Editorial: Run Amok

Federal immigration squads with shotguns and automatic weapons forcing their way into citizens' homes without warrants or lawful consent, shoving open doors and climbing through windows in predawn darkness, pulling innocent people from their beds, holding groggy occupants at gunpoint, taking people away without explanation — after invading the wrong house.

This is a true account of the depths to which the Bush administration sank in its twilight, when immigration enforcement was ramped up to a feverish extreme.

The details are in a report released Wednesday by the Immigration Justice Clinic of the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. It describes a campaign of illegal home invasions waged by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents from 2006 to 2008 on Long Island and in New Jersey. The report, written by a panel led by Lawrence Mulvey, the police commissioner of Nassau County on Long Island, examined 700 arrest records obtained through Freedom of Information lawsuits, and found a shameful pattern of abuses.

The raids were supposed to be a hunt for gang members and other dangerous criminal fugitives, but two-thirds of those arrested were happenstance targets — Latinos with civil immigration violations. Although agents lacked judicial warrants, and thus could not legally enter private homes without a resident's informed consent, they routinely did so anyway — in 86 percent of the Long Island cases studied and 24 percent of those in New Jersey. And while ICE was legally required to have reasonable suspicion before detaining and questioning anybody, in two-thirds of arrest reports studied, no explanation for the initial arrest was given.

It hardly needs saying that the raids were tactical failures as well as moral outrage. Three days of raids in Nassau County, for example, netted only 6 of 96 targets. Commissioner Mulvey and the Nassau county executive, Tom Suozzi, fiercely denounced the raids at the time as reckless, lawless and dangerous — ICE agents, they said, were flagrantly undisciplined, to the point of mistakenly drawing weapons on county police officers. The Cardozo report powerfully confirms their judgment.

The Department of Homeland Security, under Secretary Janet Napolitano, says it has been trying to undo the worst excesses of Bush-era immigration enforcement. It should hasten to adopt the Cardozo report's recommendations, including no home raids except as a last resort to catch dangerous fugitives; no raids without judicial warrants; videotaping of agents in action, and retraining them on procedures; beginning an inspector general's investigation to see how far the abuses spread.