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U.S. 'surge' targets illegal immigrants who have criminal records

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By **DIANNE SOLÍS**

The nation's top immigration cop said Friday that the Obama administration is stepping up enforcement against immigrants who commit crimes and will move aggressively against employers who hire unauthorized labor.



VERNON BRYANT/DMN

John Morton, U.S. assistant secretary of homeland security, said Friday that a three-day sweep in Texas netted 284 illegal immigrants with criminal convictions.

This week, 284 illegal immigrants with criminal convictions were arrested in Texas in a three-day operation involving multiple law enforcement agencies, said John Morton, the assistant secretary of the Department of Homeland Security who oversees Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Of the total, 159 had convictions for violent crimes or serious drug offenses and about 119 were from the Dallas-Fort Worth area. About 80 arrests were made in San Antonio.

"These are not people we want walking our streets in Texas," Morton said at news conference in Dallas. "First and foremost, we are going to focus on criminal offenders."

But the enforcement, which ICE called a "surge," raised the question of why illegal immigrants with criminal convictions hadn't already been deported after serving time behind bars.

Morton acknowledged that although federal and state prisoners' immigration status is scrutinized, there has been a gap in oversight of county and city jails nationwide.

A program initiated about 15 months ago allows jailers to check immigration status in two federal databases, but only 110 law enforcement agencies are using the program, Morton said. The goal is full participation by the end of 2013.

The law enforcement agencies participating in the program include Dallas and Denton counties, Carrollton, Farmers Branch and Irving.

At the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors less immigration, reaction to the announced crackdown was lukewarm.

All illegal immigrants should know they face arrest, executive director Mark Krikorian said.

"The message that the administration is now saying is that you are not really an illegal alien unless you kill someone or deal drugs," he said.

Some questioned the arrests of illegal immigrants with nonviolent criminal records or only civil infractions under immigration law.

"There is no question that there is a concerted effort on the part of ... [Homeland Security officials] to make it appear that they are going after hardened criminal immigrants," said Chris Newman, legal director for the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, which has affiliates in Texas. But "plenty of innocent, hardworking undocumented immigrants" have been caught up in the initiative.

Morton also said ICE would intensify scrutiny of the nation's 6 million employers.

Under existing law, employers must fill out I-9 forms that show they examined certain work authorization documents. But in 2005 and 2006, no audits of the forms were done, Morton said.

In the Bush administration, enforcement focused on high-profile raids at employers such as Swift & Co. in Cactus, Texas. Thousands of illegal immigrants were arrested and placed in removal proceedings, but few top executives were prosecuted.

"We are trying to change the practices and attitudes of U.S. employers with regards to unauthorized labor," Morton said.

Although Barack Obama said during his election campaign that he would push for an overhaul of immigration laws, as president he has maintained enforcement actions started under the Bush administration.

In the last five years, removals of illegal immigrants have more than doubled to nearly 388,000 in fiscal 2009, including about 136,000 with criminal records. In fiscal year 2008, removals totaled about 362,000, including 114,000 with criminal records.

Criminal prosecution of immigrants for illegal re-entry climbed through the end of fiscal year 2009, according to an analysis by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse of Syracuse University.

In fiscal 2009, there were about 30,000 such prosecutions – nearly triple the number in 2003. But in October and November 2009 – the last two months for which data are available – prosecutions tapered off.