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U.S. SAYS DEPORTATIONS ROSE 2% IN THE LATEST YEAR

By Miriam Jordan
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U.S. officials deported 240,255 immigrants in the latest fiscal year, according to government data released Friday, an increase of 2% from a year earlier but well below the peak of nearly 410,000 people in fiscal 2012.

The Department of Homeland Security said that in the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, it repatriated 450,954 people to their nations of origin, including migrants turned around at the border by agents and immigrants formally removed from the U.S. by a court order.

Since 2009, the first year of President Barack Obama's administration, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a DHS agency, has removed 2.75 million people ordered deported by an immigration judge. That is more than any other president's administration. Immigrant advocacy groups have called Mr. Obama the "deporter in chief," while Republicans have criticized the president for failing to secure the border and for supporting an immigration overhaul that leads to legal status for those in the country illegally.

"This administration has been the hardest hitting on undocumented immigrants despite supporting immigrant-inclusive policies," said Marielena Hincapié, executive director of National Immigration Law Center, an advocacy group.

The administration since November 2014 has prioritized the deportation of immigrants with criminal records. Of those removed in fiscal 2016 by ICE, 84% fell in the top-priority category for removal, meaning they have been convicted of a serious crime, pose a security threat or are recent illegal border crossers. The administration's enforcement capabilities are determined by congressional funding, staffing levels and detention capacity.

"The Obama administration has used the resources and mandate that it was given—and that would exist for whoever is in the administration," said Doris Meissner, a senior analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, who was immigration commissioner between 1993 and 2000.

President-elect Donald Trump has pledged to ramp up deportations by immediately focusing on two million to three million immigrants who he says are criminals. The Migration Policy Institute estimated in 2015 that 820,000 of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. have a criminal conviction.

"With current resources, deportations can't get into the two to three million range," said Ms. Meissner. "That would take considerable additional appropriations and lead time for training, hiring and adding facilities."

It also would require cooperation from state and local governments, which could be a challenge given that many undocumented immigrants reside in U.S. cities that have said they wouldn't cooperate with a large-scale deportation effort.

Any enforcement strategy also takes into account illegal flows.

In recent years, there has been a steep decline in the number of people crossing into the U.S. In fiscal 2016, apprehensions on the southwest border—a key indicator of attempts to illegally enter the U.S.—totaled 408,870, the lowest number in decades and a fraction of the number recorded between the 1980s through 2008, according to the new DHS data.

For example, more Mexicans are leaving the U.S. than are coming to the country, according to the U.S. Census. Annual inflows of undocumented Mexicans have slowed to about 100,000 a year since 2009, from about 350,000 a year in the mid-2000s and more than half a million in the late 1990s and early 2000s, according to Pew Research Center estimates based on census data.

However, there has been an uptick in the number of non-Mexicans, mainly from Central America, showing up at the southern border. In 2014, Central Americans apprehended there outnumbered Mexicans for the first time and that trend persisted in 2016.

“Far fewer Mexicans and single adults are attempting to cross the border without authorization, but more families and unaccompanied children are fleeing poverty and violence in Central America,” DHS said in a statement.

In fiscal 2016, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol apprehended 59,757 unaccompanied children and 77,857 family units. Because many of them apply for asylum once in U.S. custody, they have been burdening both detention facilities and the immigration court system, DHS officials said Friday.

Advocates said that many of them had bona fide cases but lacked legal representation in court. “So many people end up without due process,” said Ms. Hincapié, who deemed the immigration system “dysfunctional.”