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SERIAL RAPE SUSPECT TOSSED IN 2006
Deported, but not out of U.S. for good
Mecklenburg sheriff: *'It's frustrating' to deal with repeat offenders*

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Jose C. Rivera

Jose C. Rivera was booted out of the country last November as a convicted felon. Within months, the 26-year-old illegal immigrant from Honduras was back in Charlotte.

Rivera told sheriff's deputies at the Mecklenburg County jail that he crossed the border from Mexico into Texas in April, authorities said.

"Mr. Rivera told us he entered through Texas," said Julia Rush, Mecklenburg County sheriff's spokeswoman. "He walked across. He told us he came by foot."

Rivera was charged last week in connection with the rapes of three women in Charlotte.

It's not unusual for deported immigrants to come back to the U.S. Since last April, Mecklenburg sheriff's deputies working with federal immigration agents, have identified more than 150 illegal immigrants at the jail who had been deported before but re-entered the country.

In July 2006, for example, sheriff's deputies learned from fingerprints that a 52-year-old homeless man, arrested on an open container violation, had been deported five times since 1982. The illegal immigrant from Mexico had convictions in California for burglary, robbery and the sale of heroin and cocaine.

"It's frustrating -- not only for me but for everybody who has to deal with these people over and over again," Mecklenburg Sheriff Jim Pendergraph said. "It boils down to porous borders and the lack of resources to prevent illegal aliens from entering the country.

"But if I have to deport someone 25 times, I will -- if we catch them."

Last year and again this year, Mecklenburg sheriff's deputies and immigration agents at the jail identified Rivera as an illegal immigrant and targeted him for deportation.

He was deported last November after he was convicted of possession of a stolen vehicle, court records show. But in June, he was jailed again in Charlotte -- this time on breaking and entering and larceny charges. Authorities sent him to Atlanta and started deportation proceedings.

But that deportation was stopped abruptly after Charlotte-Mecklenburg police obtained warrants charging him with the three rapes. Federal authorities stopped the deportation by charging the suspected serial rapist with illegally re-entering the county.

In April 2006, the Mecklenburg Sheriff's Office and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement authorities launched a program at the jail to identify illegal immigrants. Inmates born outside the United States are fingerprinted and photographed. The information is then sent to the federal immigration database to determine if the suspects are in the country legally.

Through the program, authorities have identified more than 2,400 illegal immigrants and targeted them for deportation.

Most -- more than 1,500 -- came from Mexico. Three other countries -- Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala -- account for the majority of the others.

Pendergraph said it's not difficult to enter the country. He said an illegal immigrant can pay a smuggler \$2,000 to take him across the border and into the United States.

"The borders are so wide open; there's no security," the sheriff said. "They're just walking in."

Mecklenburg County Jail Program

- 2,400 Number of illegal immigrants identified since April 2006
- 150 Number of those who had been deported before:

Types of charges: About 1,900 misdemeanors; 500 DWIs and 200 felonies, including robberies, sex crimes and breaking and entering.

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