

**Testimony of**

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**Hearing on**

**“The Consequences of Criminal Aliens on U.S. Communities”**

**Before the**

**Committee on the Judiciary**

**Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement**

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Chair McClintock, Ranking Member Jayapal, and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Ramon Batista, and I am the Chief of Police for the city of Santa Monica, California. I was born in Los Angeles and raised in Tucson, Arizona, where I joined the local police force at 22 years old and spent the bulk of my career in a city about 60 miles from the United States-Mexico border. My approach to law enforcement is evidence-based and community-oriented, with the goal of improving public safety for all. As a member of the Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force (LEITF), I also benefit from the collective knowledge of a nonpartisan network of thought leaders who are attentive to the unique challenges and opportunities that arise while serving immigrant communities across the nation.

After a career that has spanned about 37 years and two border states, I first want to affirm the generally positive effect of immigration on our towns and cities. Whether authorized or undocumented, most of the immigrants I have encountered firsthand are hard workers who are eager to build a better life in the U.S., provide for their families, and pursue the American dream. They park cars, work in agriculture, wait tables, and fill critical labor shortages in key industries that Americans rely on. As friends, fellow parishioners, neighbors, and loved ones, immigrants often influence our lives for the better.

That said, as a veteran law enforcement leader, I also understand that immigrants are people, and all people are capable of doing bad things regardless of their shape, size, ethnicity, citizenship status, or any other identifying feature. However, I disagree with the premise that immigrants are more prone to criminality than native-born Americans. My experience and the existing evidence overwhelmingly suggest that immigrants — including undocumented immigrants — pose no greater threat to public safety than anyone else, and in fact, their presence may help to reduce crime in certain areas.<sup>1</sup>

As a law enforcement officer, my job is to stop perpetrators of crime no matter their immigration status. But ultimately, I do not work in policing because of a small subset of bad actors. I work in policing because of all the law-abiding residents whom I feel lucky to call part of my community. Undocumented immigrants who live and work with dignity in Santa Monica are a part of my community, and I take seriously my duty to keep them safe, just as I do for U.S. citizens and lawful residents.

During the nearly four decades that I have worked in law enforcement, one of the most critical lessons I have learned is the importance of trust to effectively perform my responsibilities. Trust is the lifeblood of community-oriented, 21st-century policing, and it is especially essential among marginalized groups who might otherwise be afraid to come forward to law enforcement with information. There are myriad reasons why immigrants in particular may hesitate to cooperate with police. For one, many people who come to the U.S. have fled countries with corrupt authority figures, where they may have faced persecution at the hands of law enforcement. Language barriers can also play a role, reinforcing the need for multilingual officers. But perhaps the greatest fear faced by witnesses and victims from immigrant communities is the concern that going to the police for help could inadvertently expose them and/or their loved ones to immigration consequences such as deportation.

When law enforcement is able to overcome these concerns through culturally sensitive community outreach and trust-building, it can save lives. Before I moved to Santa Monica, I served as a police chief in Arizona, where I knew I needed to prioritize connecting with the local immigrant community so they felt safe and comfortable under my leadership. That concerted effort paid off when a father came to my department, worried. His teenage son who was experiencing mental illness had started making alarming comments and had bought an assault weapon, raising fears that he might soon resort to violence. The father was undocumented and felt nervous to come forward. But his love for his son and his community prevailed, and the trust we had imbued throughout the city fostered a mutual understanding that we would not only treat him fairly but also take care of his child.

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<sup>1</sup> “Fact Sheet: Immigrants and Crime,” Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force, June 26, 2018, <https://leitf.org/2018/06/fact-sheet-immigrants-crime/>, 4.

Our outreach and care had laid the groundwork for this father to be able to do the right thing, and I believe that together, we likely prevented a mass-casualty event. The incident remains one of my greatest wins and proudest achievements from my time in Arizona, serving as a testament to what thoughtful, evidence-based community policing can do.

This, to me, is the purpose of state and local law enforcement: to neutralize real threats to public safety in our communities, and to empower all civilians under our jurisdiction in their pursuit of justice. When law enforcement agencies are able to build trust within our communities, including immigrant communities, we are more likely to get cooperation from victims and witnesses of all backgrounds, improving public safety for everyone.

Enforcement of immigration laws has always primarily been a federal responsibility. Meanwhile, local police departments like mine should use our limited resources to catch people who are actively doing harm, instead of apprehending and helping to remove residents with no criminal background beyond minor immigration violations. It is no secret that our federal immigration system is broken and has been for years now. Immigrants who want to follow the law and come to the U.S. in search of safety and opportunity often find few if any lines to legally do so.<sup>2</sup> Some arrive fleeing persecution, only to join an asylum backlog of over 1.5 million people.<sup>3</sup> Others are simply trying to reunite with family or make a decent living. Whatever their rationales, people migrating today face a far more restrictive immigration landscape than did our ancestors who made us Americans, and for many of those who are already in the U.S. without authorization, there is no viable way to get right by the law.

Immigrants who commit crimes of violence or otherwise imperil public safety should face consequences. But for the vast majority who are law-abiding and want to contribute positively to our communities, we should expand opportunities to live and work legally in the U.S., both for people who are trying to immigrate and for those already here.

In my view, the U.S.'s broken immigration system represents a missed opportunity, given that many of the immigrants who are caught in legal limbo otherwise embody core American values. They are often people of faith, who care deeply about their families and communities. And, when we embrace them, they are not only willing but eager to

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<sup>2</sup> "Why Don't Immigrants Apply for Citizenship?" American Immigration Council, October 9, 2021, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/why-don%E2%80%99t-they-just-get-line>.

<sup>3</sup> "A Sober Assessment of the Growing U.S. Asylum Backlog," Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, December 22, 2022, <https://trac.syr.edu/whatsnew/email.221222.html>.

stand up for the guiding principles of our nation, including democracy, liberty, and freedom.

For this reason, I am particularly honored and humbled to sit here today, so that I can testify to the urgency for Republicans and Democrats on this subcommittee to work together and fix our immigration laws. We need serious solutions that pair border security with a pathway to lawful status for members of our communities who contribute to our social fabric and economy every day. Congress has the power to deliver those changes, by recognizing the generally positive influence of immigrants, prioritizing public safety, and bringing our immigration laws into the 21st century.

As a police chief, I have a vested interest in this conversation. As much pride as I take in hard-won victories like the one in Arizona, I also wrestle with the knowledge that other tragedies across the country could be prevented were people not afraid to come forward with vital information. Immigration reform that would provide security and certainty to long-time, law-abiding U.S. residents would not only help them and their families — it would also help me and other law enforcement professionals do our jobs, improving public safety.

I welcome this dialogue and hope to be a resource for your subcommittee as you work toward fixing our immigration system.