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## WORKPLACE INSPECTIONS INCREASE IN PURSUIT OF ILLEGAL HIRINGS

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By Laura Meckler  
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WASHINGTON – U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has ramped up workplace inspections, increasing audits and arrests as part of an effort to find illegal workers and deter businesses from hiring them, data released Monday showed.

For most of President Donald Trump’s administration, immigration enforcement has focused on preventing people from crossing into the U.S. and then arresting and deporting those who do. The administration said Monday it is more aggressively going after employers.

During the first seven months of the fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, the agency opened far more workplace investigations, initiated more audits and made more arrests, compared with the entire previous fiscal year, according to ICE data.

The agency said its Homeland Security Investigations division, known as HSI, opened 3,510 workplace investigations between Oct. 1 and May 4, up from 1,716 during all of fiscal year 2017.

Officials expect that number to reach about 5,500 by the end of the current fiscal year, more than triple the previous year, said Derek Benner, the acting executive associate director for HSI.

ICE also said it initiated 2,282 employer audits between Oct. 1 and May 4, up from 1,360 in all of fiscal 2017. Audits involve asking employers to produce the I-9 forms that employees fill out, testifying that they are legal to work in the U.S.

The Democratic administration of former President Barack Obama also expanded the use of audits to look for employer violations, with the number of audits peaking in 2013, at 3,127. Mr. Benner said that ICE would ultimately like to open as many as 15,000 audits a year, depending on funding and other factors.

“Let’s create a culture of compliance through the administrative audit process,” he said. “In order to do that you have to have a higher number of audits conducted in a centralized way.”

Mr. Benner said he hopes to create a centralized office to oversee employer audits, rather than the existing scattershot approach via regional offices.

The agency also said it has made 1,204 arrests during the first part of fiscal 2018, up from 311 during all of fiscal 2017.

That includes administrative arrests, which are of people unlawfully present in the U.S., and involve referring the person to immigration court for possible deportation. It also includes criminal arrests, which could involve matters such as identity theft or violations of labor law. The agency didn't say how many of the criminal arrests were of business owners or managers, and how many were workers.

ICE typically faces less criticism when it targets employers, though some have said the raids are another way of going after illegal workers. The state of California has barred employers from allowing federal immigration agents into private workspaces without a judicial warrant and requires employers to notify employees before they turn over records to federal agents.

Since 1986, employers have been required to verify the identity and work eligibility of all people they hire. Businesses found to be violating the country's immigration laws by hiring undocumented workers could face criminal and civil penalties, including fines.

Mr. Trump's administration advanced its tougher line against employers in January, with raids at nearly 100 7-Eleven convenience stores in 18 states and the District of Columbia. Agents interviewed employees and managers and announced that employment records were being audited.

In that case, agents arrested at least 21 employees suspected of being in the country illegally. An ICE spokeswoman said the investigation against the company is still ongoing and no charges have been filed.