

Immigrant checks could hush witnesses, Montgomery police chief says

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Outside a Wheaton nightclub last month, police say, a middle-aged Hispanic man watched a driver ram his Toyota Camry into the side of a Honda Accord, get out, [stab one of the Accord passengers nearly to death](#), get back into his Camry and leave. The witness wrote down the Camry's license plate number, waited for police and passed along the information.

What does that have to do with the nationwide debate over Arizona's tough new immigration law? More than you might think.

The help provided by the witness, said Montgomery County's police chief, is just the kind of cooperation that could vanish if local police officers start aggressively enforcing immigration laws. And Chief J. Thomas Manger is emerging as a national voice in the debate over immigration laws and policing.

"I understand why a lot of folks in Arizona thought this was the solution," said Manger, who is scheduled to speak at a news conference Monday as the representative of the Major Cities Chiefs Association. "But I just know from a police chief's perspective, there can easily be as many negative consequences."

Not everyone agrees with Manger, nationally or in Montgomery.

"It's unfortunate that he has become a poster child for law enforcement and how to handle illegal immigration," said Brad Botwin, director of the anti-illegal immigration group Help Save Maryland. Manger's approach, which relies heavily on federal agents, "doesn't do nearly enough," Botwin said.

Under the [Arizona law](#), scheduled to take effect in July, police officers would have to ask about the status of people they come into contact with whom they suspect could be in the country illegally. At least 10 other states are considering similar measures, according to the Law Enforcement Engagement Initiative, a group opposed to the new law.

The question of how far local police should go on immigration isn't new to the Washington area. The issue surfaced in Montgomery in 2008 and last year, when suspects with questionable immigration statuses were arrested in connection with a series of homicides.

One case that grabbed attention was the Nov. 1, 2008, slaying of a 14-year-old honor student aboard a commuter bus.

Two of the men convicted in that case -- Gilmar L. Romero and Hector M. Hernandez -- were illegal immigrants whose statuses had gone undetected during previous arrests in the county, according to police.

In response, Manger instituted a purposely restrained [new policy](#). When officers arrest people in a violent crime or handgun crime, they now refer them to immigration agents. But officers are forbidden from asking people they come into contact with for lesser offenses about their immigration status.

Manger said it's partly a question of staffing.

"Immigration law is as complicated, if not more, than tax law," Manger said.

"I don't want one of my officers stopping somebody for running a stop sign and then spending the next two hours trying to determine if they're here illegally or not," he said.

More broadly, Manger hopes to draw a sharp line between those arrested for serious crimes and everyone else police deal with so that those who are witnesses or victims and whose legal status is questionable won't be scared to come forward.

Against that backdrop came the events of April 23, when Edwin Escobar-Salmeron, 29, noticed that his ex-girlfriend was out with other people in Wheaton, according to authorities. She and four others left in her Honda Accord.

A short distance away, Escobar-Salmeron rammed them with his car, got out, banged on the Honda and then stabbed a 27-year-old man five times, police said. Officers arrived to find the victim on the sidewalk, unresponsive and in a pool of blood.

Escobar-Salmeron's ex-girlfriend initially didn't say much to police. But Detective Kye Pak was able to speak with one of the Honda's occupants, who told him that the assailant used to be the woman's boyfriend. Then Pak got the license plate number.

The detective, who has worked in the department's Wheaton district for seven years, estimates that 30 percent of those he comes into contact with are Hispanic. He said he would lose witnesses' cooperation if he and other officers started making immigration inquiries beyond those they ask of people arrested for violent offenses.

And he doubts he would have gotten help from the license plate witness if Montgomery had a more aggressive policy or if the witness had immigration issues.

"There'd be no reason for him to stick around," Pak said.

Pak filed charges of attempted murder, first-degree assault, stalking and other counts against Escobar-Salmeron, who remains in the county jail pending action in his case.

Authorities say he is an illegal immigrant. And that gets to a broader point, say Botwin and those who advocate for more-aggressive local police policies regarding immigration issues.

Botwin calls for measures that he said would make illegal immigrants, such as Escobar-Salmeron, not want to live in Montgomery in the first place. Among them: police officers making immigration checks of more people they come into contact with who they suspect could have status problems, no government funding for day-laborer centers and cracking down on companies that hire illegal immigrants.