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Huge immigration raids a thing of the past

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POSTVILLE — For a short time in 2008, the Agriprocessors raid was the largest single-site immigration raid in U.S. history.

It took only four months for the “largest raid” title to go to another plant when Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents hit Howard Industries in Mississippi and found more illegal workers.

In the years that followed, the large raids — with meticulous preparation and mass arrests and deportations — have waned.

Instead, immigration officials are favoring low-profile audits that target employers.

“We have seen an end to the Postville-type of raids,” said



Muzaffar Chishti, director of the New York office for the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.

The largest raids came as lawmakers and the George W. Bush

administration argued over immigration reform bills that would have provided a path to citizenship for the 11 million or more people living and working in the country illegally.

“I think there was some need for the administration to be seen as being tough in enforcing this law,” Chishti said.

The initiatives involved allegations of identity fraud for workers who used bogus documents to land jobs.

“Operation Wagon Train” targeted six Swift and Co. facilities in the Midwest in December 2006, detaining almost 1,300 workers and bringing criminal charges against 240.

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BIG RAIDS

Obama administration shifts enforcement to employers

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Agriprocessors Inc. — raided in May 2008 — saw 389 illegal workers detained, with criminal charges pressed against 306. Detainees were bussed to a temporary detention center set up at the National Cattle Congress grounds. The federal court was moved from Cedar Rapids to mobile homes on the site.

Several supervisors and human resources staff were also prosecuted, and the chief executive officer was sentenced to 27 years in prison for financial crimes.

After Postville, immigration officials raided electrical transformer manufacturer Howard Industries in Laurel, Miss., and rounded up 592 people who were in the country illegally. The company's human resources manager pleaded guilty to conspiracy and was placed on probation for five years. The company pleaded to conspiracy and was fined \$2.5 million, according to court records.

"The idea of those kinds of raids was to invoke fear," Chishti said. The message, he said, was that this is what was going to happen to those who don't follow the law.

Human services workers said the actions, which threw

families of detained workers into turmoil as breadwinners were jailed, also invoked outrage. In Postville's case, the house of cards that had been built around the illegal employment took its toll on the town.

"In my own heart, I have to think that Postville was a great surprise to them. I think ICE thought they could come in, pull off this big raid in a small, little town and move on to the next. And there was just such an outcry that I think that kind of stopped the raids," said Sister Mary McCauley, who was pastoral administrator at St. Bridget's Church in Postville during the 2008 raid.

Chishti said there were also questions about the effectiveness of the high-profile raids.

"We unfortunately found out that in many cases, people returned," he said.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, the Obama administration shifted strategy to focus on employers who hire illegal aliens. These operations involve checking employers' verification of worker employment eligibility documents.

Chishti calls them "desktop raids."

When authorities suspect a company is breaking the law, they inspect the company's I-9 eligibility forms. Audits follow and can lead to settlements, fines or even criminal charges.