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Raid illustrates need for immigration reform Current 'system' fails all involved.

The raid at Swift & Co. in Marshalltown Tuesday is a harsh reminder of the need to reform the nation's broken immigration system.

In most cases, it appears that the people hauled away in handcuffs are guilty of nothing worse than working while in the country illegally because they are trying to support their families. Of 90 people arrested in Iowa, two will face criminal charges related to identity theft, according to information released Wednesday.

Of the total arrested in raids at meatpacking plants in Iowa and five other states (1,282), criminal charges will be filed against 65. Apparently all will face civil charges for violating immigration law.

The next Congress and President Bush must fix the law.

Otherwise, despite occasional raids, people living in poverty will continue to slip across the border to work for employers willing to hire them. Some will work awhile and return home. Others will put down roots, raise families and buy homes.

Enforcement can't begin to find the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the country today. Without reform, the numbers will continue to grow.

Meanwhile, employers usually get off the hook. Swift and other meatpackers use a federally run citizenship verification system to check the legal status of job applicants, but the system is obviously inadequate. It can't tell whether a Social Security number is stolen or being used by another person.

While the charges of identity thefts are alarming, it cannot surprise anyone that illegal immigrants use false documents to get jobs.

Clearly, the federal government should devise an effective document-verification system. And it should beef up border security and focus resources on the drug trade and other real threats.

But reform must be broader, including steps to:

- Relax immigration quotas, so they're more in tune with market forces.
- Establish a guest-worker program that meets employment needs and prevents exploitation of workers. Not everyone wants to become a U.S. citizen.

For people already in the country who do seek citizenship and have committed no crimes after their illegal entry, create a path to citizenship that includes paying a fine.

That's not condoning violation of the nation's immigration laws. Choices led to the disturbing scenes that played out Tuesday, by immigrants who entered the country illegally and by an industry that courts low-wage workers. Yet all involved are victims, too. Unless Congress enacts rational reforms, people desperate for work will continue to come without legal clearance, and companies will continue to hire them without an effective means to verify their status. Meanwhile, law-enforcement resources are spent pursuing workers instead of terrorists.

Pictures of workers being hauled out of the Swift plant in Marshalltown while their anguished families watched should sear our national conscience. They illustrate the nation's utter failure to address its immigration problems - and the reason to do so now.