



**Antonio Villaraigosa**

# Crackdown on Illegal Immigrants Spurs Backlash Among Locals

L.A. Contends Federal Raids Hurt Region's Economy  
By MIRIAM JORDAN  
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The federal government's crackdown on factories employing illegal immigrants is triggering a backlash among local officials including Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who says the federal raids could damage his region's economy.

Mr. Villaraigosa is due to meet Thursday in Washington with Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who oversees immigration. The meeting follows letters to Mr. Chertoff by the mayor and the president of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce protesting actions by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

Los Angeles is home to the largest immigrant population in the U.S. More than one-third of its 9.9 million residents and nearly half of its work force are foreign-born. An estimated 450,000 to 480,000 of the city's workers are believed to be in the U.S. illegally.

The government has stepped up raids recently. On Wednesday, ICE agents raided [Pilgrim's Pride](#) Corp. poultry plants in five states and arrested more than 280 unauthorized workers. In Buffalo, N.Y., ICE officials arrested 11 people for conspiring to harbor illegal immigrants smuggled into the U.S. to work at Mexican restaurants in four states. About 45 illegal immigrants were arrested.

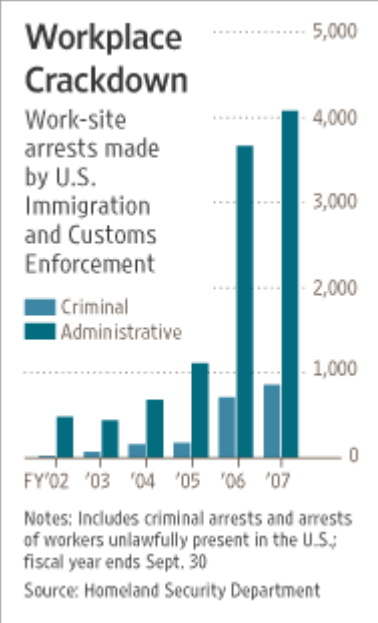
## IMMIGRATION FIGHT

- **The News:** The federal government's crackdown on illegal immigrants is triggering a backlash among local officials.
- **The Background:** The government has stepped up raids recently and has arrested a record number of employees for immigration violations.
- **What's Next:** The mayor of Los Angeles will meet Thursday with Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff.

ICE arrested a record 4,077 employees for immigration violations during worksite enforcement nationally in the year that ended Sept. 30, 2007, compared with 685 in 2004. In a phone interview Wednesday, ICE chief Julie L. Myers said workplace operations will continue across the country, including L.A. "We can't exempt any city or state from the governing immigration laws," she said.

Concern over immigration raids in L.A. spiked after ICE agents rounded up more than 130 illegal workers at Micro Solutions Enterprises, a manufacturer of computer imaging supplies, in February. Earlier this month, agents arrested an additional 69 workers during a routine inspection of warehouses next to the Los Angeles port complex.

ICE officials have also been asking Los Angeles businesses, including garment maker [American Apparel](#) Inc., to submit I-9 hiring forms and other payroll documents for



scrutiny. Robert Schoch, special agent in charge for ICE investigations in seven Southern California counties, wouldn't divulge the name of any other companies that had been served with a notice to present documents, saying only that there has been a "significant increase."

In a recent Securities and Exchange Commission filing, American Apparel said that as a result of the ICE investigation, it "could experience very substantial turnover of employees on short or no notice, which could result in manufacturing and other delays."

Some agricultural businesses, also highly dependent on undocumented workers, have in past years urged the U.S. Border Patrol to look the other way during harvest season. But it is unusual for a city to take such a public stance on federal immigration enforcement. Los Angeles is the biggest city to demand that federal immigration authorities back off from their crackdown.

Since Congress's failure last year to enact a comprehensive immigration overhaul, several cities and states, notably Arizona and Oklahoma, have passed local laws to punish employers who hire illegal workers. In Phoenix, however, Mayor Phil Gordon has begun publicly decrying the get-tough actions carried out by Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, whose deputies have been arresting suspected illegal immigrants.

Mr. Villaraigosa expressed his concerns to Mr. Chertoff in a three-page letter dated March 27. "I am gravely concerned that ICE's current focus on nonexploitative employers in and around the City of Los Angeles could have severe and lasting effects on our local economy," he wrote. The mayor said it was "nonsensical" to spend limited ICE resources to target "established, responsible employers" in industries that employ "workforces that include undocumented immigrants."

Mr. Chertoff has contended that he has no choice but to attack the root cause of illegal immigration -- employment -- until Congress passes a bill to provide employers a legal means to address their labor needs.

"I'm in favor of immigration reform," said Ms. Myers, the ICE chief. "Until Congress takes action, we will continue to enforce the current laws."

Until recently, ICE mainly slapped businesses that hired illegal immigrants with fines, up to \$2,000 per employee. "Those fines were sometimes even negotiated down," says Mr. Schoch, the ICE official in California. "It wasn't an effective deterrent. In the last couple years we stepped up efforts to bring criminal charges against employers."

The ICE has beefed up its teams of special agents and auditors. In fiscal 2007, the agency arrested 863 people, including company owners and executives, for purposefully hiring illegal immigrants and other crimes. That is up from 160 in 2004.

That has sent alarm bells through business communities, especially in immigrant-heavy areas like Los Angeles. Of the 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., about one million live in Los Angeles, according to the Migration Policy Institute. New York City is home to 500,000 illegal immigrants. Almost half of the Los Angeles work force is foreign-born compared with 15% nationally, according to a report released Wednesday by the nonpartisan research center.

"Employment of unauthorized workers is a national problem that we see on a larger scale here because of the mass of humanity in Los Angeles," said Gary Toebben, president of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, who also wrote a letter to Mr. Chertoff. He said that 200 business leaders accompanying the mayor to Washington are taking their concerns about ICE enforcement activities to elected officials.

Los Angeles city and business officials say immigrants are crucial to both high-tech and low-tech industries here. In particular, manufacturing, transportation and entertainment are believed to rely on large numbers of improperly documented immigrants. "These people are embedded in our economy," said Ilse Metchek, executive director of the Los Angeles-based California Fashion Association, which represents apparel-related businesses.

A February study by the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation, a nonprofit group, concluded that stepped-up immigration enforcement could cost the region's economy millions of dollars if it forces businesses to move away from the region.

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