

Debating The Impact Of An Immigration Crackdown

by [Jennifer Ludden](#)

In 2007, when Virginia's Prince William County ordered police to check [the immigration status](#) of anyone they had "probable cause" to suspect was in the U.S. unlawfully, the impact was swift at family restaurant Ricos Tacos Moya.

"Suddenly nobody showed up," says Stacey Moya, an employee, and daughter of the owner. "Nobody was around. Not one soul. We would go hours without any customers, any clients. Nothing."

After community protests, the policy was soon watered down. In fact, police only check the status of those they arrest for a crime. Still, the stigma around the resolution stuck. Moya says one of her family's restaurants went under. And while business at this one has picked up, it's not the same.

"Not even on weekends after church," she says. "Nowhere near what it was before. I guess nobody likes to be around in the public that much."

Next year Congress is expected to again take up immigration reform, something it tried, but failed, to pass in 2006 and 2007. The collapse of those efforts prompted a number of cities and states to adopt their own regulations aimed at driving out illegal immigrants. But years later, it can be hard to tell just how much impact they had.

For one thing, Prince William County's immigration crackdown coincided with the tanking economy. It's hard to say which hurt more — police checks, or disappearing construction jobs. But one thing the policy aimed to address has not completely disappeared.

Demographic Shift Continues

Outside a 7-Eleven, just near the Moya restaurant, undocumented day laborers still gather. Twenty-eight-year-old Apolinar — who would speak only on condition we not use his last name — says he came here three years ago from central Mexico.

"I have to support my family," he explains in Spanish. "There's just no work where I'm from in Mexico."

Apolinar says he's had no trouble with the police here. He returned to the U.S. despite being deported from California in 2006.

John Steinbach advocates for those men through the [Woodbridge Workers Committee](#); he says their numbers have certainly dwindled. But there's a larger trend under way, he adds.

"What has happened is inevitable, just like many of us predicted," Steinbach says. "The demographic changes in Prince William County continue."

In fact, the U.S. Census finds the county is now "majority-minority." The Hispanic population in particular has kept growing, through both immigration and births, despite the 2007 immigration ordinance.

"Other than causing a lot of chaos and a lot of pain for a lot of families," Steinbach says, "I don't think that it had any impact whatsoever."

The policy's main sponsor disagrees.

Turning Over Immigrants To Federal Government

"So far, we have handed over to the federal government more than 5,500 illegal immigrants who have committed crimes," says Corey Stewart, chairman of Prince William's Board of Supervisors.

He says it was the immigration policy that allowed most of those immigrants to be turned over. And he says violent crime is way down, though there's some question whether that's because of the policy. Still, Stewart points to annual surveys that show broad public support for the way police are carrying out the policy.

"I think the reason for that is people have seen their neighborhoods become safer, and everybody has benefited," he says. "And also the Latino community, I believe, has recognized that it has not led to the racial profiling that many of them feared."

That last point is echoed in a [University of Virginia analysis](#) of the immigration policy, which also notes an irony. "The outcry about the policy and the fears of harassment and profiling that were aroused in the immigrant community were based on the original, 'probable cause' version of the policy," it says, which was only in effect for two months.

If the current policy — mandating immigration checks only upon arrest — had been used from the start, the report doubts it would have caused nearly as much outcry or upheaval.

At Todos Supermarket, owner Carlos Castro says some who left the county after the crackdown seem to have realized the policy is not as bad as they feared. "I saw the people back in the store," he says. "Some moved to the Carolinas. I just saw somebody that went to Florida, and they're back."

He says both the Chamber of Commerce and the police force worked hard to reach out to Hispanics and reassure them. He thinks many business leaders now see the immigration policy as a mistake.

"I heard so many people at the business leadership level [say] that, 'We should have stopped this before,' " he says. "So I think we learned."

But Castro has a new concern. Now that Prince William County is majority-minority, he says it needs politicians who reflect that. He's launching efforts to help make sure Hispanics are part of a new generation of leaders.

<http://www.npr.org/2012/12/26/167705271/debating-the-impact-of-an-immigration-crackdown>