

# Day 27

## A Working Partnership

Day laborers, mostly from Mexico and Central America, gather under I-35 in Kansas City, Mo., to wait for work.

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America is being changed by immigration.

## REPORTED FROM KANSAS CITY, MO.

Posted on June 13, 2014, 7:00 a.m.

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When I noticed the police [officers](#) walking toward me, I was hanging from chains around their necks, I was confused. I was with a day laborer standing under an Interstate 70 overpass. I thought, and I just put this immigrant at risk.

At one point, that would have been true. Officer [redacted] is a long-time local cop known for toughness. Tall and thin, he is one of many [officers](#) in Kansas City who responded to the surge in immigrants that peaked around 2000 by arresting immigrants on minor infractions, and pushing for deportations.

“It was zero tolerance,” he said. “It was a total enforcement.”

Now, though, the dynamic has changed. What started with a simple idea — letting day laborers use a community center bathroom — has evolved into a philosophy of policing and community development that generally treats immigrant day laborers, known to be illegal, as a [part](#) of the community.

In Washington, Representative Eric Cantor’s loss to a challenger who emphasized opposition to amnesty for immigrants in the country illegally has emboldened those who favor a strict law-and-order approach to immigration. But here, the police say, crime has declined and the city’s quality of life has improved because of a policy that helps immigrants without legal status earn a living without fear of deportation — unless they commit serious crimes.




“We couldn’t arrest our way out of the problem,” Officer Tomasic said. So instead, he added, “we started treating them like human beings.”

His [partner](#) , Officer Chato Villalobos, 41, summed up the approach:


“They’re a resource for us, we’re a resource for them,” he said. “That’s how it should be.”





Sgt. John Jacobson of the Kansas City police, left, talks to [Officers](#)  Matthew Tomasic and Chato Villalobos at the community center where day laborers now gather.

The shift, found in many police departments along I-35, reflects what now amounts to nearly a generation of experience with illegal immigration.

Here, at the edge of I-35 on Kansas City’s Westside, the historic spike in illegal arrivals from Mexico and Central America hit with sudden force in

the late '90s. What used to be a group of 10 or 20 men looking for odd [jobs](#)  ballooned to a pool of 200. Many of them were homeless on and off. Men urinated and defecated wherever they could. Prostitutes showed up in the afternoons when the men finished work, along with drug dealers and beer sellers.


Complaints to the police soared until 2003, when the chief sent a message to [officers](#)  in the area: You have two weeks to clean it up. Officer Tomasic went to Lynda M. Callon, director of the Westside Community Action Network, and told her about the challenge. “I told her I’d probably be leaving,” he said.


But she had a simpler idea: “Why don’t they use the bathrooms here?” Eventually, the center moved into a building directly opposite the overpass where the workers gathered. The center developed a day labor program based on similar efforts in California. And with approval from the police and city officials, workers contributed [money](#)  for coffee and food, bathrooms and showers.





Men make use of the Westside Community Action Network Center, to get coffee or use the bathroom.

In the first few weeks, workers started to come forward with tips, including whispered warnings about an immigrant who interpreted for Officer Tomasic and then used that connection to extort others, telling them the payments would keep them out of trouble with the police. Within a year, 911 complaints in the area dropped by 56 percent. Soon after that, day laborers testified in a case in which some copper thieves, being chased by [officers](#) , killed a police dog by throwing it off a roof.

And the relationship has deepened with time. On the morning we visited, [Officers](#)  Tomasic and Villalobos told the group that they had heard complaints about people urinating near a fountain down the block.

They asked for tips on who might be the culprits. A few minutes later, one of

the workers grabbed Officer Villalobos near the door of the community center and gave him names of people he had seen hanging out by the fountain. “They’re our eyes and ears,” Officer Villalobos said.




Officer Villalobos talks to a day laborer about some others who had been urinating outside the center.

The group that shows up now to look for work is an older and seemingly tamer version of what came before. Only 10 to 25 men appear daily. “Their numbers have dwindled as they’ve started businesses, found stable employment or started families,” Ms. Callon said.

Antonio H. Hernandez, 41, one of the laborers, recalled that when he first started coming to look for work more than a decade ago, it was a free-for-all.

“The police would never leave you alone, and there were a lot of bad people, criminals, drug addicts,” he said. “But now it’s better.”

Mr. Hernandez offered up his own story as an example: He said he was waiting to be picked up by a friend and former police officer who had asked him to do some work, to help Mr. Hernandez get back on his feet after leaving his wife.

He and several of the other men said that they had contract jobs in construction or landscaping but that they came down to the overpass on their days off [to make extra money](#) , or after rain had held them back from a full week.

There were clear limits to what work they could do. At one point, a man in a white truck pulled up, asking for workers with a driver’s license, and all but two or three of the men shook their heads and walked away. Neither Kansas nor Missouri allows illegal immigrants to obtain a license.





A driver pulls up, asking which workers have driver's licenses.

Dan Stein, president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favors reduced immigration, said in an interview that such restrictions are necessary, out of respect for the law and American workers. He added that the police in Kansas City and elsewhere needed to play a stronger — and [more](#) 🇺🇸 national-minded — role in making sure that illegal immigrants are treated as lawbreakers, not citizens.

“Nobody should have the right to force their way into the country,” he said, adding: “The effort by the police is basically an effort to accommodate a complete breakdown in the rule of law.”

But the officers' boss, Sgt. John Jacobson, said their approach simply reflected local pragmatism in an evolving community of citizens and

immigrants, legal and not, learning to live together.

“They’re here on our doorstep,” he said. “We have to deal with it.”

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## ABOUT

Join Damien Cave and Todd Heisler as they travel up Interstate 35, from Laredo, Tex., to Duluth, Minn., chronicling how the middle of America is being changed by immigration. Follow their journey here and on Twitter by searching [#thewaynorth](#).

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