

Immigration tactics aimed at boosting deportations

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Story Highlights

- Immigration officials approved new tactics for deporting convicted criminals
- Some approaches were aimed at increasing deportations of people charged with minor crimes
- Changes were part of push to make sure government didn't fall short of deportation targets

WASHINGTON — U.S. immigration officials laid out plans last year that would ratchet up expulsions of immigrants convicted of minor crimes as part of an urgent push to make sure the government would not fall short of its criminal deportation targets, new records obtained by USA TODAY show.

Among those new tactics — detailed in interviews and [internal e-mails](#) — were trolling state driver's license records for information about foreign-born applicants, dispatching U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to traffic safety checkpoints conducted by police departments, and processing more illegal immigrants who had been booked into jails for low-level offenses. Records show ICE officials in Washington approved some of those steps.

President Obama's administration has made deporting convicted criminals a central feature of its immigration policy, while also saying it would halt some efforts to remove low-priority immigrants who pose little risk to public safety. Immigration advocates who have largely supported the administration said ICE's urgent effort to boost deportations last year suggested the agency had veered from that approach.

"If this is what ICE is currently doing, it's very problematic," said Gregory Chen, the director of advocacy for the American Immigration Lawyers Association. Chen said such tactics contradict immigration officials' public pledges to streamline enforcement by focusing on dangerous criminals and show that the agency instead sought to "increase its criminal alien numbers by pursuing people with minor offenses like traffic violations."

The push came after senior ICE officials in Washington warned its regional enforcement chiefs that criminal deportations had fallen from the year before and instructed them to get the numbers back up. "The only performance measure that will count this fiscal year is the criminal alien removal target," David Venturella, who then supervised ICE's field offices, said in April in an [e-mail to agents](#) in Atlanta.

ICE spokeswoman Gillian Christensen said in a statement that "ICE does not have quotas." She said the agency sets "annual performance goals" that "reflect the agency's commitment to using

the limited resources provided by Congress." She declined to say whether the agency adopted any of the new tactics.

Bob Dane, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favors tougher enforcement, said ICE "wouldn't have to do a hail Mary to juice the numbers" if it hadn't ordered its agents to halt efforts to deport some illegal immigrants.

Venturella said the deportation targets did not amount to quotas. He said in an interview that aides to ICE Director John Morton were worried that a drop in criminal deportations might be publicly attributed to the administration's policy of dropping some low-priority removal cases. Focusing on convicted criminals was a "cornerstone" of the Obama administration's immigration policy, Venturella said, "and it would have raised a lot of eyebrows if those numbers had continued to go down."

Some Morton aides "seemed to think their careers depended on that number going up," Venturella said, and they convened daily meetings on how to make it happen. In April, officials told field office heads to map plans to increase removals, then instructed at least one field office that supervises enforcement throughout Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina to go ahead with efforts to mine DMV records and step up their efforts to deport people who had been booked into county jails, among other measures.

By the time the government's fiscal year ended in September, ICE had deported 225,390 criminal immigrants — a record, and well above the agency's target of 210,000. ICE has not specified how many of those deportations were based on minor offenses; the year before, it reported that more than a quarter of the people it classified as criminals had been convicted only of traffic offenses.

How many people were deported because of the new tactics ICE proposed, and how widely they were implemented, remains unclear. In one instance outside Asheville, N.C., agents arrested 15 immigrants — many of whom had only minor convictions, frequently for driving without a license — at a police traffic checkpoint but were promptly ordered by officials at the field office to release most of them.

The e-mails were first obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina under the federal Freedom of Information Act. The group had been conducting its own inquiry into the traffic checkpoint.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2013/02/14/immigration-criminal-deportation-targets/1919737/>