



U.S. Immigration  
and Customs  
Enforcement

MEMORANDUM FOR: All ICE Employees

FROM: John Morton  
Assistant Secretary

SUBJECT: Civil Immigration Enforcement: Priorities for the Apprehension,  
Detention, and Removal of Aliens

Purpose

This memorandum outlines the civil immigration enforcement priorities of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as they relate to the apprehension, detention, and removal of aliens. These priorities shall apply across all ICE programs and shall inform enforcement activity, detention decisions, budget requests and execution, and strategic planning.

*A. Priorities for the apprehension, detention, and removal of aliens*

In addition to our important criminal investigative responsibilities, ICE is charged with enforcing the nation's civil immigration laws. This is a critical mission and one with direct significance for our national security, public safety, and the integrity of our border and immigration controls. ICE, however, only has resources to remove approximately 400,000 aliens per year, less than 4 percent of the estimated illegal alien population in the United States. In light of the large number of administrative violations the agency is charged with addressing and the limited enforcement resources the agency has available, ICE must prioritize the use of its enforcement personnel, detention space, and removal resources to ensure that the removals the agency does conduct promote the agency's highest enforcement priorities, namely national security, public safety, and border security.

To that end, the following shall constitute ICE's civil enforcement priorities, with the first being the highest priority and the second and third constituting equal, but lower, priorities.

**Priority 1. Aliens who pose a danger to national security or a risk to public safety**

The removal of aliens who pose a danger to national security or a risk to public safety shall be ICE's highest immigration enforcement priority. These aliens include, but are not limited to:

## Civil Immigration Enforcement: Priorities for the Apprehension, Detention, and Removal of Aliens

Page 2

- aliens engaged in or suspected of terrorism or espionage, or who otherwise pose a danger to national security;
- aliens convicted of crimes, with a particular emphasis on violent criminals, felons, and repeat offenders;
- aliens not younger than 16 years of age who participated in organized criminal gangs;
- aliens subject to outstanding criminal warrants; and
- aliens who otherwise pose a serious risk to public safety.<sup>1</sup>

For purposes of prioritizing the removal of aliens convicted of crimes, ICE personnel should refer to the following new offense levels defined by the Secure Communities Program, with Level 1 and Level 2 offenders receiving principal attention. These new Secure Communities levels are given in rank order and shall replace the existing Secure Communities levels of offenses.<sup>2</sup>

- Level 1 offenders: aliens convicted of “aggravated felonies,” as defined in § 101(a)(43) of the Immigration and Nationality Act,<sup>3</sup> or two or more crimes each punishable by more than one year, commonly referred to as “felonies”;
- Level 2 offenders: aliens convicted of any felony or three or more crimes each punishable by less than one year, commonly referred to as “misdemeanors”; and
- Level 3 offenders: aliens convicted of crimes punishable by less than one year.<sup>4</sup>

### **Priority 2. Recent illegal entrants**

In order to maintain control at the border and at ports of entry, and to avoid a return to the prior practice commonly and historically referred to as “catch and release,” the removal of aliens who have recently violated immigration controls at the border, at ports of entry, or through the knowing abuse of the visa and visa waiver programs shall be a priority.

### **Priority 3. Aliens who are fugitives or otherwise obstruct immigration controls**

In order to ensure the integrity of the removal and immigration adjudication processes, the removal of aliens who are subject to a final order of removal and abscond, fail to depart, or intentionally obstruct immigration controls, shall be a priority. These aliens include:

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<sup>1</sup> This provision is not intended to be read broadly, and officers, agents, and attorneys should rely on this provision only when serious and articulable public safety issues exist.

<sup>2</sup> The new levels should be used immediately for purposes of enforcement operations. DRO will work with Secure Communities and the Office of the Chief Information Officer to revise the related computer coding by October 1, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> As the definition of “aggravated felony” includes serious, violent offenses and less serious, non-violent offenses, agents, officers, and attorneys should focus particular attention on the most serious of the aggravated felonies when prioritizing among level one offenses.

