

**Now a 'destination' area But uneasiness begins to surface among
immigrants as enforcement looms. Concern here muted but rising ST. LOUIS
IMMIGRATION - PART 2 OF 2**

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Body

Cherokee Street in south St. Louis is the site of a concentration of businesses catering to Mexican immigrants: restaurants, law offices, ice cream parlors, health care centers, convenience stores. Some bear signs: "Mexico vive aqui," or "Mexico lives here."

One storefront features a list - in English - of legal services such as traffic tickets, DWI and workers' compensation. Right next to it - in Spanish - is a list that includes deportation, visas and other immigration-related matters.

As Jesus Ituarte walks from his law office on Pestalozzi Street in south St. Louis, he greets one immigrant after another.

"They're all my clients," Ituarte says. Many have recently been cited in area municipalities for driving violations that he regards as aimed more at immigration than law enforcement.

If their documents aren't in order, they may be jailed, have to pay bond money and be turned over to immigration officials, Ituarte says.

Sister Paulette Weindel, who has helped refugees for many years from her office at St. Pius V Catholic Church, says she is sometimes grilled by longtime St. Louis residents who learn of her work.

"I get these questions a lot: 'Are they legal?' 'Are you working with illegals?' That 'legal and illegal' is in our face all the time now, from people outside my work, when they find out what I do," she says.

For many years, two-thirds of all immigrants went to six states - New York, California, Texas, Florida, New Jersey and Illinois. But after California toughened its stance in the mid-1990s, new "destination states" with little recent experience with immigrants began receiving them, including some here illegally.

The population of undocumented immigrants in St. Louis is estimated by government agencies to exceed 20,000, up from about 12,000 in the mid-1990s.

Currently, about one of every 100 people in the region is here illegally, still below the national figure of about 5 percent, but a sizable population.

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Immigration enforcement is **now** an issue in local, state and national governments. And the growing national polarization over **immigration**, fueled recently by Arizona's efforts to enforce federal **immigration** laws, threatens to further roil the situation here.

"Everybody is worried since Arizona, the Hispanics and the **immigrants** generally, because that law can be adapted elsewhere," says Cecilia Velasquez, editor of the newspaper Red Latina and host of a Spanish-language radio program. "People call us on the radio, at the newspaper, and ask, 'What is going to happen? Is something going to happen in Missouri?' We are telling them, 'As soon as we know, we will tell you.'"

LOCAL CRACKDOWNS

State and local authorities **began** taking action against illegal **immigrants** in **part** because of the lack of a federal response.

In 2006, Valley Park passed the "Illegal **Immigration** Relief Act Ordinance," targeting anyone who employed or rented to illegal **immigrants**. The effort led to lawsuits and political upheaval in town.

Several other local jurisdictions took their own tough steps. And Missouri, under Gov. Matt Blunt, passed a tough statewide measure in 2008, which cracked down on employers who hired undocumented **immigrants**, made it easier to check the **immigration** status of anyone arrested, required legal checks of public employees and denied illegal **immigrants** a variety of benefits.

O'Fallon, Mo., Police Chief Roy Joachimstaler says his officers **now** ask people they arrest where they're from, with an eye toward **immigration** issues.

"Everyone that's arrested is asked where they were born, through the booking process," Joachimstaler says. "We get the full pedigree of everyone. That's normal procedure. But that's after they've been arrested. Our policy mirrors the state law."

O'Fallon also requires affidavits in publicly funded projects that workers are U.S. citizens or have legal **immigration** status, city spokesman Tim Drabelle says, because of **concerns** about employment of illegal **immigrants** and substandard wages.

In May, the **St.** Charles County Council - charging that the federal government was not enforcing **immigration** statutes - overwhelmingly approved a nonbinding resolution endorsing Arizona's tough **immigration** law and calling on Missouri's legislators to adopt a similar measure.

In Maplewood, which has a growing Hispanic population, city officials are dealing with housing issues.

