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Immigration officials active at Washoe jail

By Martha Bellisle

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Federal immigration agents and deputies at the Washoe County Jail have established a system to quickly screen prisoners and identify those who might be in the country illegally.

If tagged as illegal, those inmates are sent through the justice system on the criminal charges and then turned over to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency for processing and possible deportation, said Steve Branch, a field office director. "We're targeting criminal aliens," Branch said. "It's important for the community to know that we are addressing the criminal alien situation."

Nationwide in 2008, similar partnerships with local law enforcement and corrections systems have identified and charged more than 221,000 illegal immigrants, more than three times the total from 2006, Branch said.

Of those cases, 7,000 were from Branch's field office, which oversees Nevada, Idaho, Montana and Utah, he said.

Sheriff's Lt. Heidi Howe, a jail watch commander, said prisoners born outside the United States are interviewed by an ICE agent shortly after booking, on a priority based on the severity of the crime.

Some might be foreign-born but have a permanent residency, he said.

The inmate's fingerprints, photograph and other information is entered into a national ICE database. If local criminal charges are not filed, a person found to be an illegal resident could be deported within a week, Branch said.

He said it is important that prisoners convicted of crimes serve any jail time imposed before deportation.