

## Fear rising among North Georgia's undocumented immigrants

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### ICE Detainers from Whitfield County

2008: 111  
2009: 397  
2010: 595  
2011: 577  
2012: 514  
2013: 244  
2014: 169  
2015: 69

### ICE removals, nationally

2008: 369,221  
2009: 389,834  
2010: 392,862  
2011: 396,906  
2012: 409,849  
2013: 368,644  
2014: 315,943  
2015: 235,413  
2016: 240,255

Fear is rising among North Georgia's undocumented immigrants.

Among the executive orders he signed this week, [President Donald Trump called for the Department of Homeland Security](#) to aggressively partner with local police to send those immigrants out of the country.

In Dalton, Ga., where half the population is Latino, the new plan could upend much of the community.

"The steps we will take starting right now will improve the safety in both [the United States and Mexico]," Trump said. "A nation without borders is not a nation."

Terry Olsen, a local immigration attorney, said there is a "lot of fear of the unknown" among his clients. "Honestly, there's a great surprise that this country would do that to them. There's a great sense of loss, and a great sense of sorrow."

Specifically, Trump has ordered a return to the Secure Communities plan. Passed under George W. Bush, the policy gives Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents a lot of latitude in pushing to deport undocumented immigrants. In 2014, Barack Obama reworked the plan to target only immigrants who committed specific crimes.

A year later, the number of immigrants that ICE removed from the United States fell by 25 percent. And in Whitfield County, where Dalton is located, the number of immigrants picked up by ICE fell by about 145 percent.

Under the Secure Communities plan, local law enforcement officers can scan the fingerprints of suspected undocumented immigrants through an ICE database. If the person pops up in the system, the officer alerts an ICE agent, who has two days to pick up the immigrant, starting the deportation process.

It might seem like these immigrants wouldn't be in a database, seeing as how they didn't enter the United States through the normal process. But, Olsen said, many undocumented immigrants have had prior brushes with ICE. Some were detained at the border and released. Others were ordered to leave.

In 2014, Obama refined the program. He ordered ICE agents to pick up only immigrants who had been convicted of certain crimes. That order included those who were part of gangs, or committed a felony, or committed three misdemeanors, or committed one "significant misdemeanor" — such as domestic violence, unlawful possession of a gun, or a DUI.

Returning to the old policy will likely increase the number of people in the immigration system. And that, in turn, will put a strain on crowded detention facilities and overstuffed courts. It could require a significant boost in funding.

U.S. Rep. Tom Graves, who represents the northwest corner of Georgia, is listening. "Graves will work to ensure the agencies and departments responsible for enforcing these laws have the resources necessary to carry out their missions efficiently and effectively," spokesman Garrett Hawkins said in a statement Thursday.

### **Local impact**

Though some immigrants arrived here in the 1970s to work on Carter's Dam in Chatsworth, Ga., the largest flood of Latinos came to the region in the 1990s. Global demand for carpet surged at the time. And Dalton, the carpet capital of the world, had plenty of work available. The population grew, to the point where 48 percent of the city's 33,000 people identified as Latino.

In 2008, the Whitfield County Sheriff's Office claimed that some immigrants were causing crime problems and entered into a partnership with ICE. The federal government trained some local officers, and the officers could then run background checks on defendants they believed were in the country illegally.

ICE could then pick up the undocumented immigrants. But when Obama ordered ICE to focus on violent offenders, the detainments plummeted.

From 2009-12, according to ICE, the federal government picked up 520 people per year from Whitfield County. In 2014, ICE picked up only 169 people. In 2015, they picked up 69.

"We did not see a dramatic decrease in aliens encountered," said Capt. Wes Lynch, who oversees the sheriff's office's partnership with ICE. "It was only that the federal policies for removal had changed."

Brittany Faith, an immigration attorney based in Chattanooga, said several clients called her Wednesday and Thursday, panicked about ICE returning to the old days of increased enforcement.

"People are afraid," she said. "I do a lot of provisional waivers for people who are married to U.S. citizens. I've had a lot of U.S. citizens who have called. They're afraid they're going to lose their spouses."

### **Pressure on current systems**

An increase in immigration enforcement means more people in detention centers, which are already packed. As of October, there were 45,000 immigrants detained in the United States, according to the Wall Street Journal. Typically, the country detains between 30,000 and 35,000 immigrants.

To make space, Olsen predicts ICE will contract with local jails. Azadeh Shahshahani, a legal and advocacy director for Project South in Atlanta, predicts the government will be hitting up CoreCivic — the company formally known as the Corrections Corporation of America. "The private prison industry particularly is celebrating right now," she said.

And then there's immigration court itself, which is already spread thin. As of December, the whole immigration court system in the United States had about 540,000 pending cases.

In Memphis, four judges handle 11,600 cases. In Atlanta, six judges handle 14,400 cases. Across the country, the average wait time for a case is 22 months. But Olsen said some of his clients have waited up to four years. He believes Trump's executive orders will clog the system further.

Kathryn Mattingly, an assistant press secretary for the Executive Office for Immigration Review at the U.S. Department of Justice, said the agency needs more judges to cut through the backlog. "It is critical," she wrote in an email Thursday.

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