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Enforcement Gone Bad

1 message

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Editorial

Enforcement Gone Bad

The failures of the immigration system are many and severe, but the main problem is not that the country is catching too few undocumented immigrants. It is catching too many. Since the early 1990s, you could write the federal government's immigration strategy on a cardboard sign: Deport Them All.

A report last week from the Pew Hispanic Center laid bare some striking results of that campaign. It found that Latinos now make up 40 percent of those sentenced in federal courts, even though they are only about 13 percent of the adult population. They accounted for one-third of federal prison inmates in 2007.

The numbers might suggest we are besieged by immigrant criminals. But of all the noncitizen Latinos sentenced last year, the vast majority — 81 percent — were convicted for unlawfully entering or remaining in the country, neither of which is a criminal offense.

The country is filling the federal courts and prisons with nonviolent offenders. It is diverting immense law-enforcement resources from pursuing serious criminals — violent thugs, financial scammers — to an immense, self-defeating campaign to hunt down ... workers.

The Pew report follows news this month that even as a federal program to hunt immigrant fugitives saw its budget soar — to \$218 million last year from \$9 million in 2003 — its mission went astray. According to the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute, of the 72,000 people arrested through last February, 73 percent had no criminal record. Border Patrol agents in California and Maryland, meanwhile, tell of pressure to arrest workers at day-labor corners and convenience stores to meet quotas.

The country needs to control its borders. It needs to rebuild an effective immigration system and thwart employers who cheat it. It needs to bring the undocumented forward and make citizen taxpayers of them.

For all the billions spent on fences, raids, patrols and prisons, the number of illegal immigrants has steadily grown to about 12 million last year from four million in 1992. So has the need to overhaul the many parts of a festering, broken system: to clear out backlogs in legal immigration, to rescue families from limbo, to throw sunlight on the shadow economy, to deter unlawful hiring, to replace chaos with lawfulness and order. All those priorities have languished in the deportation era.

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