

IMMIGRATION

Non-criminals swept up in deportations

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WASHINGTON — A program intended to remove illegal immigrants who are felons and terrorists has resulted in nearly 6,000 people with no known criminal records being deported from Florida over the past five years, federal records show.

They were among 17,723 illegal immigrants deported from the state overall as part of the fingerprint-sharing program called Secure Communities, which was designed to tap information from local police to remove those who commit major crimes.

Among the deported were also 4,442 who had committed only misdemeanors.

The program is just part of a surge in deportations from the state over the five-year period that has provoked an outcry from immigrant communities.

"[Immigration officials] had the good sense to put a priority on trying to get the hard-core people out: terrorists and criminals and those who have committed multi-immigration violations. Other administrations had targeted everybody: day workers, nannies, maids — everybody," said Jeffrey Brauerman, a former immigration judge in Fort Lauderdale.

"The controversy is that they also pick up people who have committed misdemeanors, minor crimes. They still were fingerprinted and booked, so the records are there. The complaint I've heard is that the minor violators are getting caught up with the major violators."

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— Isabel Vinent, deputy director of the Florida Immigrant Coalition

lations. And they note that most of the non-criminals who were deported had violated prior deportation orders or reentered the country illegally.

But the wave of deportations has roiled Florida's large immigrant community, which seeks reforms that would give most of those now subject to removal a chance to remain here legally.

Immigration activists and family members of those being deported have been demonstrating for months outside detention centers in Pompano Beach and Miami, including prayer vigils and hunger strikes. Some have resorted to civil disobedience to protest deportations and inaction in Congress on immigration reform, including an unapproved street march in Orlando last year that briefly blocked traffic.

"Our community is suffering deportations every day. Think how many kids born in this country — U.S. citizens — are being left without a mother or a father," said Isabel Vinent of West Palm Beach, deputy director of the Florida Immigrant Coalition.

Secure Communities, begun in 2008, gives federal immigration officials access to fingerprints of everyone picked up on suspected violations, ranging from murder to driving without a license. Many were flagged after traffic stops, held on suspected violations and identified to federal officials.

Of the 5,964 who had no known criminal record, 4,541 had failed to leave the country after a prior order of removal or had reentered after being removed. The other 1,423 were neither criminal offenders nor fugitives but had entered the country illegally or overstayed their visas, according to figures compiled by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

Deportations over the five-year period removed 4,407 from Miami-Dade County, 1,374 from Broward County, 1,077 from Palm Beach County and 919 from Orange County.

That's just part of a stream of deportations of those who were here illegally.

Total removals from Florida, including the Secure Communities program, grew from 13,622 in the 2008 fiscal year to 16,578 in 2011. They dropped to 8,475 in the 2013 fiscal year, which ended Oct. 1, when immigration officials were directed to focus more than ever on criminal offenders, though some without criminal records still have been deported.

Immigration officials say they are focusing on the most serious offenders while taking steps to prevent racial profiling. They say they no longer ask police to detain immigrants arrested for minor traffic vio-

lone and other immigrant leaders are imploring President Barack Obama to suspend deportations while Congress considers reforms. "He can use his executive powers," she said. "He can make change. Yes, he can. He could at least stop the bleeding in our community."

The fear of deportation has spread through Florida's hospitality industry, construction sites and agricultural fields.

"It's just such a crucial issue for so many hospitality workers in Central Florida," said Jeremy Cruz-Haicken, a local union president in Orlando. "The industry is run largely by an immigrant workforce. And so many people live in fear, and their families live in fear. It just creates such instability in the region."

The crackdown began under former President George W. Bush and accelerated under Obama. Both wanted to show that they were enforcing existing law to help persuade Congress to enact reforms designed to secure the borders while legalizing most of those living here illegally.

Despite these efforts, Republicans in Congress and Floridians who oppose the reforms complain that the law is still not adequately enforced.

"There are people who have crossed our borders, and we have no background on them whatsoever," said Bill Landes of Lake Wales, a board member of Floridians for Immigration Enforcement.

"If they are arrested and are here illegally, they should be deported as soon as possible," he said.