ICE arrested 190 immigrants in Southern California “public safety” operation

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30 May 2017

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrested nearly 190 people across Southern California in a five-day operation covering six counties last week.

ICE officials boasted that 90 percent—169 of the 188 people—of those arrested had prior criminal convictions. Among the detained immigrants, there were 15 people convicted of “sex crimes,” including one man convicted of rape, and a previously deported cocaine trafficker. The latter two stories have been promoted by ICE officials and media outlets to push the narrative that the operation was conducted to remove “public safety threats.”

The field office director for Enforcement and Removal Operations for ICE in Los Angeles, David Marin, commented on the operation in an interview with the *Daily Breeze*: “It’s a win for us, and now we’ve taken these convicted criminals off the streets so they can’t re-offend, they can’t make more victims and, ultimately, our goal is to remove them from the country,” later adding, “they weren’t people who just had traffic tickets or speeding violations.”

The portrayal of the ongoing crackdown on immigrants as a “public safety” operation is a campaign of fear-mongering that lacks any factual basis.

In this case, of the 188 immigrants detained in last week’s sweep, the most common offense was for “drug offenses,” which included 43 people.

While a more detailed analysis of the criminal records is not provided by ICE documents, this category can include very minor offenses such as possession of small quantities of drugs like marijuana. The second most common offense, 30 of the cases, was driving under the influence (DUI). Three people were arrested for reentering the United States after being deported once already, and 19 were arrested despite having *no criminal record whatsoever.*

It is a widely accepted fact among experts that the claim that immigrants are more likely to be “criminals” is entirely false. In fact, there are innumerable studies that support the opposite conclusion.

According to data from the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS), for example, roughly 1.6 percent of immigrant males age 18-39 are incarcerated compared to 3.3 percent of the native-born. These conclusions are consistent throughout decades. Census data from 1980, 1990, and 2000 show that the incarceration rate of native-born individuals were anywhere from two to five times higher than that of immigrants.

Despite these well-documented studies, the notion of the “criminal immigrant” is being used to try to garner support for the Trump administration’s very unpopular immigration policies. Like the majority of the recent immigration initiatives, this tactic is hardly a creation of the Trump administration; it has been prepared, in a bipartisan effort, over the course of decades.

The confluence of the terms “criminal” and “immigrant” emerged as a conscious policy in conjunction with the “War on Drugs” in the 1980s. During this campaign, the battle against illegal drugs and “illegal aliens” became frequently linked to each other in political rhetoric.

This rhetoric was heavily promoted by private prison companies that worked actively to shape the federal and state laws regarding immigration, detention, corrections, and law enforcement policies. The persecution of immigrants during this period provided these companies, which were rapidly expanding, a fresh market to fill their prisons. The 1980s and 1990s gave rise to the current massive prison apparatus, locking up

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working class men and women, both immigrant and native-born alike, by the millions.

Another pivotal event in the criminalization of immigrants came with the signing of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) by Democratic President Bill Clinton.

This legislation impacted immigration policy in two profound ways. First, the laws introduced the mandatory detention and deportation of non-citizens (both lawful permanent residents and illegal immigrants) who had been convicted of an "aggravated felony." Second, the laws transformed the definition of "aggravated felonies" to include a much wider set of offenses. Today, aggravated felonies have been expanded to include more than 30 types of crimes, including simple battery, theft, filing a false tax return, and failing to appear in court.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, these measures were both strengthened and expanded as part of the fraudulent "war on terror." The US Patriot Act of 2001, the Homeland Security Act of 2002, and the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 collectively make up the Bush administration's contribution to the criminalization of immigrants.

Among the many newly enshrined powers was granting to federal officers the ability to apprehend and detain non-citizens on immigration grounds without legal review for up to six months if the case is deemed a "national security risk."

Finally, the Obama administration built on the policies of its predecessors through the massive expansion of the Secure Communities Act, which introduced a new mechanism for identification and apprehension of immigrants through the use of biometric data, combining local law enforcement databases with immigration databases, to screen for "deportable immigrants" who were being jailed. It is through these very mechanisms that the Trump administration is now able to target the "criminal" immigrants, such as those victims of the recent Southern California raids, who are being apprehended and deported in droves.

The policies of the Trump administration certainly mark a significant escalation in the criminalization and assault on immigrant workers in the US; however, they were not created from scratch overnight. They flow from the policies of previous administrations, both Republican and Democrat, over the course of the last almost four decades.

ICE raids have spiked significantly since the signing of Trump's executive orders on immigration in January. Immigrant apprehensions have increased by nearly 40 percent compared to the same period last year. The same ICE forces responsible for last week's raids in Southern California conducted a similar campaign in February that netted 161 arrests. Official statements by local Los Angeles ICE agents indicate that more such sweeps are still to come this year.

These raids have a particular significance in the Southern California region, which is home to the largest cluster of people living in the country without proper documentation. About 1.4 million undocumented immigrants live in the area between Los Angeles and the US-Mexico border.

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