

Chicago Tribune

Report criticizes immigration enforcement

By Antonio Olivo

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More than three-quarters of the roughly 630 illegal immigrants in Illinois turned over to federal authorities under a program targeting hardened criminals had no prior criminal convictions, according to a report set to be released Friday.

Nationwide, 27 percent of those arrested under the federal "Secure Communities" program had no prior criminal records, according to an analysis of federal data from 2008 to last July 31 by the Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

The findings, which were disputed Thursday by federal immigration authorities, add to a drumbeat of criticism by immigrant advocates frustrated by a lack of action in Congress even as deportations escalate — nearly 54,000 illegal immigrants have been kicked out of the country since October.

On Thursday, Chicago's City Council passed a resolution calling on the federal government to stop deporting people in "mixed-status" families, meaning some members have legal U.S. status.

Joshua Hoyt, executive director of the coalition, said the Secure Communities program represents a "dragnet" approach to immigration enforcement and has diminished the trust between immigrants and local law enforcement.

"The way it's being implemented, I guarantee you that not one undocumented person will stick around after a traffic accident, not one undocumented person will be willing to be a witness against a criminal, and all undocumented people will avoid all contact with the law enforcement whether they're a witness or a victim of a crime," Hoyt said.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which handles deportations, defended the program and said Thursday that more recent data indicates that about 44 percent of those handed over to the feds through the Secure Communities program lack a criminal record.

Nationally, the spokeswoman put the figure at 37 percent, which is actually higher than the coalition's findings.

Launched in 2008, the Secure Communities program is aimed at finding illegal immigrants with criminal records by running the fingerprints of inmates arrested in other crimes through federal databases.

Hailed by the Obama administration as a way to weed out bad elements among the country's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants, the voluntary program has been adopted by local law enforcement agencies in 35 states so far and has led to the removal of nearly 51,000 people. In Illinois, the program exists in 26 counties, including Lake, DuPage, Will, Kane and McHenry.