<sup>4</sup> Some misdemeanors are relatively minor and do not warrant the same degree of focus as others. ICE agents and officers should exercise particular discretion when dealing with minor traffic offenses such as driving without a license.

- fugitive aliens, in descending priority as follows:<sup>5</sup>
  - fugitive aliens who pose a danger to national security;
  - fugitives aliens convicted of violent crimes or who otherwise pose a threat to the community;
  - fugitive aliens with criminal convictions other than a violent crime;
  - fugitive aliens who have not been convicted of a crime;
- aliens who reenter the country illegally after removal, in descending priority as follows:
  - previously removed aliens who pose a danger to national security;
  - previously removed aliens convicted of violent crimes or who otherwise pose a threat to the community;
  - previously removed aliens with criminal convictions other than a violent crime;
  - previously removed aliens who have not been convicted of a crime; and
- aliens who obtain admission or status by visa, identification, or immigration benefit fraud.<sup>6</sup>

The guidance to the National Fugitive Operations Program: Priorities, Goals and Expectations, issued on December 8, 2009, remains in effect and shall continue to apply for all purposes, including how Fugitive Operation Teams allocate resources among fugitive aliens, previously removed aliens, and criminal aliens.

*B. Apprehension, detention, and removal of other aliens unlawfully in the United States*

Nothing in this memorandum should be construed to prohibit or discourage the apprehension, detention, or removal of other aliens unlawfully in the United States. ICE special agents, officers, and attorneys may pursue the removal of any alien unlawfully in the United States, although attention to these aliens should not displace or disrupt the resources needed to remove aliens who are a higher priority. Resources should be committed primarily to advancing the priorities set forth above in order to best protect national security and public safety and to secure the border.

*C. Detention*

As a general rule, ICE detention resources should be used to support the enforcement priorities noted above or for aliens subject to mandatory detention by law. Absent extraordinary circumstances or the requirements of mandatory detention, field office directors should not expend detention resources on aliens who are known to be suffering from serious physical or mental illness, or who are disabled, elderly, pregnant, or nursing, or demonstrate that they are

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<sup>5</sup> Some fugitives may fall into both this priority and priority 1.

<sup>6</sup> ICE officers and special agents should proceed cautiously when encountering aliens who may have engaged in fraud in an attempt to enter but present themselves without delay to the authorities and indicate a fear of persecution or torture. See Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, art. 31, *opened for signature* July 28, 1951, 19 U.S.T. 6259, 189 U.N.T.S. 137. In such instances, officers and agents should contact their local Office of the Chief Counsel.

primary caretakers of children or an infirm person, or whose detention is otherwise not in the public interest. To detain aliens in those categories who are not subject to mandatory detention, ICE officers or special agents must obtain approval from the field office director. If an alien falls within the above categories and is subject to mandatory detention, field office directors are encouraged to contact their local Office of Chief Counsel for guidance.

*D. Prosecutorial discretion*

The rapidly increasing number of criminal aliens who may come to ICE's attention heightens the need for ICE employees to exercise sound judgment and discretion consistent with these priorities when conducting enforcement operations, making detention decisions, making decisions about release on supervision pursuant to the Alternatives to Detention Program, and litigating cases. Particular care should be given when dealing with lawful permanent residents, juveniles, and the immediate family members of U.S. citizens. Additional guidance on prosecutorial discretion is forthcoming. In the meantime, ICE officers and attorneys should continue to be guided by the November 17, 2000 prosecutorial discretion memorandum from then-INS Commissioner Doris Meissner; the October 24, 2005 Memorandum from Principal Legal Advisor William Howard; and the November 7, 2007 Memorandum from then-Assistant Secretary Julie Myers.

*E. Implementation*

ICE personnel shall follow the priorities set forth in this memorandum immediately. Further, ICE programs shall develop appropriate measures and methods for recording and evaluating their effectiveness in implementing the priorities. As this may require updates to data tracking systems and methods, ICE will ensure that reporting capabilities for these priorities allow for such reporting as soon as practicable, but not later than October 1, 2010.