

Opinion

Crackdown on immigrants undermines public safety



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Anti-immigrant rhetoric from the Trump administration is undermining the relationships between immigrants and law enforcement officers.

By [Dan Satterberg](#)

Special to The Times

PRESIDENT Donald Trump claims that immigrants threaten public safety, and he promises that a massive wall, immigration agency sweeps and deportations will make us safer. From my position as King County prosecutor, I can tell you these actions

have the opposite effect for crime victims.




Dan Satterberg is King County's prosecuting attorney.

When victims of crime are afraid to trust police and the courts, the only winners are violent people. Because our top mission is public safety, this “crackdown” is an immediate and serious concern to those of us who work to protect all King County residents.

There are an estimated 1 million immigrants in Washington, one in every seven people in the state. Police and prosecutors have worked for decades to build trust with these communities, and encourage them to cooperate with the justice system. In King County, brave cooperation from undocumented residents who are witnesses or victims has allowed us to hold many violent offenders accountable. The wisdom of this approach has been widely recognized. Indeed, Congress even passed laws to protect immigrant crime victims to encourage them to come forward and report crimes that put us all at risk.

Undocumented immigrant victims, who are disproportionately women and children, are particularly vulnerable to crime due to language barriers, cultural differences and a lack of familiarity with the justice system. Violent criminals are adept at preying on the most vulnerable and marginalized in our community. This is of special concern in cases of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking, where victims already take enormous risks to stand up to their abusers.

“We are not safer when a victim of abuse thinks she must choose between deportation or suffering more violence at the hands of her abuser. Unpunished violent crime threatens us all.” 

Today that hard-earned trust, built intentionally over many years, is being quickly eroded by Trump administration comments and highly publicized actions of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. Prior administrations had focused their attention on undocumented people in jails or prisons; today the ICE attention is on neighborhoods. In El Paso, Texas, last month, a victim seeking protection from violent abuse was arrested by federal immigration agents in the courthouse where she sought help.

Just this week, Washington Chief Justice Mary Fairhurst wrote a letter to Homeland Security Director John Kelly asking that ICE agents cease operating near our state's courthouses, citing the real potential for driving victims and witnesses away from the justice system. No longer hypothetical or anecdotal, ICE actions are undermining trust in the neutrality of the court system, where “justice for all” has been our hallmark.

We are not safer when victims of crime fear being deported if they call 911, talk to police, or come to the courthouse to get protection. We are not safer when a victim of abuse thinks she must choose between deportation or suffering more violence at the hands of her abuser. Unpunished violent crime threatens us all.

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My alarm isn't theoretical. Last year our office worked with 67 undocumented immigrants (more than 300 in the last five years) to prosecute crimes ranging from murder and rape to domestic violence. Without that cooperation and trust of undocumented immigrants, we wouldn't have been able to get some dangerous offenders off the streets.

We must continue to assure our most marginalized communities that it is safe to ask police and the courts for help. Here's how we do that in King county:

- Neither the 911 operator, the police, nor the prosecutor will ask about immigration status. We want people to report crime and be safe;
- Victims and witnesses who assist local law enforcement and prosecution are eligible for immigration protection. Federal law still protects immigrants who are crime victims and witnesses.
- Crime victims are eligible for a new service from local civil legal aid organizations in partnership with my office at both Superior Court courthouses (Seattle and Kent). Among the legal services available for crime victims is advice and representation by Northwest Immigrant Rights Project.

Confusion, fear and demagoguery are destabilizing important ties between immigrant communities, police and the court system. This directly undermines public safety. That's why I join other criminal justice leaders in calling for an immediate end to this dangerous crackdown on law-abiding undocumented immigrants.

The trust we have spent decades building with immigrant communities can be lost in a few weeks. As for my office, we remain committed to doing all we can to encourage

and protect all crime victims in our community.

Dan Satterberg

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