

ICE arrests 2,000 immigrants in largest sweep of the pandemic

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced on Tuesday it made more than 2,000 arrests during a six-week nationwide operation in July and August that focused on those with criminal convictions and charges, but also led to the arrests of some undocumented immigrants with clean records.

As part of the operation, ICE agents made “at-large” arrests, which could take place at residences, worksites and traffic stops, across the country, including in large metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, where the ICE field office apprehended the most immigrants. ICE said the operation targeted undocumented immigrants and others subject to deportation who had been charged or convicted of a crime involving a victim.

Roughly 85% of those arrested had criminal convictions or charges ranging from assault and sexual offenses to domestic abuse and robbery, ICE said. Henry Lucero, the executive associate director of ICE who’s in charge of apprehensions, detention and deportations, said the rest of those arrested include immigrants who were ordered deported by an immigration judge but did not leave, those previously deported who had reentered the U.S. and so-called collateral arrests.

The agency announced in March that it would focus on apprehending those with certain criminal records and those deemed to pose a threat to public safety during the coronavirus pandemic. Asked by CBS News how the recent arrests of immigrants without convictions or charges conformed with that announcement, Lucero offered a clarification of the so-called “enforcement posture.”

“We never said we were going to stop arresting individuals,” Lucero said in a call with reporters. “We said we were going to prioritize and focus on those that are public safety threats. And that’s exactly what we did during this operation.”

Lucero reiterated that the enforcement posture, which he said is still in place, does not exempt immigrants without criminal records from enforcement actions.

“We never stated we’re ... going to stop arresting any type of immigration violator. We continue to arrest immigration violators. We use discretion when

appropriate. That will remain in effect until further notice,” he said.

Lucero said the late summer operation initially targeted those with convictions or charges related to domestic abuse and then expanded. “We know a lot more people are spending time at home to mitigate the spread of COVID-19,” he added. “We wanted to do everything we could to prevent people from getting hurt, especially in their own homes.”

Since the early days of the Trump administration, ICE agents have no longer been bound to Obama-era policies that instructed them to focus on arresting and deporting immigrants with certain criminal records, recent border-crossers and those who reentered the country after being deported.

ICE and its enforcement priorities under President Trump have become a focal point of the nation’s broader debate around immigration, with some Democratic lawmakers calling for the agency to be abolished. Advocates for immigrants have also criticized ICE’s response to the spread of the coronavirus inside its sprawling immigration detention system, which is the largest in the world.

More than 5,300 immigrants have tested positive for the coronavirus while in custody and at least six detainees have died after contracting the virus, according to the agency’s latest statistics.

Lucero on Tuesday noted the agency’s detainee population has plummeted during the pandemic, declining to roughly 21,000 this week, and said officials are screening new detainees for medical vulnerabilities to assess whether they can be released if they don’t pose a flight risk or public safety threat. He noted, however, that those with criminal convictions that make them subject to “mandatory detention” under a 1996 Clinton-era immigration law are not eligible for release.

The pandemic has also significantly limited ICE operations. As of August 22, the agency had made nearly 94,500 arrests inside communities, as well as at state and federal jails, in fiscal year 2020, 89% percent of which were immigrants with criminal convictions or pending charges, according to ICE officials. During the same time span in fiscal year 2019, ICE made more than 143,000 arrests, 86% of which were immigrants with convictions or charges.

However, Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, policy counsel at the American Immigration Council, noted that the number of people entering ICE detention after being arrested by the agency, rather than being transferred by border officials, has

been increasing in recent weeks, according to agency data. He expressed concern about ICE arrests in communities increasing while the coronavirus continues to be widespread in the U.S.

“There is still a pandemic raging,” Reichlin-Melnick told CBS News. “ICE should not be engaging in large-scale enforcement actions that send people to detention centers where the virus is rampant.”

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Camilo Montoya-Galvez



Camilo Montoya-Galvez is the immigration reporter at CBS News. Based in Washington, he covers immigration policy and politics. Twitter: @camiloreports

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