

New America Media

Law Enforcement Officials Call for Immigration Reform

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- "Americans want a solution to our immigration dilemma, as do law enforcement officials across this nation. But the solution isn't turning every local police department into an arm of Immigration and Customs Enforcement."

That isn't a quote from a pro-immigration activist. It's from an editorial that the former Chief of Police of Los Angeles, William J. Bratton, wrote in the [Los Angeles Times](#).

Bratton isn't alone. Over the course of this year, there have been various reports and [events](#) at which law enforcement officials have come out as allies in support of immigration reform. Their reasons are obvious: instead of concentrating on efforts to guarantee the safety of the communities whose trust they must secure in order to protect them, dozens of police departments are diverting time and agents toward immigration enforcement.

Ron Miller, Chief of Police of Topeka, Kansas, summarized it this way: "We cannot police a community that will not talk to us. We need to work together as a nation to address immigration reform."

J. Thomas Manger, Chief of Police of Montgomery County, Maryland, described the consequences when the immigrant community fears law enforcement officials:

"An increase in unreported crime, reluctant victims and witnesses, and the targeting of immigrants by criminals because the bad guys know that many immigrants will not call the police."

This year, the Police Foundation issued a [report](#) detailing how tasking police with immigration enforcement is counterproductive. It diverts scarce resources, makes them more vulnerable to lawsuits, and creates distrust in the same community police are ostensibly supposed to protect.

Art Venegas, former Chief of Police of Sacramento and director of the Law Enforcement Engagement Initiative (LEEI), lamented that national attention has focused on figures like Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Arizona and his questionable techniques in implementing the 287(g) program (which allows local police to function as immigration agents) when police across the country are calling on Congress and President Barack Obama's

administration to advance broad immigration reform.

"There are police chiefs and sheriffs who aren't doing what Arpaio's doing. They're the silent majority," Venegas told America's Voice.

The Republican administration of George W. Bush interpreted the defeat of immigration-reform proposals in Congress in 2006 and 2007 as a green light to intensify enforcement efforts and demonstrate a "firm hand" against the undocumented, even though the former president had promoted immigration reform. In addition to a physical and virtual "border wall," they conducted a series of raids which terrorized entire communities. Furthermore, they intensified the enforcement of the 287(g) program (which, in the spirit of full disclosure, was first implemented as part of the disastrous 1996 immigration reforms signed into law by Democratic President Bill Clinton).

The results have been terrible for the immigrant community and minorities, especially Latinos. 287(g) has resulted in racial profiling and other abuses illustrated to perfection by Arpaio, who is currently under investigation by the Department of Justice for civil rights violations.

Although more than 520 organizations defending civil rights, human rights and immigrants have asked the Obama administration to end the program, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has decided instead to revise the guidelines, in an attempt to eliminate profiling and abuse. For example, they did not renew Arpaio's authority to conduct "sweeps" to check for immigration status on the streets of Maricopa County, but did allow him to continue identifying undocumented immigrants who had been incarcerated in the county's jails.

However, this time, it's more typical to find police officers advocating for pragmatic solutions.

"The fact that many of these programs damaged the relationship between communities and local police departments didn't seem to matter before. But now local and state police are reclaiming their territory," said Lynn Tramonte, deputy director of America's Voice.

In the past, one of the concerns holding immigration reform back was that its opponents would frame the issue as a choice between the "rule of law" or rewarding lawbreakers.

"But the growing public support of law enforcement agents demonstrates that even from the perspective of the police themselves, the appropriate and realistic solution is comprehensive immigration reform," Tramonte added.

And in the search for Congressional support, police officials in favor of immigration reform are a persuasive ally.

Venegas admits that for many police officers, speaking out in favor of reform isn't easy. Some have even faced retaliation.

But there are more Venegases and Brattons around us all the time.

As Rick Brazier, Sacramento's Chief of Police, put it: "Without comprehensive immigration reform, we place our communities and our nation at risk."