

EDITORIAL

Hounding Immigrants

In Prince William, the poisonous fruit of congressional failure

Editorial

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THE SENATE'S failure last month to come to grips with immigration reform is certain to accelerate the nationwide trend of localities cracking down on undocumented foreigners in their midst. The impulse is understandable, if not always attractive: Towns, cities and counties bear the burden of providing immigrants with health care, education, law enforcement and other services. And in places with fast-growing communities of undocumented immigrants, native-born citizens tend to bristle at the problems sometimes associated with them -- gangs, flophouses, day workers thronging parking lots and a general clash of cultures.

The tensions have been particularly acute in [Prince William County](#), a booming jurisdiction where Hispanics, who registered scarcely 10 percent of the population in 2000, now approach 20 percent. Prodded by angry constituents, the county Board of Supervisors looks set to adopt a resolution whose evident purpose is to harass illegal immigrants in hopes that they move elsewhere.

The resolution's sponsor, [John T. Stirrup Jr.](#) (R-[Gainesville](#)), believes that illegal immigrants are to blame for "economic hardship" and "lawlessness" in [Prince William](#) and that the county has encouraged immigrants to settle there by turning a blind eye to their status while providing them with services. Leave aside the dubious propositions that illegal immigrants are criminals -- prosecutors say most are law-abiding -- or that they've come because of county services rather than the availability of jobs. By seeking to make life miserable for immigrants, the county is likely also to make things a good deal worse for itself.

Mr. Stirrup's measure would have county police act as adjunct immigration agents, determining the status of anyone detained for any kind of violation. The county already reports serious crimes committed by undocumented immigrants to the feds, but this would cover even the lightest misdemeanors. That would be a difficult, time-consuming and in many cases impossible task for local police officers; small wonder they don't want to do it. The resolution also seeks to compel all other county agencies, schools included, to deny services to undocumented immigrants. Outrageously, it would empower any citizen to sue any county agency for failing to quiz immigrants about their residency status or for providing them with services. Tattletales of the world, unite!

The effects of Mr. Stirrup's proposal are apt to be poisonous. Does he really think that denying thousands of illegal immigrant children the right to attend school -- which the Supreme Court has granted them -- would contribute to social harmony? More likely, it would put a lot of youths on the street with little to do but make trouble. If police become immigration agents, immigrants will be leery of providing information and cooperating as witnesses to crimes, as police have said. If health clinics deny care to illegal immigrants or

scare them off by asking about their status, that will make them only more likely to end up as uninsured, non-paying visitors to a hospital emergency room.

We doubt that Mr. Stirrup's measure would force many illegal immigrants to relocate. But if it did, they'd be more likely to move next door to [Loudoun](#) or [Stafford](#) counties than back to [El Salvador](#) or [Mexico](#). What would be accomplished by such a beggar-thy-neighbor policy?

The resolution in Prince William, like other such laws and ordinances around the country, is a symptom of a larger failure by this country to devise a workable, realistic immigration system. The result will be a society that beckons to immigrants by offering them jobs with one hand, then slaps them around with the other once they are settled here. It's shameful, hypocritical and ugly. And it's what the Senate has bequeathed the nation by failing to enact meaningful reform.