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Deportation Program Sows Mistrust, U.S. Is Told

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A task force advising an Obama administration deportation program has sharply criticized [immigration](#) officials for creating confusion about its purposes and has found that the program had an “unintended negative impact” on public safety in local communities.

In a report on the program, known as [Secure Communities](#), the task force said that the program had eroded public trust by leading to the detention of many immigrants who had not committed serious crimes, after officials said its aim was to remove “the worst of the worst” immigrant criminals from the United States. The task force report was completed Wednesday.

The report also said that immigration officials had created tensions with local authorities by making inconsistent statements on whether states and cities were required to participate.

In the most significant of its recommendations, the task force said that fingerprint identifications through the program should no longer lead federal agents to deport immigrants arrested by local police officers for minor traffic violations.

The task force, which included law enforcement chiefs from four major cities as well as immigrant advocates and state homeland security officials, urged [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), the agency that operates the program, to start over to “reintroduce” it in many places where local opposition had swelled.

The report added to the controversy surrounding the Secure Communities program, a centerpiece of the Obama administration’s efforts to curb illegal immigration by deporting as many as 400,000 foreigners a year.

John Morton, the director of the immigration agency, named the task force in June to channel and address resistance from state officials, local police chiefs and immigrant organizations. But in the final hours of work on the report, new dissension arose in the task force. Five of its 19 members, including all three who represented labor unions, resigned on Wednesday rather than endorse the final report.

The report shows that divisions persisted among the remaining members of the diverse group. Some thought the program was too deeply flawed to continue. Others, especially the police officials, argued that information-sharing among law enforcement agencies under the program was too vital to halt.

Under Secure Communities, fingerprints collected from anyone arrested by local or state police are checked against F.B.I. criminal databases — a routine police procedure — and also through Department of Homeland Security databases, which record immigration violations. After initiating the program in 2008, Immigration and Customs Enforcement has extended it across about half of the country, recently to growing outcry.

Chuck Wexler, the executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, who was the task force chairman, said there was a “strong consensus” in the group that Secure Communities should focus on deporting serious and violent felons.

But many local police officials told the task force that the program had eroded trust between them and immigrant communities by leaving the impression that they were engaged in enforcing federal immigration laws. Some communities had become reluctant to report crimes.

“You can’t mix in low-level offenders and not lose credibility in the communities,” Mr. Wexler said.

In four public hearings, the task force learned of many cases of illegal immigrants stopped by the police for minor traffic offenses — or, in some cases, for no offense at all — who were swept into deportation after being flagged by a Secure Communities check.

“To the extent that Secure Communities may damage community policing,” the task force report found, “the result can be greater levels of crime.”

The task force said immigration officials had made confusing statements about the legal authorities underpinning the program. After initially suggesting that state officials could delay their participation, administration officials now say they are required to extend the program nationwide by 2013.

The task force said the immigration agency should make broader and far more systematic use of prosecutorial discretion to concentrate its resources on deporting convicted criminals.

In a letter submitted Wednesday, representatives of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and two unions of immigration officers said they were resigning from the task force because the final report “demonstrates a clear absence of our voice.” They did not detail their disagreements.

Arturo Venegas, the former police chief of Sacramento, and director of the Law Enforcement Engagement Initiative, a police organization, said in a resignation letter that the recommendations did not go far enough to ensure that immigrants detained for minor offenses would not be deported. A representative of the National Immigration Forum, an advocacy group, also resigned.

Roberto Villaseñor, the police chief of Tucson, Ariz., and a task force member who did endorse the report, said the police had to continue sharing fingerprints with the immigration authorities. “I don’t think that as law enforcement we should turn away from that,” he said.

Mr. Morton said he would meet with the task force members who resigned to hear their concerns.