

Restrictive laws push undocumented in shadows

By [Elizabeth Aguilera](#)

Monday, March 26, 2012

Restrictive policies aimed at undocumented immigrants have pushed them underground, fostered negative perceptions of law enforcement and created anxiety around mundane activities such as walking their children to school and driving, according to a [report](#) released Monday that focuses on North County.

Supporters of those measures said they are intended to make life difficult for the undocumented, with the goal of spurring them to return to their native countries or at least leave this region. Escondido's police chief also disputed the study's findings, saying that public safety in his city has not been undermined.

The report, titled "[Life as an Undocumented Immigrant: how restrictive local immigration policies affect daily life](#)," was released by the Center for American Progress, a think tank in Washington, D.C., that produces in-depth analysis of various issues targeted at policy makers and media. This study is the second in the center's "Documenting the Undocumented" series, which began with a look at how immigration-related laws in Alabama were affecting the undocumented population there.

"Restrictive policies are not pushing people out of these communities," said Angela Garcia, co-author of the [report](#) and Ph.D. candidate at the University of California San Diego. "They are just more isolated, life is tenuous and there is a lot of everyday fear and anxiety."

Escondido Mayor Sam Abed said the city simply stresses enforcement of laws and safety, and so be it if illegal immigrants are disproportionately affected by efforts to go after those who commit crimes or drive without licenses.

"Nothing justifies breaking the law," Abed said. "If you are in the country illegally and you feel so uncomfortable ... you put yourself in that situation."

North County has a history of ordinances affecting undocumented immigrants, including a rental ban that the Escondido City Council approved in 2006; the measure was later rescinded.

Other examples in the area include restrictions on day laborers, requirements that certain businesses use E-Verify to screen employees for their residency status, and a partnership between Escondido police and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

There are an estimated 11.5 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Of those, two-thirds have been in the country more than a decade and most live in families with legal residents and children who are American citizens.

That means living deeper in the shadows hurts not just the undocumented person but the whole community, said Angela Kelley, vice president for immigration policy and advocacy at the Center for American Progress.

The new study found that undocumented immigrants tried to avoid authorities' scrutiny by acting calm and being well-dressed, asking friends to help with errands or other outings so they don't have to go outdoors, and relying on a social network to avoid police checkpoints.

Kelley said such strategies may discourage full reporting of crimes, reduce parental involvement in their children's education and contribute to a less engaged community overall.

The center recommends that change begin with Congress, which it urges to pass immigration reform legislation. It also calls for a federal review of various enforcement programs, and for local elected and police leaders to reconsider restrictive immigration measures.

Escondido Police Chief Jim Maher is skeptical about the study. He said his department is constantly reaching out to the Spanish-speaking community to explain its work with ICE through the program "Operation Joint Effort," which he said is strictly focused on people with criminal records and/or deportation orders.

"They think we have some kind of draconian policy, and actually our policy is much more restrictive than the cities around us in terms of what our officers can do," Maher said.

His department has turned over to ICE more than 1,000 undocumented immigrants since May 2010, Maher said. At the same time, he said, the volume of calls from Spanish speakers reporting crimes or providing tips has increased since the department created a community liaison position in 2006.

Bill Flores, a retired San Diego County assistant sheriff and a current member of the advocacy group El Grupo, said the collaboration between Escondido police and ICE is problematic.

"It's a very counterproductive step for local authorities to begin enforcing federal laws, particularly immigration laws because that is the antithesis of community-oriented policing," said Flores, a resident of the city. "It's this kind of relationship that makes this segment of the community reluctant to call or come forward as a witness of a crime."

Garcia cowrote the study with fellow UC San Diego doctoral candidate David Keyes. Both are with the Mexican Migration Field Research Project, a part of the university's Center for Comparative Immigration Studies.

The project is a years-long study of three immigrant-sending communities, including one in Oaxaca where many residents have made their way to North County. The surveys for Monday's report were taken in North County and Oaxaca of people who had recently lived in Oceanside, Vista or Escondido during the first three months of 2011.

<http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2012/mar/26/study-shows-undocumented-immigrants-deeper-shadows/>