

Mexicans feel Bridgeport brush-off

Language, rental and job rules leave immigrants uneasy.

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Bridgeport, population 4,500, is the kind of hometown that holds a stickball tournament to raise money for kids with cancer. It's the kind of place that lauds firefighters for rescuing a beagle from a second-story window. It's the kind of place where Brubaker's Screen Printing makes discounted T-shirts for the town watch.

It is also a place where Hispanics say they have not felt welcome since the Borough Council declared English the official language and approved penalties for housing or employing illegal immigrants.

"They treat us differently," said Carmen Cortes, 17, a high school junior. "Like we're alien."

Bridgeport, in Montgomery County, enacted the law in the summer after a similar measure in Hazleton, Pa., set off a trend spreading to 27 states.

None has embraced the movement more than Pennsylvania.

Of 100 communities that have introduced laws targeting illegal immigrants, a third are in Pennsylvania, according to the Fair Immigration Reform Movement, an immigrant-rights group in Washington.

Analysts say they do not believe that means the commonwealth is more bigoted than other states. Ethnic tensions play a part, they say, but there are many other factors.

They include the copycat effect from the publicity about Hazleton, and competition for low-wage jobs in economically depressed small towns. There is also the state's colonial legacy of small towns. With more than 1,064 incorporated municipalities, there are simply more local officials in Pennsylvania wielding the *whereas* and *thereby* than in states like New Jersey, which has only 566.

"You have a very homogenous, white ethnic population... and suddenly a large influx of immigrants who are Hispanic. This is sort of a shock to the cultural system," said Christopher Patusky, director of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania.

Add to this the tenuous social and financial health of former mining and manufacturing towns, he said, and the response begins to make sense.

"These folks are struggling economically, and they see the threat of a low-wage immigrant population. They have legitimate concerns - job competition, budget pressures, city services like schools - and towns have to respond."

In Bridgeport, with a Hispanic population of only 4 percent, anxiety has scuttled across the border from Norristown, a city with eight times Bridgeport's population and several thousand Hispanic residents.

"In some ways, I can't blame them," said Anette Robles, 24, who was born in Mexico and raised in El Paso, Texas, and who moved to Philadelphia after thinking the city looked appealing in the film *National Treasure*. "People who are used to running things don't like it when other people come in."

Until recently Robles worked as a waitress at Los Arcos, a Mexican restaurant in Bridgeport. "Some people crowd apartments and play music loud on weekends," she said, "so they judge us."

The borough sits on a concrete-and-brick hill between the county seat of Norristown and the shopping mecca of King of Prussia. Bars, delis and pizza places draw faithful clientele. Along the railroad tracks lie long, flat industrial buildings like shoe boxes. They were the factories for steel tubes and carpet until they closed a generation ago, leaving the Italian, Polish and Irish families who account for most of the community to scramble for jobs.

"I agree with the laws. If they're not here legally, I don't think they should benefit from our jobs," said Christine Lattanze, a Bridgeport hair-salon owner, as she trimmed a client's gray sideburns.

"I like the different nationalities here," said Lorraine DeSimone, 50, a manicurist. "I go to an Irish church, but I'm Italian."

DeSimone said she had no problem with legal immigrants moving to Bridgeport, "but I don't want it overrun by one group the way it happened in Norristown."

Many residents were reluctant to talk about the issue because they didn't want to seem racist.

The police chief, the city solicitor, two council members, and the mayor did not return calls from a reporter. A borough employee said last week that Mayor Jerry Nicola was in Costa Rica on vacation.

The one official who agreed to be interviewed was Anthony DiSanto, acting borough manager.

"I know of no tension between the Bridgeporters and the Mexicans," said DiSanto, 62, a retired high school guidance counselor. He said he was not involved in the immigration-law debate, but understood that the measures - particularly one requiring all renters to register with the borough - had been designed to protect public health and safety.

Since the ordinances were passed, the wariness Robles used to sense from white Bridgeporters has grown into something harsher, she said.

"I was in the Wawa, talking to a friend, when a couple of senior citizens scowled at us and said, 'We should get rid of them all!' I guess they didn't think we spoke English."

The pattern, she said, is part of human nature. "It's always been that way... . In Pennsylvania, they had it against the Irish back in the day. Now it's Mexican time."

Bridgeport's ordinances have been revised several times to try to avoid legal objections.

There is also the case of Riverside, Burlington County, which last July passed its own law which bans hiring or renting housing to illegal immigrants. While it is being challenged in court, local residents say half of the town's estimated 2,000 to 3,000 Brazilians have left.

Lawyers from the Philadelphia Public Interest Law Center and the Reed Smith law firm have reached an agreement with the borough requiring a 10-day written notice before the new regulations are enforced.

So far, no notice has been given, and no one has been fined for housing or hiring an illegal immigrant.

"It is reasonable," said Steve Camarota, "for towns to want to reduce the size of their illegal population."

Camarota is director of research for the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington think tank that is advising Hazleton in its legal case.

Win or lose, Camarota said, places like Hazleton and Bridgeport may have already achieved their goal, because the message alone that Hispanics are under suspicion drives immigrants away.

"Little by little, we've seen business drop," said Carmen Olvera, who owns a Mexican restaurant and a grocery store in Bridgeport with her husband, Bulmaro. Both are citizens.

While their Norristown restaurant is doing well, they have lost 40 percent of their customers in Bridgeport. The only explanation, they said, is that Hispanics feel unwelcome in the borough.

The anti-immigrant movement has created a backlash, said Regan Cooper, director of the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition. Last month, Lancaster's City Council declared that while it "does not condone unlawful entry," it opposed overzealous efforts that "fail to recognize our common humanity and the values of our nation."

Should their neighbors in Bridgeport catch that wave, the Olveras said, they would be relieved.

"I'm going to try to stay open a few more months and see," Bulmaro Olvera said. "But I have bills to pay."

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