



Nation's Largest Chicken Producer Raided for Immigration Identification Scam

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MOUNT PLEASANT, Texas —

Federal agents say their case for a series of workplace raids in five U.S. states was strengthened by identity theft victims who recounted stories of plummeting credit scores and medical benefits denied.

Federal authorities carried out the sweeps Wednesday, arresting hundreds of workers at Pilgrim's Pride chicken plants on charges of identity theft, document fraud and immigration violations.



Authorities also arrested dozens of workers at a doughnut factory in Houston, and the operators of a chain of Mexican restaurants in upstate New York.

Authorities said agents investigating a scheme to provide documents for illegal immigrant workers had tracked down several of the identity theft victims.

"Identity theft is a horrible problem that can ruin a person's good name," said Julie Myers, homeland security assistant secretary for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

ICE said nearly 300 people were arrested, but officials at Pilgrim's Pride Corp., the nation's largest chicken producer, said about 400 hourly, non-management employees were taken into custody.

A federal grand jury in Tyler handed up the indictments on April 1, but they remained sealed until the raids, which began before dawn.

Pittsburg, Texas-based Pilgrim's Pride worked with ICE agents before the operation, company spokesman Ray Atkinson said. It also reported suspicion of identity theft at an Arkansas plant.

"We have terminated all of the employees who were taken into custody and will terminate any employee who is found to have engaged in similar misconduct," Atkinson said in a statement. "We are investigating these allegations further."

The sweeps stemmed from a larger investigation into identity theft and document fraud at Pilgrim's Pride, Myers said. That investigation led to the arrests of two dozen people from the company's Mount Pleasant plant and nearby homes in December.

No criminal or civil charges have been filed against Pilgrim's Pride, which has about 55,000 employees and operates dozens of facilities mostly across the South and in Mexico and Puerto Rico, supplying the KFC restaurant chain and other customers.

Forty-five people, all illegal immigrants, were arrested in Mount Pleasant on charges of false use of Social Security numbers, ICE said. More than 100 people were arrested on immigration violations in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and they could face criminal charges related to identity theft, the agency said. Another 100 were arrested on immigration charges in Moorefield, West Virginia.

More than 25 people face immigration violation charges in Live Oak, Florida. They will also face identity theft or document fraud charges, ICE said. More than 20 were arrested in Batesville, Arkansas, on federal warrants for alleged document fraud or identity theft.

DJs on a Spanish-language radio station told listeners to be careful Wednesday after reporting news of the raid. After the arrests, many of the dozens of businesses in town that cater to Latino immigrants had few customers or none at all.

"It's sad and scary," said Sheita Delacruz, who works at her mother's dress and gift shop.

The poultry raids were the largest of the immigration enforcement actions across the country Wednesday.

It was at least the fourth round of raids at U.S. poultry plants in the past three years. Agents arrested about 160 illegal immigrants in Fairfield, Ohio, last May. Separate raids three months apart in 2005 netted about 120 arrests each in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, and Stillmore, Georgia.