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# ICE operations team searches for fugitive illegals

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## ICE operations team searches for fugitive illegals



Posted: Monday, August 21, 2006 10:23 am

Art Martori

Monserat Avila-Ortiz crossed illegally into the United States from Mexico in 2000 and was arrested that year in Nogales by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents.

She was released from custody by an immigration judge, with the understanding that she'd leave the country voluntarily within 60 days.

Six years later, agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement have caught up with the 39-year-old woman from Chihuahua, Mexico. They found her hiding in the shower of a darkened bathroom at her home near Mesa Drive and Broadway Road in Mesa.

Avila-Ortiz is one of more than 6,000 undocumented immigrants in Arizona targeted for deportation by the state's fugitive operations team, an investigative unit reporting to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Undocumented immigrants such as Avila-Ortiz end up on a fugitive operations' wanted list after they are ordered to leave the country, fail to report for deportation and warrants are issued

for their arrest.

Russell Ahr, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokesman, said the voluntary deportation process — in theory — cuts down the workload for the agency and saves taxpayer money.

But undocumented immigrants often don't cooperate.

"The problem is that so many of them blow it off," Ahr said. "Then, on the 61st day, there's a warrant issued for their arrest."

Avila-Ortiz, who sat in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody last week in the back of a

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minivan, hidden by deeply-tinted windows, said she didn't know she was supposed to leave. My lawyer "told me it wasn't necessary," she said tearfully.

Cory Ray, fugitive operations team leader, said most undocumented immigrants picked up by the team plead ignorance.

After the immigrants don't show up for voluntary deportation, they get used to living in the United States, Ray said. Then, the fugitive operations team shows up — sometimes several years later — to arrest them.

"They all say they didn't know," Ray said.

Ray said team members have never fired a shot in the line of duty, and rarely use force to enter homes.

Fugitive operations teams were created in 2003 under the Department of Homeland Security. There are 45 teams throughout the United States. The seven-member Arizona team arrived in the state last year and began operations in June.

The teams are led by Ray, a former New Orleans police officer, whose voice carries a hint of his Southern heritage, and whose confidence reflects the 18 years he's been with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

He said fugitive operations teams prioritize "targets" presenting a danger to public safety, such as a Mexican man they arrested Monday night in Casa Grande suspected in an attempted slaying in Mexico.

But Avila-Ortiz, picked up by the team last week during a sweep through the East Valley, was not a danger, Ray said. The team found her through its ongoing investigations.

"You just take it case-by-case," he said. "Once we exhaust those leads, we just move on to who's next."

The fugitive operations team made at least three arrests throughout last week as a result of its work in the East Valley.

The Department of Homeland Security reports that to date, fugitive operations teams have arrested 52,000 fugitives nationwide and arrest about 1,000 undocumented residents each week.

Although the Department of Homeland Security reports the success of the fugitive operations program, millions of other undocumented immigrants aren't even on the agency's radar because they've never received a deportation order — or even been stopped by Border Patrol agents.

The Pew Hispanic Center, a Washington, D.C., research institution, estimates that nearly 12 million undocumented immigrants are living in the United States, nearly 450,000 of them in Arizona.

The latest Department of Homeland Security reports estimate the population of undocumented residents grows by about 350,000 annually.

Eliás Bermúdez is a spokesman for Immigrants Without Borders, an organization calling for immigration policy reform.

He said the use of a highly trained team to remove undocumented immigrants from the United States is the wrong approach to a complicated issue.

"It is a sad and unacceptable situation," he said. "Unfortunately, the answer does not lie with law enforcement."

Although he opposes the current U.S. immigration policy, Bermúdez added that he supports the efforts of Ray and his team in maintaining public safety.



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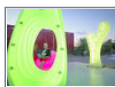
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"Those who are criminals, I will help them find and send back," he said. "I don't want criminals in this country."

As the fugitive operations team scoured a largely Spanish-speaking neighborhood for the Mexican man they suspected in the attempted slaying, Lucía Rodriguez, a neighborhood resident watched from her home across the street.

Rodriguez, 43, said she immigrated legally to the United States from Sinaloa, Mexico, after a five-year process. She said she was glad to see Immigration and Customs Enforcement in her Chandler neighborhood, near Pecos Road and the Santan Freeway.

"It should be this way," she said. "They shouldn't be here without papers."

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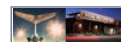
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