

U.S. to Speed Deportation of Criminals in Jail

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Federal authorities expect to identify and deport more than 200,000 immigrants this year who are convicted criminals serving time in prisons and jails across the country, the country's top federal immigration enforcement official said Monday.

The effort to speed the deportation of foreign-born criminals is part of a campaign by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency to help federal and state prisons reduce the costs of housing immigrants, the official, Julie L. Myers, assistant secretary of homeland security and head of the agency, said in an interview.

In 2007, Ms. Myers said, the agency, known as ICE, brought formal immigration charges against 164,000 immigrants who are behind bars nationwide for crimes committed in this country. Many of those immigrants are still in the United States and are also slated for deportation this year, she said. By comparison, in 2006, the agency identified 64,000 immigrants behind bars, most of whom were deported.

The big increase in deportations will place "a significant burden," on ICE's detention centers, she said, and on the airplanes, mostly from the Justice Department, used by the agency to fly immigrants back to their home countries. Last year, Congress authorized \$200 million for programs to deport immigrant criminals.

Under current law, immigrants convicted of crimes are deported only after serving their sentences in this country. Foreigners behind bars, Ms. Myers said, include large numbers of immigrants who were legal residents, but lost their legal status as a result of being convicted of crimes.

Ms. Myers said the agency would work with states to devise parole programs allowing immigrants imprisoned for nonviolent crimes to reduce their prison time if they agreed to be deported immediately upon release.

The issue of immigrants in county jails and state prisons has been a sore point in many states. At city council meetings and in local elections, taxpayers vented frustration at having to pay for the imprisonment of illegal immigrants convicted of crimes committed in this country.

The Bush administration, after failing to win legislation last year to give legal status to illegal immigrants, has rapidly increased enforcement, placing a "huge priority" on deporting criminal immigrants, Ms. Myers said.

In general, immigrants end up in prison at significantly lower rates than people born in this country, said Rubén G. Rumbaut, a sociology professor at the University of California, Irvine, who studies immigrants and crime. Among men between the ages of 18 and 39, Mr. Rumbaut has found, Americans are five times more likely to land in prison than immigrants.

In 2007, ICE sent 276,912 immigrants to their home countries, including many who were had never been arrested for crimes, but were deported for civil immigration violations.

In the past year, Ms. Myers said, agents have stepped up efforts to find immigrants behind bars and complete immigration proceedings so they could be deported directly from prison without being released into the streets.

Ms. Myers, who was confirmed in late December after serving a year in the post, said the agency would intensify the crackdown this year with increased criminal prosecutions of employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants.

“There should be more of those,” she said of such prosecutions. Last year, the agency totaled \$30 million in fines and forfeitures against employers, but fewer than 100 executives or hiring managers were arrested, compared with 4,100 unauthorized workers.

Ms. Myers said ICE agents were frustrated that employment cases had moved slowly in the courts and had not been treated as serious crimes by federal prosecutors and judges.

“This can’t be that we are the only ones who want to have these laws enforced,” she said.

Some employers, Ms. Myers said, were moving on their own to fire immigrant workers who lacked proper authorization and to tighten their hiring practices. She cited an Electrolux factory in Springfield, Tenn., that fired more than 150 immigrants in December after ICE arrested a handful of its workers.

“Do I think we have solved this problem? No,” Ms. Myers said of the hiring of illegal immigrants. “Do I think we are starting to make an impact? I think we’re starting to.”

On a separate issue, Ms. Myers confirmed that the agency adopted a new policy last week requiring a court order for medical staff members to give sedation drugs to immigrants being deported. The decision, in a Jan. 9 memorandum, responded to a lawsuit in California by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of two immigrants who were forcibly drugged during attempts by ICE to deport them.