

Wave of immigration raids target youth falsely branded as “criminals”

Norisa Diaz
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US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers are engaging in a nationwide wave of raids this week to target and deport thousands of immigrant teens, mostly 16-17 years old, on the grounds that they are “suspected of gang activity.” The raids are also targeting undocumented mothers who have entered the US with their children.

According to an internal memo shared with Reuters, ICE raids began Sunday and will continue through Wednesday, targeting youth who entered the country unaccompanied by an adult.

The Trump administration’s labeling of these immigrant youth as “criminals” or “gang members” is an attempt to get the American public to swallow the horrific reality that the administration is deporting waves of young people who merit a grant of asylum. ICE claims that a person can be identified as a gang member if they meet two or more criteria, including having particular tattoos, frequenting an area with gang activity, or wearing gang apparel.

ICE will use police databases of lists of suspected gang members over the past few decades. Long known by public defenders and inmate advocacy networks as being rife with errors and purposely false additions, many are subject to deportation simply because they live in poor and working class areas with high gang activity.

Hundreds of thousands of people throughout the US are unknowingly on these lists. The California or CalGang database alone includes the names of more than 150,000 suspected gang members and affiliates. An audit in 2016 found that 42 infants one year old or younger were entered into the database, and 28 of them were entered for “admitting to being gang members.”

Even an internal audit by the Los Angeles, Santa Ana, Santa Clara, and Sonoma County sheriffs forced

the agencies to admit that 13 out the 100 persons they reviewed were “incorrectly identified.”

However, there are currently no means by which a person can challenge their suspected affiliation. A 2014 California state law requires that parents receive notification before juveniles are added to the database, but an audit found that 70 percent had been added without proper notification.

A disproportionate percentage of these unaccompanied youth living in the US have fled poverty, gang violence, and extortion from the Northern Triangle of Central America which includes Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Even if the youth are affiliated with gangs, immigration lawyer David Leopold of Ulmer & Berne said, “In many cases, children don’t freely decide to join a gang. They are threatened by older gang members and forced to get a gang tattoo if they live in a certain neighborhood.”

On July 21, the *New York Times* published a fluff piece aimed at legitimizing ICE. In the article, *Times* journalists go on a “ride-along” with ICE agents as they make raids, arrest migrants, and place them in deportation proceedings. The article falsely reported that Trump’s deportations of immigrants without criminal records is “a break from the Obama administration’s policy of mostly leaving those immigrants alone.”

In fact, Obama oversaw the deportation of nearly 3 million immigrants. Close to 1 million of those were refugees fleeing the Northern Triangle countries and included 40,000 children. In many cases, the Obama administration barred immigrants because they have tattoos that are not gang related. The desperate social situation many immigrants and youth are fleeing is the product of Washington’s long history of CIA-

organized coups throughout the region and of the training of death squads and paramilitary forces through the Pentagon-funded School of the Americas.

The US intervention in a 1954 Guatemalan coup provoked a series of civil wars claiming 200,000 lives over 30 years. In the 1970s and 1980s, another 75,000 were killed in the bloody counterinsurgency campaign waged by Washington and the US-backed dictatorship in El Salvador, while in Honduras the working class and peasantry were ruthlessly repressed by death squads employing torture and assassinations. These are the countries from which many of the youth are seeking to escape.

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The line at which the cartels and gangs meet the government, its paramilitary forces and international finance is blurred. Investigations into the March 2016 murder of Honduran indigenous rights activist Berta Cáceres, for example, revealed that the assassins had ties to the US-Honduras Chamber of Commerce and top officials within the Honduran ruling National Party.

The 2003 CAFTA-DR or Central American Free Trade Agreement between the US, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, dissolved commercial barriers between the countries and opened the floodgates for hyper-exploitation by American corporations.

As a result the Northern Triangle remains one of the most impoverished areas in the Americas. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America reports that the respective poverty rates for El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are 41.6 percent, 74.3 percent and 67.7 percent.

Fifty percent of children in Guatemala are malnourished, with the rate rising to nearly 75 percent in rural areas, while approximately 75 percent live in poverty. One out of 5 Hondurans experience extreme poverty, and are forced to live on less than US\$1.90 per day. The World Food Bank reports that chronic malnutrition levels can reach up to 48.5 percent in the poorest areas.

El Salvador is the deadliest non-war zone on the planet due to widespread violence. Over 25 percent of children below the age of 5 live in extreme poverty.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the US deported 250,000 "convicted criminals" back to the Northern Triangle. In large numbers and often forced, the

deportees joined the gangs. Today, many of those deported are subsequently murdered by the gangs.



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