"Somebody will rent property, showing a proper ID, and a month or two later we're getting complaints: 'The premises are overpopulated, there are eight to 10 males living in a one- or two-bedroom apartment,'" says Maplewood City Manager Marty Corcoran. "That's been the issue we have to deal with."

The calls are typically prompted by residents' **concerns** over such issues as noise or problems parking, Corcoran says. "So we investigate, and we find the property indeed is overpopulated. We cite the property owner."

SEEKING OPPORTUNITIES

Immigration issues "have put the Hispanic community on the defensive," says Jorge Riopedre, executive director of the newly expanded Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Chamber participants gather weekly, seeking ways to help new business owners plant roots and existing businesses tap into an expanding new market.

"Every company I'm asking for major dollars (to help pay for Chamber programs and staffing), they're asking me in return to connect them with Hispanic bilingual talent," Riopedre says.

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He is happy about that "because the atmosphere is a little dicey now. ... Any time a minority group becomes more visible, there's always going to be a negative side to that, a cultural clash, so we are seeing the same transformative process that we've seen with different immigrant groups since this country was founded."

Fred Wooten is a participant in the chamber who wants to build "bonds and referrals" between Hispanics and African-Americans in St. Louis and reach out to Bosnian, Vietnamese, Korean and other immigrant populations.

Anna Crosslin, who runs the International Institute of St. Louis, which recently received a competitive federal grant recognizing its work with refugees as among the best in the country, says immigrants and refugees bring much-needed entrepreneurial energy to the region.

Riopedre agrees.

"A more diverse work force is a more dynamic, creative and energetic population," he says. "They're going to create jobs, help the region think outside the box. With the global economy, we can't do things the way they've always been done. We've got to have new visions of ways of doing things."

John Ammann, director of the St. Louis University Legal Clinic and a SLU law professor, who has worked closely with Catholic Charities, a refugee resettlement agency here, notes that immigration issues have not reached the emotional level they have in other communities. If passions remain in check, polarization is unlikely to take root in St. Louis, he says.

"I think it's a temporary situation we're in," he says. "We're at the cusp of a problem, but I'm optimistic. When the economy improves, people won't feel as threatened."

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Philip Dine, a Post-Dispatch reporter, columnist and editor from 1987 to 2008, in 1995 examined the growing influx of immigrants and refugees to St. Louis in "An Invisible Population." This year, he revisited the topic. His stories Sunday and today look at the local situation in light of the poor economy, rising national controversy and evolving immigration flow to St. Louis.

Funding for this series came from the Enterprise Journalism Fund of the Press Club of Metropolitan St. Louis. Learn more at stlpressclub.org.

VIDEO

- St. Louis immigrants speak about their experiences.
- Radio station WEW-AM 770 is the oldest radio station west of the Mississippi and the second-oldest in the country. See how its shows help to represent the diversity of St. Louis.

stltoday.com/multimedia

Notes

st. louis immigration • part 2 of 2

Graphic

Now a 'destination' area But uneasiness begins to surface among immigrants as enforcement looms. Concern here muted but rising ST. LOUIS IMMIGRATION - PART 2 OF....

Photo by David Carson • dcarson@post-dispatch.com Friends (from left) Jesus Martinez, Janet Cruz, July Sanchez, Orlando Epindola and Francisco Ocampo meet up Sunday on Cherokee **Street** in **St. Louis**. The **street** has developed into a hub of businesses to serve the growing Mexican **immigrant** population in **St. Louis**. Photo by David Carson • dcarson@post-dispatch.com Photo - Jhoana Rios and Derek Main exchange business cards after a networking meeting for entrepreneurs at the **St. Louis** region's Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. The group includes **immigrants** and longtime **St. Louis** residents and is designed to encourage the growth of Hispanic businesses. Photo by David Carson • dcarson@post-dispatch.com Carlos Dominguez, owner of Carniceria Latino Americana, a Mexican grocery and restaurant on Cherokee **Street**, attends a meeting of the Cherokee **Street** Latino Business Owners Association regarding plans for a large festival on Cherokee on Sept. 11 and 12 to celebrate Mexico's bicentennial.

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