

## **SILENT ABOUT CRIME: Deportation fears make easy victims**

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### **Body**

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DeKalb County police Officer Jose Ayala stands near the swimming pool of an apartment complex on Buford Highway, asking Latino residents if they've ever been victims of crime.

A dozen hands go up.

Then he asks, in Spanish, how many have called police to report the incidents. Many hands go down.

That is his point.

"We need you to report the incidents," said Ayala, dressed in plain clothes and holding a microphone, pacing beside the pool at the Highland North apartments.

"The Hispanic population has been targeted by criminals specifically because of the immigration question. We know this," Ayala told the reluctant crowd of about 60 people --- some standing outside the gates looking in. "Regardless of whether you're illegal, or legal, if you're a victim, call us."

Confronted with an unflagging pattern of crime against foreign born residents, especially robbery, Ayala and other north precinct cops have started a summer tour of the 48 apartment complexes on Buford Highway where many immigrants from Mexico and Central America live.

The effort is part of DeKalb's new community policing initiative begun this spring. Its officers are ahead of other departments in reaching out to the Hispanic community.

Eventually 10 officers in each of DeKalb's five precincts will devote time to improving relations with the residents of their precincts of all races and ethnicities. They'll give their cellphone numbers to residents, said Keisha Williams, DeKalb police spokeswoman.

On Buford Highway, the message is simple: Don't be afraid of the police.

Ayala grew up in Puerto Rico and speaks fluent Spanish. He has resorted to knocking on doors and nudging people to attend his early evening meetings. He can sweet-talk a crowd and elicit a few laughs while he's at it.

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Building trust has been Ayala's main job since he was appointed the police department's liaison with the Hispanic community last year. He reassures residents that if they are victims, DeKalb police will not delve into their legal status. That is reserved for those charged with crimes, he said.

Behind Ayala stand four uniformed DeKalb police officers who deal with the neighborhood, and their bosses.

Their job is tougher now that Georgia has enacted several new laws that aim to crack down on illegal immigration. One requires jailers in Georgia to check the legal status of anyone charged with DUI or felonies and report illegal immigrants to immigration agents.

Under an agreement with federal immigration authorities, Cobb County's jail is now initiating deportation paperwork and checking the legal status of foreign inmates, no matter how small the crime.

The new procedures intensify immigrants' worries about deportation, making many shy away from contact with government officials. Relations with the police have chilled, Hispanic activists say.

Police in DeKalb say it's hampering their ability to nab criminals.

"It's frustrating to find someone who fits the description, but we can't find you [the witness] because you gave us the wrong information," said Lt. Anthony Gallo.

He talked to the crowd at the apartment complex and Ayala translated his comments. Victims don't want to give correct phone numbers or addresses, said Gallo, who works the night shift along Buford Highway.

At the end of the presentation, one man raised his hand and requested more patrols in the back of the complex where it's darker. There have been a lot of car burglaries, he said.

Why hasn't he called the police? Ayala asked.

The man replied that he's afraid of being beaten by neighbors or gang members if they discover he's reporting crimes.

Ayala told him the DeKalb Police Department is the biggest gang in town, and it's legal. That got a chuckle from the crowd.

Police have known for some time that Hispanic laborers make up a greater proportion of robbery victims because they don't use banks and they carry wads of cash. Payday robberies are common. Criminals prey on Hispanic immigrants because they assume they won't go to the police, Ayala said.

In the Buford Highway corridor, Hispanics made up 58 percent of pedestrian robbery victims in 2006, according to DeKalb County police statistics. That probably doesn't represent the whole picture because people don't report all the crimes, police say.

Countywide, Hispanics make up about 9 percent of DeKalb's population but represent 17 percent of robbery victims, police statistics and census numbers show.

In Cobb County, which also has a significant Hispanic population at 10.5 percent of the county, 38 percent of victims of pedestrian robberies, home invasions and purse snatchings in 2006 were Hispanic, according to police records.

While robberies are the most common crime against Hispanics, sometimes more violent crimes go unreported.

DeKalb police got word of a serial rapist in the Doraville area, not from a victim, but from doctors at a health clinic, said DeKalb police spokesman Michael Payne.

"We finally had one victim come forward," he said. "It's almost impossible to enforce the law if they won't come to us and report it."

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Back at the apartment complex meeting, a cop hands out a few pamphlets in English and Spanish with phone numbers for DeKalb police. One pamphlet urges people to open bank accounts, telling them they can do so with their Mexican consular IDs.

Ayala also **makes** a pitch against drunken driving and gang membership and urges everyone to learn English.

Resident Cecilia Tino, 25, from Guatemala, told the officers her nephew was pistol-whipped and robbed of \$600 outside their apartment last month. He lost his hearing in one ear, she said.

"We need more lights and a fence around this place," said Maria Ascencion, 35.

Her brother-in-law was robbed of \$800 two years ago at another apartment complex, she said.

Nearby, at the Hampton at Lenox apartments, cars belonging to the family of Blanca Tlacuatl Lopez, 30, have been burglarized **about** five times in a couple of years.

Last month, thieves broke the window of her van and stole a \$3,000 saw used to cut wood for flooring --- the work her husband does.

"It **makes** me so mad," Tlacuatl Lopez said in Spanish. "We sacrifice so much and they rob from us!"

### BY THE NUMBERS

9: Percentage of DeKalb County's population that is Hispanic

17: Percentage of **victims** of pedestrian robberies in DeKalb who are Hispanic

58: Percentage of Hispanic **victims** of pedestrian robberies in the Buford Highway area, where a large number of Hispanic residents live

Sources: DeKalb County Police Department, 2005 U.S. census estimates

## Graphic

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Photo: VALENTINO MAURICIO / StaffDeKalb police Officers J.A. Amnicki (center) and J.L. Green talk to residents at Parke Towne Apartments. Officers are visiting 48 apartment complexes along Buford Highway, begging people to report criminal acts. Police promised they'll go after the criminals, not the **victims**, who might be illegal immigrants./ImageData\* ImageData\*

Photo: VALENTINO MAURICIO / StaffParke Towne Apartments residents laugh with police during a meeting designed to earn their trust. Hispanics frequently are targeted by criminals because they're known to carry wads of cash./ImageData\* ImageData\*

Photo: VALENTINO MAURICIO / StaffDeKalb police Officer Jose Ayala (right) listens as a resident of Parke Towne Apartments discusses **crime** in the area. A disproportionate number of **crime victims** in DeKalb County are Hispanic, police said./ImageData\*

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