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Illegal Hiring Is Rarely Penalized



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By [Spencer S. Hsu and Kari Lydersen](#)
Washington Post Staff Writers
Monday, June 19, 2006; Page A01

The Bush administration, which is vowing to crack down on U.S. companies that hire illegal workers, virtually abandoned such employer sanctions before it began pushing to overhaul U.S. immigration laws last year, government statistics show.

Between 1999 and 2003, work-site enforcement operations were scaled back 95 percent by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which subsequently was merged into the Homeland Security Department. The number of employers prosecuted for unlawfully employing immigrants dropped from 182 in 1999 to four in 2003, and fines collected declined from \$3.6 million to \$212,000, according to federal statistics. In 1999, the United States initiated fines against 417 companies. In 2004, it issued fine notices to three.

The government's steady retreat from workplace enforcement in the 20 years since it became illegal to hire undocumented workers is the result of fierce political pressure from business lobbies, immigrant rights groups and members of Congress, according to law enforcement veterans. Punishing employers also was de-emphasized as the government recognized that it lacks the tools to do the job well, and as the Department of

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Homeland Security shifted resources to combat terrorism.

The administration says it is learning from past failures, and switching to a strategy of building more criminal cases, instead of relying on ineffective administrative fines or pinprick raids against individual businesses by outnumbered agents.

It is seeking more resources to sanction employers, toughen penalties and finally set up a reliable system -- first proposed in 1981 -- to verify the eligibility of workers. That would allow the government to hold employers accountable for knowingly hiring illegal immigrants.

The Homeland Security Department also is seeking access to Social Security Administration records of workers whose numbers and names don't match -- access that has long been blocked by privacy concerns.

Still, in light of the government's record, experts on all sides of the debate are skeptical that the administration will be able to remove the job magnet that attracts illegal immigrants.

"The claims of this administration and its commitment to interior enforcement of immigration laws are laughable," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, an advocacy group that favors tougher



Ben Salazar, a longtime activist, says that "immigrants know they're needed" in jobs many Americans will not fill, "so they will take their chances." (By Kari Lydersen -- The Washington Post)

The Immigration Debate



The Washington Post's coverage of the immigration issue, from the politics of revising the nation's immigration laws to the impact of illegal immigration on the U.S.-Mexico border and the Washington region.

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workplace enforcement, among other measures. "The administration only discovered immigration enforcement over the past few months, five years into its existence, and only then because they realized that a pro-enforcement pose was necessary to get their amnesty plan approved."

Angela Kelley, deputy director of the National Immigration Forum, which supports immigrant rights, agreed that enforcement has been "woefully tiny."

"Why should the public believe it, because the government hasn't done it before?" Kelley asked.

In recent months, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which succeeded the INS, has dramatically stepped up enforcement efforts. It won 127 criminal convictions last year, up from 46 in 2004, and obtained \$15 million in settlements from an investigation of Wal-Mart and 12 subcontractors last fall, a spokesman said. Comparable figures before 2003 were not tracked, the agency said.

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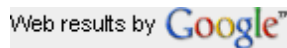
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