

U.S. Citizen questioned by immigration officials

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Manuel Mendez was working at a construction site Wednesday morning in Round Rock with dozens of others when two immigration enforcement cars pulled up.

People have heard stories about it, but until now there have been few eyewitness accounts of immigration raids taking place in Central Texas.

Mendez said the officers asked him for proof of U.S. citizenship.

"I told them no, because I had left it in my wife's car this morning when she dropped me off," he said.

That's when Mendez said the uniformed men told him he'd have to leave his work site -- in handcuffs. But there's one problem. Mendez is a U.S. citizen born and raised in Austin.

"They told me to put my hands behind my back because they didn't have proof I was a citizen. But then I gave them my Social Security number," he said.

Mendez said the officers cleared him once they double checked his Social Security number. The incident comes on the heels of dozens of unconfirmed reports of immigration raids in Central Texas. But Mendez said he can't believe he was questioned simply because of his ethnicity.

"They singled me out because I was Hispanic, and they thought I was not from here, they thought I was from Mexico," he said.

Barbara Hines of UT's Immigration Law Clinic said stopping someone solely on race is illegal, but others say it's legal for immigration officers to stop and question someone based on their race and other factors, such as where they work, their manner of dress and language ability.

While immigration officers have the right to approach you, everyone has the right to refuse to answer questions. Hines said it's difficult to get people to understand that.

"It's very hard to teach people that you have the right to say, 'no,' because the general instinct is that if someone comes up to you you're going to answer those questions," she said.

It was clear the encounter had a chilling effect on workers at the Round Rock site. By the afternoon only a handful were still there. Mendez said he can't blame them; he's just surprised it happened at all.

The U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement Department will not return calls to confirm or deny they're responsible for the immigration raids.

But a press release issued last week on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Web site said the agency has launched a "comprehensive immigration enforcement strategy" that includes enforcement on worksites.