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U.S.

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## Exclusive: U.S. immigration raids to target teenaged suspected gang members

Julia Edwards Ainsley



WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. immigration agents are planning nationwide raids next week to arrest, among others, teenagers who entered the country without guardians and are suspected gang members, in a widening of President Donald Trump's crackdown on illegal immigrants.

The raids are set to begin on Sunday and continue through Wednesday, according to an internal memo seen by Reuters. The teenagers targeted will be 16- and 17-years-old.

The raids represent a sharp departure from practices during the presidency of Barack Obama. Under Obama, minors could be targeted for deportation if they had been convicted of crimes, but were not arrested simply for suspected gang activity or membership.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said in a statement that a person can be identified as a gang member if they meet two or more criteria, including having gang tattoos, frequenting an area notorious for gangs and wearing gang apparel.

The agency said it does not comment on plans for future law enforcement operations, but that it focuses on individuals who pose a threat to national security and public safety.

The memo instructing field offices to prepare for the raids was dated June 30. A Department of Homeland Security official speaking on background confirmed on Friday the raids were still scheduled to take place, though ICE could still change its plans.

Trump, who campaigned on the promise of tough immigration enforcement, has made deporting gang members, especially those belonging to the El Salvador-based Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, a top priority.

“You have a gang called MS-13. They don’t like to shoot people. They like to cut people. They do things that nobody can believe,” Trump said at a rally in Cedar Rapids, Iowa last month. In a May speech, the president promised the gang would be “gone from our streets very soon, believe me.”

FILE PHOTO: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Assistant Field Office Director Jorge Field (R), 53, and Field Office Director David Marin arrest a man in San Clemente, California, U.S., May 11, 2017. REUTERS/Lucy Nicholson/File Photo

## **'THIS IS TROUBLING'**

Although children can be deported like adults, U.S. immigration law considers minors arriving at the border without a parent or guardian particularly vulnerable and gives them additional protections.

Minors apprehended entering the country without a guardian are placed in custody arrangements by U.S. Health and Human Services, often with a family member living in the United States.

Law enforcement agencies maintain databases of individuals suspected of having gang affiliations, but the lists have come under fire from civil rights groups.

Marielena Hincapie, executive director of the National Immigration Law Center in Los Angeles, said the databases often contain inaccurate information.

“This is troubling on several levels,” Hincapie said. “For one, the gang databases in places like California are rife with errors. We have seen babies labeled as potential gang members.”

Immigration lawyer David Leopold of Ulmer & Berne said innocent children could be swept up in the raids.

“In many cases, children don’t freely decide to join a gang. They are threatened by older gang members and forced to get a gang tattoo if they live in a certain neighborhood,” he said.

The raids planned for next week will also target parents who crossed the border illegally with their children and have been ordered deported by a judge, and immigrants who entered the country as children without guardians and have since turned 18, according to the memo.

The document directs field offices to identify people in their areas that meet the criteria.

The Obama administration targeted those two groups in 2016 raids that sought to deter a surge of illegal border crossings by families and minors that began in 2014.

Obama, however, directed immigration agents to prioritize for deportation only those who had committed serious crimes or had recently entered the country.

Slideshow (2 Images)

Reporting by Julia Edwards Ainsley; Editing by Sue Horton and Ross Colvin

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