

Immigration Reform Advocates: Heavy-Handed Obama Deportations Hit Minor Offenders, Not Serious Criminals

By [Laura Matthews](#)

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Immigration-reform advocates are feeling vindicated by a New York Times report on Sunday revealing that a majority of undocumented immigrants deported by the Obama administration were not high-risk criminals but at most minor offenders. And they are using that story as the basis for a renewed effort to get the administration to slow the pace of deportations.

The record level of deportations -- under President Obama, 2 million people have been deported -- is the most contentious part of the currently stalled immigration reform debate. Lawmakers and activists have been asking for administrative relief for those who would qualify for legal status should Congress pass the immigration bill approved last year by the Senate. They argue that too many families are being broken apart and breadwinners deported over minor infractions.

Veronica Dahlberg, executive director at [HOLA Ohio](#), a grassroots Latino organization in northeast Ohio, said she has for years seen immigrants who should be low on the administration's radar swept up in dragnets and channeled through the deportation system for things like a simple traffic violation.

"It's finally shedding a light on what is really happening versus what the administration says is happening," Dahlberg said during a conference hosted by pro-reform group America's Voice. The White House says deportations target serious offenders.

Only 20 percent of the deportation cases under President Barack Obama, or fewer than 400,000 people, were convicted of serious crimes, the Times' analysis of administration records show. But the Times analysis isn't the only one offering some vindication to activists' on-the-ground observations.

The Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University also analyzed millions of deportation records since the launch of Secure Communities, a controversial program that formally began in 2008 to rid communities across America of criminal aliens who pose a public safety threat. TRAC found that in fiscal year 2013, only 12 percent of all deportees had serious "[Level 1](#)" offenses, which by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency's definition includes acts such homicide, kidnapping and sexual assault. The most serious convictions for approximately half the deportees were [immigration and traffic violations](#).

"It's so sad and incredible that all these things are happening," said Monica Garcia, regional coordinator for Border Network for Human Rights in Las Cruces, N.M. "Deportation under Obama is just very sad."

Garcia said she is not opposed to law enforcement doing their job, but she wants them to follow the discretion principles under the current law and prioritize cases of serious offenders.

“Our community is still in fear,” she said. “We feel insecure. We feel persecuted instead of being protected.”

Even legal experts are concerned about the revelations of these independent analyses of administration data.

“Those of us on the ground here, now we know we’re not crazy,” said David Leopold, an immigration attorney in Cleveland and the past president of American Immigration Lawyers Association.

He, too, clarified that highlighting the cases of immigrants deported for minor violations isn’t a call not to enforce the law but rather to do so “with common sense.” From a legal perspective, said Leopold, the Obama administration now needs to insist that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement strictly follow policy guidelines.

“It’s not being followed in the field, and the numbers corroborate [that],” Leopold said.

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