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INSIDE AN IMMIGRATION ROUNDUP: CRYING CHILDREN, CLOSED DOORS, COFFEE

A knock on the door before dawn; targeted for deportation in Los Angeles

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Gathered in an underground parking garage before dawn on a chilly February morning, a group of eight armed immigration officers listened closely to the details of seven people wanted for immigration violations.

There was the Guatemalan man convicted of battery; a possible gang member with multiple felony convictions; a Salvadoran national and green card holder with a grand theft conviction; several sex offenders, and a man who spent time in jail as a juvenile.

Soon, they would drive into densely packed neighborhoods across the city to find and arrest the men at their homes. If someone runs, the lead officer instructed, don't chase "unless they are right there." Just before 6 a.m., officers maneuvered unmarked sport-utility vehicles in front of a three-story apartment building just west of downtown Los Angeles. They were here for the Guatemalan.

Across the country, groups like this one – called fugitive operations teams – are tracking and arresting illegal immigrants living in the U.S. The operations are a crucial piece of President Donald Trump's promise to crack down on illegal immigration, and have intensified under his administration.

In the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, more than 143,000 immigrants in the U.S. were arrested, up from 110,000 the previous fiscal year, according to Immigration and Customs Enforcement figures.

Still, deportations have declined slightly as arrests of immigrants crossing the border illegally have declined.

From February 2017 through September 2017, the first eight full months of the Trump administration, ICE deported about 138,000 people.

During the same period of the Obama administration's last year in office, the agency deported 160,698 people. The Obama administration deported nearly 3 million people, including more than 409,000 in 2012.

Illegal immigration overall had fallen to its lowest level in a decade in the years before Mr. Trump took office.

Last year, the number of arrests at the Mexican border dropped to its lowest level since 1972.

There are around 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. – about 2.3 million of whom live in California, according to the Pew Research Center.

Critics of the increased enforcement effort in the interior of the country have said the agency is casting too wide a net and arresting immigrants whose only offense is being in the country illegally. Such operations, they say, cause tremendous fear in immigrant communities and make immigrants less likely to cooperate with local law enforcement and report crimes.

Under the Obama administration, ICE was told to arrest only the most serious criminal offenders.

According to ICE statistics officers and agents arrested 37,734 immigrants with no criminal record in 2017. In 2016, there were 15,353 such arrests under the Obama administration.

David Marin, ICE's top deportation official in its Los Angeles office, said his officers focus on those who have committed serious crimes, but can't ignore other illegal immigrants they encounter.

Mr. Marin's enforcement officers and others around the country used to spend time interviewing and arresting immigrants already being held in local jails. But legal changes in California and other states placed limits on local cooperation with ICE.

The Trump administration has responded to such moves by "sanctuary jurisdictions" by threatening to withhold some federal grant money, and stepping up arrests of immigrants released from local jails.

Where ICE officers can't rely on local cooperation, they turn to methodical searches through neighborhoods.

The work can be slow, resource-intensive, frustrating or fruitless. Officers may have to confront a gang member. Or take away a father or mother from young, upset children.

"One of the things we try to do is not handcuff them in front of their children," Mr. Marin said. "We know how traumatic that can be."

If someone simply refuses to open the door, ICE officers can't enter without a criminal warrant.

"With those we don't have a criminal warrant for, we will go ahead and go and try another day," Mr. Marin said.

During one week in Southern California, hundreds of officers, some wearing bulletproof vests, in small teams of about eight fanned out over a roughly 36,000-square-mile area with nearly 19 million residents, on the hunt for about 400 immigrants. By week's end, they arrested 212 people. The agency said 91 percent of those arrested were convicted criminals, had previously been ordered out of the country or been previously deported.

When officers reached their first apartment in Los Angeles just after 6 a.m. on a recent Sunday, the front gate was open and the building's front door was missing a lock, giving them an entry into the building.

"Good morning, police. Open the door," an officer said, knocking on the door and speaking loudly enough to be heard inside the apartment but softly enough to avoid waking the entire building.

Two children, a boy and a girl, eventually opened the door. An officer asked for an adult to come to the door.

ICE officers explained in Spanish that they were looking for Mariano Lopez, a native of Guatemala, who ICE said had served 90 days in jail for a battery charge. The officers identified Mr. Lopez once inside the apartment. They carried with them a mug shot and an administrative warrant for his arrest. He was handcuffed in the hallway, out of the view of the children.

As officers escorted Mr. Lopez to a waiting SUV, the children and a woman looked on from a second-story balcony, crying. He was driven to a nearby parking lot and handed off to other officers who took him back to an ICE office to be fingerprinted and charged.

At the next address, a five-story apartment building, knocks at two apartments yielded only friendly, albeit sleepy residents. A pair of roommates at one door said they had been living there for just a few months and didn't know the immigrant being sought. They offered the ICE officers coffee. The officers politely declined.

Mr. Marin said dead ends are common.

"The leads we have are what we have; some are good some are bad," Mr. Marin said. "They do the best they can to find these people."

Often, people simply refuse to open their doors.

Immigration advocacy groups around the country routinely hold "know your rights" seminars in churches and community centers. The Los Angeles Raids Response Network, one such group, issued a statement last week reminding people that without a criminal warrant, ICE officers can't come in their homes.

Just after 8 a.m. Sunday Mr. Marin's team knocked at an L.A. duplex, looking for a man they said was a registered sex offender on probation, ordered out of the U.S. by an immigration judge.

A woman inside the house said the man wasn't there – though Mr. Marin's officers said they spotted the wanted man peering through drawn mini blinds.

"She said, 'You guys are ICE, I'm not letting you in,'" Mr. Marin said. The team decided to move on to another address. "At some point we'll catch him. We know he's there."

By 10 a.m. the search was over, and ICE officers had arrested two of the seven men they were looking for. They arrested two other men whose names weren't on the list, who ICE officers encountered while searching for others.

Guillermo Alvarez Moreno, a 57-year-old native of Mexico, was an unexpected arrest. He and another man were at the suburban, single-family house where officers arrested another man they were after, German Alvarado Castillo, a registered sex offender in California.

Mr. Alvarez has no criminal record, but was arrested anyway because he is in the country illegally. He wasn't on the list of wanted people ICE was seeking, but under new enforcement priorities, illegal immigrants without criminal records are detained if ICE officials find them while searching for others.

By day's end, all four of the men arrested were in immigration jail northeast of Los Angeles. Because immigration court records aren't publicly available, it is unknown if the men have lawyers. ICE declined to provide additional details about their cases or identities, citing privacy rules.

Mr. Alvarez said he had been in the U.S. for about 10 years.

"I entered illegally, just to work," Mr. Alvarez said as he sat on a bench in the parking garage of the federal building, waiting to be booked.

Mr. Alvarez said before the officers came to the house Sunday morning about 9 a.m. he was a little nervous about being arrested. But since he hadn't had any problems with the law before, he didn't think officers wouldn't be looking for him. Eventually he will face an immigration judge who will decide if he should be deported.