Immigration Reform: Likely Effects of Cross-Deputization

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What happens when local law enforcement officers become immigration agents?

Several states are considering following in the footsteps of the new Arizona immigration law, where local law enforcement officers have been scheduled to be deputized as immigration officers beginning July 29, 2010. These “cross-deputization” policies have ignited strong emotions on all sides of the debate over immigration reform. However, strong new research suggests that this approach might backfire, leading to increased crime rates as both White and Latino residents become less likely to cooperate with police investigations.

Background: In 2008, Utah’s State legislature enacted legislation that enabled local law enforcement officers to enforce federal immigration laws. This approach is, in principle, similar to Arizona’s, but Utah law enforcement officers have resisted the policy and it has yet to be enforced. Recently, Dr. Phillip Goff of UCLA, in collaboration with police chiefs in Utah and Colorado, conducted a research survey among residents of Utah to assess the validity of public arguments on the issue of cross-deputization.1

Findings: Survey responses addressed three main questions.

- Why do people support cross-deputization measures? White residents indicated that they do not believe that cross-deputization policies will reduce illegal immigration, while police officers and Latino residents (documented and undocumented) believe that they would result in a slight reductions. This finding suggests that endorsement of such measures is motivated by factors other than one’s perception of their likely effectiveness.

- What is the relationship between the Latino population and crime rates? White Salt Lake City residents who were surveyed consistently overestimated Latino involvement in criminal activity, perceiving Latinos to perpetuate 47% of drug crimes, 48% of violent crimes, and 38% of identity theft. However, actual Salt Lake City crime statistics reveal much lower levels of Latino involvement in these crimes (27%, 26%, and 17%, respectively).

- What is the likely impact of cross deputization? Both White and Latino residents (both documented and undocumented) indicated at nearly the same rates that they would be drastically less likely to report drug crimes after implementation of cross-deputization than they are now. This would have a negative impact on the ability of police to fight crime and protect public safety for all citizens, while giving a green light to criminals to step up their illegal activities.

These data support the concerns of many law enforcement officers around the country that requiring them to enforce immigration laws is liable to undermine the public’s overall trust in police. In contrast to the belief of many supporters of the new Arizona law, these data strongly suggest that cross-deputization may in fact harm public safety for all racial/ethnic groups.

In the words of Salt Lake City Police Department Chief Chris Burbank, co-author of the research study: “Fighting crime without the help of one’s community is like trying to disarm a hidden mine by stomping on the ground. By the time you have found the problem, it is already too late.”2

About Dr. Phillip Goff, lead researcher for this study
SPSSI member Phil Goff is a social psychologist and co-founder of The Consortium for Police Leadership in Equity. A graduate of Harvard and Stanford Universities, Dr. Goff is on the psychology faculty at UCLA, and has recently been appointed as a William T. Grant Foundation scholar, in recognition of his exceptional early career research contribution.

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1 The survey was conducted by Phillip A. Goff, Liana M. Epstein, Chris Burbank, & Tracie L. Keesee. A sample of 118 Salt Lake City Police officers, 187 White Salt Lake City residents, and 103 Latino residents (54 documented and 49 undocumented) were interviewed.

2 To read the entire article where Chief Burbank is cited, go to http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chief-chris-burbank/policing-immigration-a-jo_b_602439.html.