

Stop the Raids

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Editorial

Armed squads bursting into homes in the dead of night with shotguns and automatic weapons, terrorizing families and taking away anyone who lacks identity papers, even if they have raided the wrong house. It may sound like Baghdad, but it is the suburbs of New York City, the latest among hundreds of communities around the country where federal agents have been invading homes and workplaces in search of immigrants to deport.

Federal officials say the raids are a focused campaign to catch gang members and other fugitives. That would be good if Immigration and Customs Enforcement were carefully extracting the dangerous criminal sliver from a population of 12 million illegal immigrants. But as immigration raids have vastly increased, they have become something murky and ugly.

ICE is catching modest numbers of undesirables, but also a much larger by-catch of peaceable immigrants. Its agents have set off waves of fear and outrage, not only among illegal immigrants, but among citizens whose privacy and security they have violated, through unchecked aggression, carelessness and incompetence.

Last week, dozens of federal agents fanned out across Nassau County, Long Island, to execute warrants on accused gang members. County Executive Thomas Suozzi and Police Commissioner Lawrence Mulvey were so dismayed that they have refused to cooperate on further raids until ICE gets its act together.

They described a seriously botched “cowboy” operation by dozens of ICE agents — some in cowboy hats — who had not trained together, used inappropriate weapons and mistakenly drew them on Nassau officers. They said that ICE misled them — that what was supposed to be a targeted gang crackdown was actually something much more sloppy and indiscriminate. They said the agency ignored repeated invitations to check its list of targets against Nassau’s up-to-date gang records and ended up raiding many wrong homes.

The raids were stunningly ineffective. Nassau says they caught only 6 of 96 fugitives. ICE, using a looser definition of “gang member,” said it got 13 in Nassau and 15 in neighboring Suffolk. There, Peggy De La Rosa-Delgado, an American citizen, said her Huntington Station home was raided by mistake last Thursday at 5:30 a.m. It was the second predawn raid looking for the same man at the same wrong address. Her husband and three teenage sons, legal residents, were terrified, she said.

ICE officials callously shrug off such mistakes as collateral damage, but advocates for immigrants have filed a class-action lawsuit asserting that recent raids in the New York City area were unreasonable searches conducted by agents who did not show warrants and misidentified themselves as police officers. Mr. Suozzi has written to the Homeland Security secretary, Michael Chertoff, asking him to investigate the Nassau debacle.

Mr. Suozzi deserves praise for having the courage to oppose mindless immigration enforcement while affirming a commitment to sane policing and public safety. President Bush has repeatedly insisted that the undocumented immigrants cannot, and will not, be rounded up. He and Mr. Chertoff must stop these reckless raids.