrests of more than 900 immigrants, most of whom committed crimes, ignored deportation orders or returned to the U.S. after being removed, according to federal authorities. Half of those arrested have since been deported to their native countries, authorities said.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement has regularly sent out "fugitive operations" teams since the program's inception in 2003, but this was the first time all 13 teams in California had traveled the state together, said Brian DeMore, acting field office director of detention and removal operations in Los Angeles. A total of 905 immigrants were arrested, including 327 in Los Angeles and surrounding counties. "Overall it was a great success," DeMore said. Immigrants rights advocates criticized the operation, saying that many non-criminals were swept up. During the operation, from May 5 to May 23, arrestees included dozens who did not have criminal records or outstanding deportation orders.

"This is one of the most shameful things our government is doing," said Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. "In many instances they don't get the people they are looking for, so one of the things they do to up their numbers is arrest bystanders."

Advocates also say that the immigrants' criminal records may be from decades earlier and that they are now working, paying taxes and contributing to society. Some were green card holders whose residence was revoked because of the crimes.

DeMore said the arrests are not random, but based on investigation. The teams target immigrants who may be a threat to national security or public safety. In the Los Angeles area, 244 of the people arrested had criminal records, ignored judges' orders or illegally reentered the country after deportation, according to the agency.

Immigration officials said among those arrested was a previously deported Mexican who was convicted in the 1990s of lewd and lascivious acts with a child under 14, and a Briton with convictions for burglary, robbery and forgery who had been ordered deported.

"The officers in the field are focused on arresting fugitives and criminals and use discretion during their operations," DeMore said.

Some of those who had returned to the U.S. after being deported will be referred to the U.S. attorney's office for possible prosecution, he said. The people arrested were from throughout Mexico and Central America, as well as from countries in Europe and Asia.

There are 75 fugitive operations teams in the nation, and Congress has authorized adding 29 for fiscal year 2008-2009. Locally, Immigration and Customs Enforcement plans to add a team in the San Fernando Valley and one in the Inland Empire.