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Who gets swept in immigration sweep?

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On a summer day as hot as a soldering iron, Catalina Reyes was driving through her hometown of Chandler, Ariz., when she was stopped by police.

The authorities asked Ms. Reyes for her immigration papers. As a native-born Arizonan, she didn't have any. By her account, the police then pulled her from the car and placed her in handcuffs - not letting her go until she happened to curse at them in English.

Reyes's account of that fateful day in July 1997 lies at the heart of a sensitive immigration dispute that may presage a new, social divide in suburban America. Reyes was detained twice as part of an immigration sweep conducted by local police and the US Border Patrol. They were hoping to stem what they consider a "tidal wave" of illegal immigration flowing into the rapidly growing Phoenix suburb.

The five-day dragnet netted 432 undocumented immigrants. But in the process, dozens of Hispanic residents, both US citizens and legal immigrants, say they were stopped, questioned, and detained as well - just because they "looked Mexican."

The result is a collision here amid the saguaro and creosote over two fundamental forces: the need to protect people's civil rights, and the need to control the nation's borders. Indeed, since the sweep was conducted 18 months ago, it has spawned numerous protest marches, four investigations, and two lawsuits - one involving Reyes.

While the issue of how far the police should go in curbing illegal immigration is always a sensitive one, the dispute in Chandler has defined it in particularly sharp lines.

The city represents a clash of cultures between what has been a largely Hispanic, agricultural town and a newer, more affluent high-tech center - the self-proclaimed capital of "Silicon Desert."

In an exaggerated way, it symbolizes tensions that are surfacing in many boom towns across the American West. Rapid growth - from expanding suburbs and increasing immigration, both legal and illegal - is creating an uneasy alliance of varied economies and perceptions.

Population boom

With about 160,000 residents, Chandler is the second-fastest growing city in the United States among those with populations over 100,000. Most of the 18 percent of the city's population who are Hispanic continue to live in the city's center, which was originally modeled after a Mexican village.

But recent growth has been fueled by high-tech firms like Intel and Motorola. In recent years, the cotton fields and citrus groves surrounding the city have given way to wide, palm-lined streets and modern stucco-and-tile homes to accommodate the new influx of better-educated, more affluent, predominantly Anglo households.

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But the changing demographics have not slowed the tide of immigration. Ron Sanders, chief patrol agent for the Border Patrol's Tucson sector, calls Chandler "the first or second most notorious staging site for aliens in the world" with well-established smuggling routes and drop houses where illegal immigrants are housed.

As many as 70,000 legal and illegal immigrants pass through Chandler on their way to other parts of the country, Sanders says. Many stay just long enough to earn enough money for the next leg of their trip. Others never leave.

Popular with immigrants

Officials cite many reasons for Chandler's continued popularity with illegal immigrants. One reason is the city's location - about 120 miles north of the Mexican the border with easy access to Interstate 10 and Sky Harbor International airport.

Another is the economy. Where illegal immigrants once found plentiful work in the fields, now they find a similar demand in construction. Still others come to the city because of ties to Mexican-American families who immigrated previously.

The idea for the Roundup sprang from Operation Restoration, an effort to revitalize the city's impoverished downtown.

Operation Rest-oration was the result of a neighborhood task force that was mostly concerned with improving property maintenance in the downtown area by cracking down on city code violations.

The task force held a number of community meetings to discuss its recommendations. According to a city spokesman, complaints about illegal immigrants were raised at these meetings.

Hispanic activists are skeptical about police claims about these and other undocumented complaints including everything from homicide to public indecency. Nevertheless, the complaints became the basis for the department asking for help from the Border Patrol.

Because the Border Patrol lacked the manpower to do the kind of wide-ranging sweep the city had in mind, the Chandler Police Department suggested the two organizations join forces. The Border Patrol agreed.

The result was a series of joint operations culminating in the five-day July sweep that has become known as the Chandler Roundup.

Litigating an apology

The city still has not been able to put the event behind it, and each new reminder rankles. Coming is a March 16 trial to decide a \$35 million federal lawsuit filed against the city on behalf of 15 plaintiffs, one of which is Reyes.

"This should never have happened," she says, adding that Chandler Police stopped her twice during the Roundup, the second time in front of her young son, Carlos. "Now, every time my son sees a cop, he tells me to go hide."

City officials recently refused an offer to settle that would have required the city to issue a public apology and provide funding for community and educational programs to benefit the Hispanic community.

Stephen Montoya, the Phoenix attorney who brought the suit, says the people who were detained and questioned included undocumented workers and legal immigrants as well as naturalized and native-born citizens.

"Some speak only Spanish; others speak only English," he says. "The only characteristic they shared was that they looked Hispanic."

That's illegal, says Mr. Montoya, who alleges that the plaintiffs' constitutional guarantees against unreasonable searches and seizures were violated. His case was bolstered last month after the Ninth US Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco ruled in a similar case that the Border Patrol can not stop drivers based on ethnicity.

Chandler Police Chief Bobby Joe Harris has angered Hispanics by repeatedly denying

that his officers did anything wrong.

But a survey conducted by the state attorney general last year concluded that the operation violated the constitutional rights of American citizens and created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.

That was followed in November by the long-awaited report of an independent investigator hired by the city. That report found a lack of malice on the part of the police and Border Patrol, but concluded that excesses probably did occur as a result of poor training and supervision. After the report was released, the city manager reprimanded Chief Harris for his role in the oversight of the operation.

City officials point out that they have taken a number of steps to ensure the mistakes of the past will not be repeated.

Building bridges

The city has resurrected a Human Relations Commission, dormant since the 1960s; appointed a Hispanic liaison officer in the police department; and launched a program of cultural sensitivity for police officers.

But many say these moves amount to nothing more than a hollow gesture. Among them are city Councilman Martin Sepulveda, who has been openly critical of the Roundup and the city's response to the outrage.

"I'm not so sure it has to do with truth and justice as much as it has to do with getting our butts covered as far as we can cover them," he says.

On both sides, all involved agree that it will take time for the wounds to heal.

"I think as a department we learned a great deal," says Lt. Ray Villa, who was appointed to serve as the Chandler Police Department's Hispanic liaison officer. "We're going kind of slow, but that's OK. As long as we're taking those steps, I believe that eventually everything will mend itself and we'll begin to move in the right direction."

Caption: COURT-BOUND: Catalina Reyes, with her son Carlos, was detained twice during the 'Chandler Roundup' of July 1997. 'I couldn't believe they were doing this. Now, every time my son sees a cop, he tells me to hide.' BY ROBERT HARBISON - STAFF MAP: Showing Chandler, Ariz. BY STAFF

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