

Insecure communities?

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While a mandatory federal deportation program headed to Montgomery County takes a more balanced approach to illegal immigration than other measures, its presence could make day-to-day law enforcement more difficult for Montgomery's police.

In September, the county is expected to begin participating in the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Secure Communities program, which scans and stores the fingerprints of anyone brought to the county jail. The database is sent to the FBI and ICE, which check to see if the person is wanted for a federal crime or listed as an illegal immigrant. If he or she is found to be in the country illegally, he or she can be turned over to ICE officials and deported.

Montgomery County and Baltimore city are the only remaining Maryland jurisdictions not participating and ICE hopes to expand the program nationwide by 2013.

The program has multiple problems, not the least of which is an undetermined impact on county policing.

According to data from ICE, the Secure Communities program in Maryland has been responsible for the deportation of 293 illegal immigrants as of March 31. The bulk of those — 223 — came from Prince George's County; however, 145 people, or 65 percent, had no criminal record, and the reasons they were brought to jail were too minor for prosecutors to pursue. Nationwide, of the 248,000 database hits in fiscal 2010, 15 percent were for those accused of felonies.

The county already engages in a similar practice to Secure Communities, where police report all those arrested for serious crimes, such as murder and rape, to ICE. It is then ICE's responsibility to check the immigration status of the submitted names.

With Secure Communities' track record of deporting minor offenders or non-offenders, who might otherwise be valuable resources to police, it's difficult to see how the program is worthwhile.

Montgomery's police chief, J. Thomas Manger, has been an outspoken opponent of having local police engage in what he views as a federal matter. Doing so often deteriorates the relationships on which officers rely for community police work and can erode trust with valuable sources in immigrant communities.

Manger is responsible for the largest jurisdiction in the state by population, and has helped keep crime in line with growth over the past five years, so his views are not to be taken lightly. In 2004, the county had about 23,740 reports of violent crime, such as rapes and murders; in 2009, that number was 25,132, an increase of about 5.8 percent. When considering that population increased by about 5 percent during the same time period, crime has been essentially flat.

There are other, valid concerns, with Secure Communities, cited by the American Immigration Council, a pro-immigration nonprofit organization. These include access to an attorney and lack of a clear complaint process for when errors are made.

County Council member Nancy Navarro has drafted a resolution opposing the Secure Communities program, but ultimately the county has little authority in determining whether it wants to participate, an unfortunate situation given Montgomery's population and considering it is home to a third of the state's Hispanic population.

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