

Record number of undocumented immigrants deported from N.J. last year

by Rudy Larini/The Star-Ledger

Thursday November 06, 2008, 5:40 PM

A record number of undocumented immigrants were rounded up and deported in New Jersey last year, reflecting the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's heightened commitment to strategic enforcement efforts.

ICE also stepped up its removal of undocumented immigrants released from custody for criminal offenses.

The number of immigrants seized in New Jersey and deported to their native country jumped 25 percent, from 3,339 in 2007 to 4,194 during the federal fiscal year that ended in September, according to year-end statistics ICE released today.

More than 30 percent, or 1,263 deportees, had prior criminal convictions in addition to being in the country illegally. Nationwide ICE returned more than 349,000 undocumented aliens, a 20 percent increase over 2007.

"We made a commitment to the American people to embark on an ambitious enforcement strategy aimed at securing our borders and strengthening our nation's immigration system. The record results seen across the country reflect significant, steady progress toward this goal," Julie L. Myers, assistant secretary for ICE in the Department of Homeland Security, said in a statement announcing the statistics.

Mark Vogler, assistant director of the agency's Newark field office, said ICE is committed "to enforce the immigration laws as written.

"We welcome those who come to our country and come legally," he said, adding those in the country illegally should "know that ICE will track you down and send you home."

Shai Goldstein, executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, criticized ICE enforcement measures as misguided.

"The bottom line is that, as a practical reality, it is impossible to deport 12 million people without spending trillions of dollars," Goldstein said, citing the national estimate of undocumented aliens. "It's not cost effective, it's counterproductive economically, and it's bad public policy. We need to have an federal immigration policy that is fair, humanitarian and grounded in reality."

ICE also stepped up its removal of immigrants freed from custody for criminal offenses. In fiscal year 2008, the agency ordered 4,503 criminal offenders to appear before a judge for deportation, up from 1,594 the previous year.

Ensuring that criminal aliens are targeted for removal rather than being released onto the streets is the task of the agency's Criminal Alien Program. Nationally, ICE charged more than 221,000 incarcerated criminals, 330 percent more than just two years ago.

ICE officials attributed much of the increase in deportations to the agency's more than 100 fugitive operations teams that target aliens who have defied court orders to leave the country. The number of teams in New Jersey increased from four to five last year, and they accounted for 2,210 arrests, up 131 over the previous year.

Nationally, nearly 34,000 arrests were made under the fugitive initiative, more than double the number just two years ago.

As a result of the enhanced effort, the nation's fugitive alien population continued to decline. Estimates now place the number of fugitive alien cases at slightly under 560,000, a decrease of nearly 37,000 in the fiscal year. Moreover, it represents a reversal of the continuous growth trend in fugitive cases from earlier years.