



“It Opens the Door to Inhumanity:’ How Anti-Immigrant Policies in Arizona, Texas Affect Local Law Enforcement

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Dr. Ruben Quesada became a police officer to protect everyone’s rights. So when state legislators in Arizona tried to use local law enforcement like him to crack down on unauthorized immigration, he and many of his colleagues felt torn.

Enacted in 2010, Arizona’s S.B. 1070 was notoriously [the harshest anti-immigrant law](#) in the United States at the time. Some of its authors and champions were shown to have devised the provisions based on their own racial animus, documented through years of [private emails](#) that portrayed all Latinos as unauthorized immigrants — and in turn falsely equated many unauthorized immigrants with criminals.

[S.B. 1070](#) made it a state crime in Arizona to be present without authorization in the U.S., created another state crime for trying to work without permission, forced state or local officers to confirm someone's immigration status if they were arrested or detained, and allowed certain noncitizens to be arrested without a warrant. Its sweeping restrictions were immediately challenged as unlawful and wound up in front of the U.S. Supreme Court, where the justices [struck down](#) much of the law in 2012 based on the longstanding constitutional principle that immigration enforcement is chiefly a federal responsibility.

Yet one section of S.B. 1070 remained intact [until 2016](#) — the “show me your papers” provision. The policy received its nickname because police officers were instructed to interrogate people’s immigration status, often leading them to request identifying documents from citizens and noncitizens alike. Widespread racial profiling [against Latinos](#) ensued, drawing [comparisons](#) to highly criticized “[stop-and-frisk](#)” enforcement practices. And so S.B. 1070’s stipulations — and the harms they caused — raised questions for Quesada: Who do the police *really* represent? Are they there to protect everyone, or just the people whom the government says?

“You can’t talk about immigration without talking about profiling. And I believe that is everything that we are against,” said Quesada, now the police chief in Swampscott, Massachusetts, after more than two decades serving in Mesa, Arizona. “That is everything that we denounce. And when you try to intertwine the two, I don’t think you can separate it. And so I think that’s worrisome.

“How do you know somebody is undocumented or illegally in this country? You go back to race, class, gender, phenotype, ... the color of their skin. ‘Do they look foreign?’ I’ve heard that before, and it eats me at my core, because we are all supposed to be treated equally.”

Now, more than a decade after S.B. 1070 was enacted, a new slew of copycat legislation has cropped up in response to another wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, most notably in Texas. Senate Bill (S.B.) 4 — [which passed the Texas legislature](#) in November 2023 and was signed into law the following month — creates state-level crimes for entering Texas unauthorized from abroad and gives state officials the authority to approximate deportation orders, even if migrants or asylum seekers have ongoing cases in immigration court. These policies raise many of the same legal and constitutional questions about federal preemption as Arizona’s S.B. 1070 already seemingly settled, and for Quesada, it all feels like *déjà vu*.

“We always have to be leery of unintended consequences, and starting to enforce immigration and mix immigration with law enforcement, we’re gonna have a lot of harmful unintended consequences,” he said. “We’re gonna victimize more people who we should be helping.”

Arizona, Texas, and the Legacy of Anti-Immigrant Policies

To Quesada, local immigration enforcement reached a tipping point in Mesa, Arizona, not with the passage of S.B. 1070, but nearly [two years earlier](#) — when Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio conducted an overnight raid of a city-owned library to search for unauthorized immigrants working there. A team of armed deputies ended up [arresting](#) three janitors whom they suspected of using fake identification, causing alarm among local officials who saw the operation as a serious over-reaction to undocumented labor.

“Our police chief [testified](#) in front of Congress, and he also denounced — he had a verbal spar essentially — in the news media with the sheriff. It was very contentious. And to our credit, to our department’s credit, he took the lead and we followed, because we did believe that that’s not our jobs,” Quesada said.

For his part, Quesada experienced the fallout from the raids as a devastating blow to community cooperation. In policing, trust is key. But it's especially difficult to earn among immigrants, many of whom are already afraid to come forward as victims if they're undocumented.

"We've worked so hard to try to build this consensus of trust, and now in one swoop, it [was] all gone," Quesada remembered. "Now, we in law enforcement have to answer for this one individual [Arpaio] who is doing this. And so it worries me that it's going to happen again, only in Texas."

