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Carwash Managers Held in Immigration Raids

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PHOENIX — Federal agents arrested 11 managers and supervisors of a local car-washing chain on immigration fraud and other charges in weekend raids that brought in more than 200 people, setting off fear among immigrants already on edge by years of relentless enforcement in a state at the core of the debate over illegal immigration.

The scene on Saturday resembled the workplace raids by Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County and operations by federal authorities here and elsewhere: heavily armed agents in bulletproof vests and ski masks surrounded the businesses, and then escorted workers outside single file with hands bound behind their backs.

In all, the agents rounded up 223 people, most of them in the United States illegally. Of those, 179 were released after questioning, under a policy that gives priority to the deportation of people with criminal records or a repeated history of immigration violations. Thirty immigrants fit this profile and were placed on a path to deportation, according to federal officials.

But officials said workers on the carwash floor were never the investigators' target. From the investigation's start two years ago, they said, they had their eyes trained on the people in charge, whom they accused of running a scheme that also included identity theft and financial improprieties, in part for evading taxes on wages paid to the unauthorized workers.

"I want to make clear for the community that this was not an immigration-enforcement operation," Barbara Gonzalez, a spokeswoman for [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), said outside one of the carwashes, in central Phoenix. "This was a criminal investigation."

The raids — at 16 Danny's Family Car Wash locations, as well as the offices of a contracted staffing-services provider, HR Betty — happened as the Obama administration treads carefully around the minefield that is immigration enforcement and as an overhaul of the country's immigration system hangs in the balance in Congress.

They began Saturday morning as dozens of customers lined up to have their vehicles cleaned. While some agents rounded up workers, others riffled through offices' drawers and computers, removing evidence they hope to use to shore up their case. Three other people were named in an indictment but not yet arrested, officials said.

"We're targeting the companies that are not playing by the rules, the companies that are not following the law," Ms. Gonzalez said. "That's our priority."

As word spread through text messages — “We’ve just been raided by immigration,” read one of them — relatives and friends of the carwash workers employed under someone else’s [Social Security](#) number, a practice that stands at the heart of the criminal case, gathered on the sidelines. Many shouted words of encouragement while trying to get answers from the stoic agents.

The raids rankled immigrant advocates, who gathered outside the federal courthouse before shouting “Justicia, justicia!” At the same time, they showed that the Obama administration, which has generally avoided high-profile worksite raids, is not afraid to punish employers who break immigration laws.

The employees who were arrested — four of them United States citizens, the others Mexicans — were brought before Judge Michelle H. Burns in United States District Court here Monday afternoon to hear prosecutors lay out the accusations against them.

The 11 men appeared in court still wearing their work uniforms — white polo shirts for some, black for others. All held mid- or upper-level leadership posts in the business, including that of general manager.

The owners of the carwash business were not arrested. A federal official close to the investigation, who was not authorized to discuss it publicly, said other arrests were expected once evidence was analyzed.

In addition to the 14 individuals, the indictment names 18 corporations, including Danny’s Family Companies. A federal audit in 2011 found that many of the employees at the chain were in the country illegally. The company promised to fire them, which it did, but then began the process of rehiring the same people, under different identities, officials charged.

Among the 30 people who face deportation is Juan Carlos Raynosa Espinoza, who had worked for Danny’s carwash for nine years, most recently in Scottsdale, where he was arrested on Saturday while his wife, Laura Torres, was home making lunch for their two children, both United States citizens.

Outside the ICE office on Monday, Ms. Torres said that her husband had refused to sign a voluntary deportation order put before him after he was detained, and that he had two other deportation orders against him from nearly 10 years ago.

“He is not a criminal. All he wants to do is work for his family,” she said in Spanish. “My children are crying every night for their father, and I don’t know how to explain to them what’s happening.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/us/carwash-managers-held-in-immigration-raids.html>