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Illegal Immigrants at Center of New Identity Theft Crackdown

By [RACHEL L. SWARNS](#)

[WASHINGTON](#), Dec. 13 — Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff on Wednesday announced a broad new plan to crack down on illegal immigrants who steal the identities of American citizens to get jobs. The strategy, he warned, would likely have economic consequences for the industries that rely heavily on illegal workers.

The announcement came one day after homeland security agents swept into Swift & Company meatpacking plants in six states and arrested nearly 1,300 workers, almost 10 percent of the company's work force, in what Mr. Chertoff hailed as the largest workplace crackdown on illegal [immigration](#).

Of the 1,282 workers detained, 65 were charged with identity theft or other crimes, officials said. The rest face administrative charges for being in the United States illegally and will likely be deported. The company, which cooperated with the government, was not charged with any criminal or civil violations.

Mr. Chertoff said illegal immigrants had assumed the stolen identities of hundreds of American citizens to get jobs at Swift & Company. And he warned that he intended to aggressively pursue document-theft rings and the illegal immigrant workers who use them, even though he acknowledged that "when we remove the illegal workers, there's going to be some kind of a slowdown."

"Obviously, when — even unwittingly — a business is significantly built on illegal labor, once we enforce the law, that's going to have a ripple effect," Mr. Chertoff said at a news conference in response to questions about the impact of the new strategy on businesses and the economy.

"It's going to be a deterrent to illegal workers," he said. "It's going to cause them to say that, you know, this happened in Swift, it could easily happen somewhere else. In fact, I'm pretty much going to guarantee we're going to keep bringing these cases."

The news sent shudders through the nation's businesses because Swift & Company, the world's second largest processor of fresh beef and pork, had tried to weed out illegal workers and had relied on a federal program designed to help employers detect fake identity documents. Mr. Chertoff acknowledged that the program, known as Basic Pilot, is unable to detect authentic identity documents that have been stolen.

In a statement, Swift & Company executives said the raids had forced the company to temporarily suspend operations on Tuesday in its plants in Texas, Colorado, Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa and Utah. They said work resumed on Wednesday, but warned that production was expected to fall "below normal levels in the short term." Union officials said that employee attendance dipped slightly on Wednesday because some immigrants were afraid to return to work.

Homeland security officials emphasized that only the company's workers — not the company — had been charged with wrongdoing, though the investigation is continuing. They said Swift's situation demonstrated the need for a temporary worker program, such as the one advocated by President Bush, to ensure that companies have access to foreign workers.

Mr. Chertoff also urged Congress to pass legislation that would allow Social Security officials to pass along information about valid Social Security numbers being used in multiple workplaces, which then would allow the Basic Pilot program to capture such data and give it to employers.

Homeland security officials also noted that Swift fired scores of workers it determined were illegal, without informing the government, which had notified the company of its investigation. Swift also unsuccessfully sought a court order to prevent federal officials from conducting raids. Both instances, officials suggested, raised questions about the company's willingness to cooperate with the government.

But that did little to reassure jittery executives.

"This is any business's nightmare, whether you are in the meat industry or outside the meat industry," said Janet Riley, spokeswoman for the American Meat Institute.

[Randy Johnson](#), a vice president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, warned that the raids would lead companies to question the value of participating in the Basic Pilot program. And Laura Reiff of the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, said she was deluged on Wednesday with calls from business owners upset by the [Department of Homeland Security's](#) actions.

"They're frightened; they're outraged," said Ms. Reiff, whose coalition represents hotels, restaurants, construction companies and other service industries. "Companies have tried to work with them in good faith. For them to target a company that is using a program that they're trying to sell is disingenuous."

This week's sweep reflects the Bush administration's continuing efforts to demonstrate that it is determined to enforce the nation's long-neglected immigration laws, even as it works to revive legislation that would create a temporary worker program that would legalize most of the 12 million illegal immigrants believed to be in the United States.

In 2002, immigration officials arrested or charged 25 people for criminal violation of immigration law. During fiscal year 2006, which ended on Sept. 30, that number surged to 716. Hundreds more were arrested and deported for living here illegally.

Richard Siklos contributed reporting from New York.

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