

Hispanics feel harassed under Alabama's immigration law

By Alan Gomez, USA TODAY

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When Natividad Gonzalez's 3-year-old daughter fell off the stairs at their home in Maplesville, Ala., the panicked mother raced to the local hospital.

She carried her daughter into the emergency room and scanned the room for help, but came to halt when a doctor approached them.

"Instead of asking me what happened to my daughter, he asked me what her (immigration) status is," said Gonzalez, 27, who emigrated from Mexico illegally nine years ago, but gave birth to her daughter in the [United States](#), making the child a [U.S.](#) citizen. "People think that doesn't really happen. They say the new immigration law won't affect people who are legal. But that's wrong."

As Arizona officials prepare to implement a section of its immigration law that was upheld by the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) last month, they could use the experience of Alabama as a guide.

Six states have passed laws in the last two years that require local police officers to check the immigration status of suspects if the officer believes the person may be in the country illegally. Judges blocked five of those states from implementing that law, including the Arizona case that ended up before the Supreme Court. But a federal judge in Alabama allowed that law to go into effect.

Now, nine months later, Hispanic residents complain that they're subjected to constant harassment and racial profiling by police and other state officials in Alabama. Civil rights groups set up a hotline in the state, and more than 6,000 people have called in with complaints, said Mary Bauer, legal director of the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), which has helped file lawsuits to block state immigration laws.

"And this is a state with a tiny immigrant and Latino population," Bauer said. "I imagine this playing out in a state like Arizona, and it's just incredibly heartbreaking to imagine the many people who will be subjected to this treatment."

Law enforcement agencies from around the state say their officers have implemented the new law responsibly and have not engaged in racial profiling. Officials with the Alabama Attorney General's Office and the state [Department of Homeland Security](#) say they've received no formal complaints from legal or illegal immigrants about the law.

Leah Garner, a spokeswoman for Homeland Security, said officers have been trained on how they are supposed to develop the "reasonable suspicion" they need to initiate an immigration check and have been properly warned that racial profiling will not be tolerated.

"We haven't received any complaints," she said. "Most people in Alabama appreciate this law and support it."

The law did not require police agencies to report the number of times their officers use the new law, so there are no numbers on how often Alabama officers have used it. But even some law enforcement officials say they don't need any data to declare that the law has been harmful to Hispanics.

Ron Tyler, the police chief in Florence, Ala., said the small Hispanic community in his city of 39,000 people has "gone underground," refusing to report crimes out of fear that officers will arrest them or their family on immigration charges.

"There's a great deal of distrust between the Hispanic community and law enforcement anyway. Then you place this law on top of that and it's enhanced the issue of under-reporting," Tyler said. "There are certainly politics involved in whether they should be here or not. But the fact is, we're just trying to serve humanity. If they need help or there's a crime going on, we want to know about that so we can respond."

Gonzalez has seen that fear of police playing out each day.

She said many people from her community have left the state, and those who remain have adopted habits that reduce their exposure to police. She said that's a huge change from life before the law, when the Hispanic community had a good relationship with police.

"The police were always very nice. They didn't bother (us); they didn't care if we were legal or illegal," she said. "But after the law, I don't know if they're forced or what, but they've been going after Latinos."

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2012-07-21/arizona-immigration-law-alabama/56394360/1>