In the run-up to S.B. 4's passage, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has similarly demonized immigrants to mount a yearslong aggressive campaign against unauthorized crossings. Through [Operation Lone Star](#), a multi-billion-dollar crackdown, thousands of Texas state troopers and National Guard members have been deployed to the U.S.-Mexico border. Coils of [hazardous concertina wire](#) have been strategically placed to ensnare migrants who try to wade across the Rio Grande, increasing the likelihood of injuries and drownings. Abbott has even [started building](#) his own border wall, taking over former President Donald Trump's signature project.

Amid this backdrop — and as Abbott [claimed](#) an "invasion" of Texas's border, echoing some of the xenophobic rhetoric used by extremists who espouse the "[Great Replacement](#)" theory — state lawmakers eventually passed S.B. 4 to ramp-up immigration enforcement by peace officers in Texas. But the legislation is already getting pushback from officials, who are [balking at the realities](#) and costs of enforcing the new crimes in their communities. Questions abound, such as how — in a state that is over 268,000 square miles, much of which is far from the Texas-Mexico border — peace officers are supposed to discern who has made a recent border crossing without authorization? Or how, when a [plurality of the state population](#) identifies as Hispanic or Latino, and when migrants are often stereotyped as Hispanic or Latino, Texas will avoid mass racial profiling like that which occurred in Arizona a decade ago?

Beyond logistical challenges, policies such as Arizona's S.B. 1070 and Texas's S.B. 4 can exact a heavy toll on local law enforcement — especially Latino police officers who feel torn between their personal and professional identities. For his doctorate, Quesada wrote a [dissertation](#) on Latinos in policing, with some of the research centered on officers' unease carrying out immigration enforcement activities. Interviewees discussed how their duties at times contradicted what their hearts felt, or how their community trust-building practices were often undermined by immigration sweeps. Some even relayed being called derogatory immigration-related slurs or being treated differently on the job because of their ethnicity, a level of discrimination that underscores how —

especially once out of uniform — they too could face profiling because of laws that disproportionately affect people of color.

In this context, and to mitigate harms against the wider community, Quesada's police department in Mesa actively fought back against S.B. 1070 while it was in place. They still followed the letter of the law, but they avoided targeting people solely for immigration violations and worked with nongovernmental organizations and Spanish-language media on outreach to educate locals about their rights.

“The heart of humanity in policing is not about trying to enforce federal civil laws,” Quesada said. “And it takes a toll on the trust that we're trying to build.

“It opens the door for inhumanity.”

From Arizona to Massachusetts

It may not come as a surprise that Quesada sees obvious parallels between Arizona's anti-immigrant policies and what's happening in Texas today. But after several years in Massachusetts, he has also started noticing racial and ethnic divides there, much like the ones that have long plagued the southwest region.

“It's not risen to the level that I've seen in my history in Arizona,” he said. “It's percolating, I guess, for lack of a better term. We have to work on it now. We have to work on it together.”

Drawn by a unique right-to-shelter law for certain families, many migrants — including a large Haitian community — have gone to Massachusetts in recent months to build a life while they await their next steps in the immigration process. But as new arrivals continued to climb earlier this year, state officials set a ceiling of [7,500 total families](#) (including both [newcomers and longtime residents](#)) who could be accommodated by the shelter system at any given time, a capacity limit that has been reached for weeks now. Meanwhile, state and federal representatives [have collaborated](#) to quickly sign up eligible migrants for work authorization and connect them to jobs, so they can become self-sufficient and no longer rely on the state's services.

Quesada said that while local law enforcement hasn't yet experienced a strain from the increased migrant arrivals, schools and social services are struggling to keep up. As tensions rise, he warned that law enforcement may start feeling the pressure, too — not because migrants drive crime rates higher ([empirical research](#) and Quesada's anecdotal experience suggest they don't), but because of a [growing backlash](#) to their presence.

Quesada expressed concern about the general tenor of the conversation around immigration and identity in the U.S.: “It’s not an immigration debate anymore. It’s a hate debate. And anything that’s ‘different’ is now part of that debate,” he said.

To counter these trends, Quesada would like to see more education on these topics. Especially in Massachusetts — which lies many thousands of miles from the U.S.’s southern border — residents are often relatively new to the immigration debate, at least in terms of how it affects their corner of the world. As new cultures meet, some for the first time, he wants to bridge differences — not just in law enforcement, but in the larger community, with hopes of stoking a more productive discussion.

“I think that the less we fear, the better we feel,” he said. “And I think that just being part of having this conversation — this difficult conversation — is important.

“Whatever side of the aisle you’re on, it’s important to start that conversation.”