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RECORD NUMBER OF FOREIGNERS WERE DEPORTED IN 2011, OFFICIALS SAY

By Julia Preston
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Immigration enforcement authorities detained and deported record numbers of illegal immigrants in 2011 and are on track for similar figures this year, even as the numbers of migrants crossing the border illegally dropped to a 40-year low, according to data published Friday by the Department of Homeland Security.

Immigration agents deported 391,953 foreign-born people during the 2011 fiscal year, the department's Office of Immigration Statistics reported. They included more than 188,000 people who had been convicted of crimes in the United States – an "all-time high" for such deportations, the report found.

Citizens of four Latin American countries – Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador – made up 93 percent of all people deported last year.

With just one month to go in the 2012 fiscal year, deportations were down slightly, with just over 366,000 people expelled through Aug. 31. But they include more than 191,000 convicted criminals, more than last year, according to figures from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, one of several agencies in the department.

The figures provide a backdrop to the administration's political calculations on the thorny issue of immigration as President Obama heads into the last stretch before the November elections. Although Homeland Security Department officials have said they are focusing their efforts on criminals, the fast pace of deportations in the last two years was felt in many Latino immigrant communities, and caused growing disillusionment with Mr. Obama.

Pressure from Latino and immigrant groups helped persuade Mr. Obama to take a sweeping executive action in June to suspend deportations temporarily for as many as 1.7 million young illegal immigrants who came to this country as children. The program, which has been very popular among Latinos, began to accept applications on Aug. 15. Homeland Security Department officials have not yet reported that any applicants have been approved and their deportations deferred.

In spite of the sharp increases in deportations of criminals, Mr. Obama's policies have not won him friends on the other side of the political divide. Republicans in Congress say the deferred deportations are a backdoor amnesty, and they accuse the administration of crippling enforcement by demanding that agents steer away from arresting illegal immigrants if they are not convicted criminals.

In addition to formal deportations, last year Homeland Security Department agents expelled about 324,000 foreigners back to their countries without formal court proceedings, according to the report. Most were illegal immigrants who agreed to leave voluntarily after they were detained, rather than be removed by the authorities.

According to the new figures, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which is known as ICE, detained about 429,000 immigrants last year, another record.

Homeland security authorities have increasingly concentrated their efforts at the border with Mexico, with the majority of detentions and expulsions coming there. In 2011, the Border Patrol captured about 335,000 migrants trying to cross illegally, the lowest number since 1971, and the figures are continuing to drop. High rates of unemployment here and intensified border enforcement have discouraged many migrants from Mexico and Central America from attempting illegal crossings, officials said.

The Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, has said his priority would be tougher border enforcement. He has not said if he would cancel the deferred deportations program.