

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/immigration-executive-action-a-tool-for-rebuilding-trust>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On November 20, 2014, President Obama announced his [Immigration Accountability Executive Action](#), a series of initiatives aimed at partially reforming an immigration system that an increasing number of Americans believe is broken. This executive action also has the potential to serve as a powerful tool for law enforcement agencies to build trust with immigrant communities.

The executive order which will take effect in mid-February will, among other things, expand eligibility for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, offer three-year work permits to parents of U.S. citizens, and provide new temporary immigration protections for unauthorized parents of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents, provided they pass a background check and pay taxes.

More than 5 million individuals many of whom are parents to U.S.-citizen children will now have temporary permission to remain in the U.S. and gain lawful employment, and the impact of this executive action will have a broad reach, particularly for law enforcement.

First, undocumented immigrants may now be more likely to obtain government-issued identification cards. By making work permits accessible to more immigrants, the executive action will allow more individuals to secure employment authorization documents, which can be used as photo IDs for a variety of things, including applying for a Social Security number and securing legal employment.

Such IDs will enable law enforcement to more easily identify victims, suspects, and witnesses, and determine whether an individual has a criminal record or poses a threat to society. This will help reduce unnecessary arrests and detainments and the time and money wasted on them. As former Sacramento Police Chief Art Venegas [explained](#), immigrants should be allowed to have some form of identification, either from here or from their home countries, a birth certificate or something else every time we stop somebody who has no identification, it takes a lot of manpower to try to identify that person.

Second, no longer in fear of approaching police for assistance, members of immigrant communities may be more willing to report crimes and to cooperate with police. Vera's 2012 report [Policing In New Immigrant Communities](#) found that undocumented immigrants were less likely to report crime for fear of deportation. Numerous other studies have found that undocumented immigrants are also less likely to call 911, access emergency care in life-threatening situations, or approach police as victims or witnesses of crime, for the same reason.

The executive action may lead to an increase in the reporting of crimes commonly experienced among immigrant populations, including robbery of day workers who are often carrying a day's or even a week's worth of wages, exploitation by employers taking advantage of an individual's immigration status by withholding wages or violating U.S. labor laws, and domestic violence perpetrated by an abuser who knows that his or her victim will not approach police for assistance.

Rapidly changing demographics make better relations between police and immigrant communities essential to protecting public safety and crime prevention. More than 40 million foreign-born people now live in the United States, according to the U.S. Census, and more than two-thirds of U.S. states saw their foreign-born populations increase by at least 30 percent between 2010 and 2011. And that growth is not just taking place in major cities: in 2013, nine smaller metro areas like Scranton, PA and Knoxville, TN saw their foreign-born populations [at least double](#). As these smaller metro areas grow, many immigrants have begun to disperse to more suburban and rural areas throughout the country.

This sprawling of the foreign-born population, combined with the sweeping changes that will come about as a result of the Executive Action on immigration, will undoubtedly present new challenges for local law enforcement officials, as well as opportunities to connect with immigrant communities, build trust, and improve public safety overall.

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