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ICE's big net catches small fish

WASHINGTON -- Ricardo Velasquez walked into the Mecklenburg County jail on Tuesday night charged with raping children ages 7 and 8.

After a fingerprint scan and a few taps of the computer, the accused assailant was further identified as an illegal immigrant from South America.

Velasquez, 40, still must be tried on his criminal charges in the United States, but more than likely, he won't leave custody until he boards a plane for his native Ecuador.

The Obama administration has said it is on track to remove a record number of illegal immigrants from the United States this year, buoyed by an increased emphasis on finding and deporting illegal immigrants who, like Velasquez, pass through the nation's jail system after having been convicted or accused of crimes.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement now lists its top deportation priority as those illegal immigrants convicted of the most dangerous crimes - murder, rape, assault and major drug offenses.

A local-federal partnership in place in Mecklenburg and other North Carolina counties, and making strong inroads in states such as Virginia, Texas and Florida, could eventually affect how the federal government deports illegal immigrants across the country.

"We're seeing success," said Department of Homeland Security spokesman Richard Rocha. "The numbers show that."

The administration has said that, given its current resources, it could deport up to 400,000 illegal immigrants this fiscal year, including an estimated 150,000 convicted criminals.

Last year's total was nearly 390,000.

Critics of the ongoing deportation program say the numbers tell only part of the story. Despite the focus on violent criminals, the majority of the removals handled by ICE still are noncriminals or immigrants accused of lesser infractions such as traffic violations and misdemeanors.

Just 16 percent of immigrants removed this fiscal year are the top-priority, violent criminals known as "Level 1" immigrants, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

More than 50 percent of those removed this fiscal year are deemed noncriminal.

Secure Communities

The recent focus on criminal removals stems in part from the push of U.S. Rep. David Price, a Chapel Hill Democrat who took charge three years ago of the Homeland Security spending subcommittee. Price has said repeatedly he wants the administration to go after illegal immigrants who already have shown they will do harm.

The latest numbers show that the emphasis on the most dangerous criminals isn't everything it could be, Price said.

"I'm not satisfied with those numbers," he said, adding: "I think they're moving in the right direction."

The new focus pushed by Price and others in Congress depends on an increasingly intense relationship between local law enforcement and the federal government - helped by advances in technology.

The government program, called Secure Communities, is in 494 jails and prisons in parts of 27 states. It is expected to go nationwide by 2013.

It links fingerprints of those in jail with federal immigration databases - a step that once took repeated phone calls can now take just a few minutes.

Some counties have had the program since November 2008. Mecklenburg joined in October 2009. Eight more were added last month, bringing the state's total to 29.

John Morton, head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, wrote in a June 30 memo that the agency's highest priority would be the removal of illegal immigrants who pose a risk to public safety. That didn't preclude, though, the removal of other undocumented immigrants as well, he wrote.

The federal government has increased audits of employers who hire illegal immigrants, and Congress this week passed \$600 billion for new border patrol agents and high-tech monitoring on the Mexico border.

This emphasis on deporting criminal immigrants is nothing new, said Mark Reed, a consultant in Arizona who once served as the highest-ranking government official in the Immigration and Nationalization Service.

"Every administration ... has targeted criminal aliens as their highest priority," he said. "We were doing that 20 years ago. If you say you're going to go after criminal aliens, there are not many people who are going to push back."

Few are 'priority'

What's changed, he said, is the technology to link local and federal resources. Even then, Reed cautioned, the numbers of criminal aliens are simply too high for an administration to tackle.

"They're making an appearance that they can do something they can't really do," Reed said.

As of June 30, North Carolina counties had submitted 168,550 fingerprint sets to the federal government since October 2008, according to government figures.

Of those, 15,171 matched illegal immigrants.

But most matches don't lead to deportation.

Once criminals or suspects are released from local law enforcement, ICE makes the decision to keep them in custody or release them, often with a future immigration court date.

Just 707 - less than 5 percent - of those illegal immigrants found through North Carolina's jail system were identified as top-priority, violent offenders.

Nonetheless, 3,164 people were booked into ICE custody, and 1,736 were eventually deported, data show.

Critics of the program

Elena Lacayo, immigration field coordinator at the National Council of La Raza in Washington, D.C., said the approach touted by the administration casts too wide a net.

"This is not an efficient program," Lacayo said of Secure Communities. "It is taking in so many people that are not the priority that ICE has stated."

Nationally, the program has found 39,054 Level 1 offenders; 9,831 have been removed, according to federal data.

"They're only deporting a small number of people who come to their attention," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C., which supports a reduction in immigration.

He said the focus on criminal aliens doesn't remove enough illegal immigrants because the government doesn't have enough detention space and hasn't asked for more.

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