

## **Pre-emptive prejudice**

Copley News Service

August 17, 2006 Thursday 6:54 PM EST

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**Section:** DAILY EDITORIALS

**Length:** 545 words

**Byline:** the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

### **Body**

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On Aug. 7, 16-year-old Alberto Lopez left his house in Valley Park, Mo., to go shoot hoops on a church playground. He wound up in the middle of a national trend.

As the Census Bureau reported Monday, the number of immigrants living in U.S. households is up 16 percent in the last five years. Increasingly, the bureau said, immigrant families are putting down roots in places where people aren't used to them. One such place is Missouri, where the number of immigrants is up 31 percent since 2000.

Lopez is one of them. He told St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter Stephen Deere that he came to the United States from Puebla, Mexico, eight years ago with his mother and his brother, eventually settling in a rented home in Valley Park. Family members told Deere they are here illegally.

Two St. Louis County police officers patrolling Valley Park spotted Lopez driving into the church parking lot on the evening of Aug. 7. One of the officers said she recognized him from the nearby high school and didn't believe he had a drivers license. When the officers questioned him at the basketball court, said Lt. Scott Melies, commander of the county's Valley Park police detail, "somewhere in the course of the conversation he admitted he wasn't here legally." Now in many other parts of the country, this would scarcely have been news. However, Valley Park just last month passed a city ordinance cracking down on illegal immigrants. "Preventive maintenance," the mayor called it.

More like **pre-emptive prejudice**.

One provision of the new law forbids landlords from renting to undocumented aliens. In the Lopez case, county police had no choice but to issue a round of citations. Immigration and Customs Services officials were notified, and the family could face deportation. This is a threat that undocumented aliens constantly live with; they know that any brush with the law, however light, could mean deportation.

Like most undocumented aliens, the Lopezes pay their taxes and have Social Security cards. On Monday, analyst Ruth Ehresman with the Missouri Budget Project told the Missouri House Special Committee on Immigration Reform that the 35,000 to 65,000 undocumented aliens in Missouri pay between \$29 million and \$57 million a year in state sales and income taxes. Since they are ineligible for most state social services, "they contribute \$20 to \$30 million more than they actually use," Ehresman said.

The Lopez family told Deere that they had been hopeful that President George W. Bush and Congress would provide a way for illegal immigrants to change their status and become "guest workers." But the Valley Park ordinance struck first.

## Pre-emptive prejudice

It seems awfully harsh that a hard-working, tax-paying family would be sent packing because a sharp-eyed cop spotted an unlicensed driver on a church parking lot. Especially when the federal government is wrestling with changing the law. Laws should be based on facts and good judgment, not rumor and baseless fear.

We're not saying "amnesty" necessarily. We're saying "cease-fire." Cut the Lopez family and others like them some slack until the feds decide what national policy is going to be. Illegal immigration is too complicated an issue to be decided by the Valley Park Board of Aldermen.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newswire

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); FAMILY (89%); POLICE FORCES (88%); BASKETBALL (78%); LEGISLATION (78%); CITY GOVERNMENT (77%); TRENDS (77%); DRIVERS LICENSES (73%); EXCISE & CUSTOMS (73%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (73%); FOREIGN LABOR (72%); SOCIAL SECURITY (65%)

**Organization:** US CENSUS BUREAU (58%)

**Industry:** DRIVERS LICENSES (73%); TRANSPORTATION SUPPORT SERVICES (67%); BUDGETS (65%)

**Person:** GEORGE W BUSH (50%)

**Geographic:** SAINT LOUIS, MO, USA (79%); MISSOURI, USA (95%); UNITED STATES (92%); MEXICO (79%)

**Load-Date:** August 22, 2006