

Immigrants on “ICE”

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“Jessica Morales”—that’s not her real name—thought she’d found a relatively safe place to live as an undocumented immigrant. With U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) focusing on communities with larger immigrant populations, Morales and her husband lived and worked peacefully in Ypsilanti for over four years, in spite of their illegal status. Then, on March 16, she heard a knock on the door.

“I was in the bathroom, giving my daughter a bath,” Morales recalls. “Someone was knocking really hard, and I think my husband opened the door. ICE agents came in, asking for my brother-in-law’s wife. But then they started yelling ‘green card’ at my husband. When he told them he didn’t have one, one of the agents tried to grab him. He ran into the bedroom, and they started struggling with him and he fell to the floor.

“The agents dragged my husband to the laundry room,” she continues, her voice trembling. “He hit his head and scraped his knees, there was blood on the floor. My kids both started crying. I asked the agents, ‘Why are you treating him this way? We’re not animals.’ But they just yelled at me to move away. So I locked myself in the bedroom with the kids. But then they broke through the door, so we ran away to a neighbor’s house. I didn’t have any other choice. They already had my husband, and I was afraid they’d take me away and leave my kids without anyone.”

The incident was part of a recent surge of ICE activity that has sown panic among the local undocumented community, and sparked outrage among immigrant rights advocates. According to the Washtenaw County Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights, there were 14 reported incidents in Washtenaw County in March and early April, in which over 22 people were apprehended. “The detentions we know of have been mainly at individual homes, clustered in places where people of lower economic status live,” says Laura Sanders, an adjunct professor at the UM School of Social Work and co-coordinator of the coalition. “Immigration agents come looking for specific people, and if those people aren’t there, they take everyone who can’t show valid papers. They’ve busted in without warrants, they’ve ransacked homes, they have [in the Morales case] physically attacked a man in front of his children. It’s horrendous.”

ICE spokesman Gregory Palmore denies allegations of excessive violence, saying agents only use force if a suspect attempts to flee or threatens others’ safety. He also defends the legality of ICE’s tactics. “Our job is to obey the laws, not just enforce them,” he says. “We conduct targeted enforcement actions, focusing first on criminal aliens, and second on fugitives who’ve disobeyed a final order from an immigration judge to leave the country. But if we go to a residence seeking specific targets and we encounter individuals who give us just cause to believe they’re here illegally, we cannot turn a blind eye to enforcing the law. And even without a warrant, there are different ways we can legally gain entrance to people’s homes.”

Though he says he's not aware of any mass operations in Washtenaw County, Palmore says ICE activity in the area has increased significantly since the Immigration and Naturalization Service was folded into the Department of Homeland Security in 2003. "There is a greater focus on immigration enforcement nationwide, and there's no longer a safe haven here in Michigan. Gone are the days when individuals without valid status here can hide in the wings. We have two teams conducting active fugitive operations around the clock, and from 2006 to 2007 the Detroit area of operations more than doubled its physical fugitive apprehensions. And we expect these increases to continue."

That might be unwelcome news to the Ann Arbor Police Department. Palmore says his agency notifies local police before operating in their areas, and sometimes requests their assistance. But a 2003 City Council Resolution prohibits the AAPD from assisting ICE, except in cases of penal violations or public safety threats. After AAPD officers assisted in one of the recent detentions, pulling over a suspect at the request of ICE agents in an unmarked car, immigrant advocates raised concerns about the police department's role.

According to Chief of Police Barnett Jones, "The officers here know the position of City Council, and the position of this community. We as a police agency are not going out there attempting to locate and detain illegal aliens. But when a federal law enforcement agency is calling on us to assist them, we are duty bound to stand by." Though he insists that the AAPD rarely does anything but observe and document ICE actions, activists like Laura Sanders want firmer guidelines. "The 2003 Resolution wasn't developed specifically to deal with the immigration issue, but our interpretation of it doesn't suggest that police have to cooperate with federal immigration agents," she says. "We need stronger policies that clearly state that police won't be involved in helping federal agents detain and deport people."

To that end, the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights has been meeting with police departments and government officials throughout the county, as well as organizing pickets and community forums on the immigration issue. But Sanders acknowledges that even the most immigrant-friendly local ordinances will not deter federal agents from doing their jobs. Absent changes in national immigration law, she says, advocates' most valuable role may consist of helping immigrants like Jessica Morales deal with a loved one's deportation.

"We've got less than a month to sell our house and arrange everything before my husband is deported back to Honduras," Morales says. "My kids and I will leave voluntarily with him." She shakes her head. "Back in my country, many people want to come here - to try to provide a better life for their kids, and maybe send a few dollars home. But they can't imagine all the ways they'll suffer if they come illegally. If people back home tell me they're thinking of coming here, I'm going to tell them, 'No, no, no!'"