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AGGRESSIVE ENFORCEMENT MAY DRIVE OUT COLLEGE-EDUCATED IMMIGRANTS

By Daniel Lippman
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Aggressive local immigration enforcement has failed to get noncitizens to leave the U.S. and may have been most successful at driving out college-educated immigrants, a new study suggests, thus hurting local economies.

One section of a 1996 immigration reform law allowed local law enforcement agencies to enforce federal immigration law, and since 2002, almost 80 state and local agencies signed agreements to do so.

The new working paper "Enforcement and Immigrant Location Choice", by economist Tara Watson of Williams College, found that these agreements don't actually cause immigrants to leave the U.S. except in extreme cases, such as Arizona's Maricopa County, famous for Sheriff Joe Arpaio.

The study, using data from the U.S. Census' American Community Survey, said that the enforcement mechanisms may have missed their "intended targets" and caused noncitizens, particularly more educated ones, to relocate elsewhere in the U.S. into areas that may be friendlier to them.

"The enforcement regime created a local environment that did not feel hospitable to them and even if they weren't likely to be deported as a result of enforcement, the fact that there was a lot of street harassment going on in these areas probably made it an unpleasant place for them," said Ms. Watson.

Opponents of local enforcement of immigration laws allege that it led to street harassment and racial profiling and targeted undocumented immigrants for minor infractions; supporters say the program has been effective at fighting illegal immigration.

Ironically, when local authorities have enforced federal immigration law, it "does not deter foreign-born inflows, either from abroad or other parts of the United States," the study said.

When excluding Maricopa County from the data, the study found that such enforcement policies increased the probability of immigrants moving out of state by 57%.

Late last year, the Obama administration ended the agreements that governed the use of task forces to enforce federal immigration law, in favor of other programs like Secure Communities.

Ms. Watson said the immigrants who left are usually "contributing to the economy, [and] on average, immigrants tend to be more entrepreneurial. They're more self-employed."

"They're known to migrate in response to labor market opportunities, so in that sense, they're really helpful for the economy as a whole, they go to where labor is needed."