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Amid push for border wall, many Latinos distressed by Trump's tone

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As a soft rain fell in the Mission District on a recent morning, marking the start of another workday, dozens of the district's Latino residents shuffled to bus stops while business owners opened up shop, carefully setting up jewelry displays, carting out fresh batches of sweet bread and unpacking fruit along the sidewalk. Mothers carried bundled-up toddlers. Friends met for coffee, speaking freely in Spanish.

This is the vibrant immigrant community that Carmen Sanchez wants President Trump to see. These are the people she wants highlighted in his prime-time speeches, spontaneous tweets and trips to the border.

But since his 2016 election, Trump has often painted a much darker picture of people crossing the border into the United States, characterizing undocumented immigrants in particular as killers, rapists, drug smugglers and job stealers. Trump — who proposed Saturday to extend protections for immigrants who arrived as children or were displaced by disasters in their home countries, in exchange for funding for a border wall — has leaned on that profile heavily in his push for the barrier, saying Saturday, “The lack of border control provides a gateway — a very wide and open gateway — for criminals and gang members to enter the United States.”

But his strategy has come at a cost, immigrants and advocates say. They say the heightened rhetoric has translated into hostility and violence directed at immigrants — whether or not they entered the country illegally — and Latinos in particular. The effects have been profound in diverse regions like the Bay Area, where there are an estimated 1.7 million Latinos, according to census data.

“If the president of the United States is speaking this way of Latinos, then of course some people are going to look at us like garbage, as if we bring in drugs, live off welfare and come here to do bad things,” said Sanchez, 58, a retired waitress who immigrated to the U.S. from Nicaragua in 1981. “That’s not the case. In the barrio of the Mission there are lots of people who came here to work and who own their own businesses.”

Florice Ramos, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who has been in the United States for two decades and worked the fields in Lodi (San Joaquin County) picking grapes, said she is apprehensive about leaving her home at times.

“We come here to work and to give a better future to our kids. We want to live in peace,” said Ramos, 39, who has three U.S.-born children. “It’s frustrating that people like the president criminalize us for being here.”

Toward the end of an Oval Office address this month, Trump listed killings and other crimes he said were committed by undocumented immigrants, starting with the slaying of a California police officer allegedly shot by an undocumented man the day after Christmas.

“Over the last several years, I’ve met with dozens of families whose loved ones were stolen by illegal immigration. I’ve held the hands of the weeping mothers and embraced the grief-stricken fathers. So sad. So terrible,” he said.

The president’s rhetoric has exacerbated racial tensions, according to experts. Half of Latinos say their situation in the U.S. has worsened in the previous year — up from 32 percent in the weeks after Trump’s election, according to an October poll by the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C.

Of the 1,500 Latinos polled, more than half said it’s become more difficult to be Latino in the U.S., and nearly 4 in 10 said they’ve experienced some form of discrimination, including being criticized for speaking Spanish in public and being told to go back to their home country.

Meanwhile, there has been an uptick in hate crimes against Latinos since Trump was elected — though whether the increase is related to his statements and immigration policies isn’t clear. Hate crimes against Latinos rose by nearly 52 percent in 2017 — more than any other minority group in the state, according to a report by the California Attorney General’s Office. The number of those crimes reported against Latinos, 126 in 2017, has doubled since 2014.

Experts say it’s impossible to pin this surge solely on Trump, but some say there’s a correlation.

“We try not to take a position on these issues, but it’s pretty clear that something is happening, whether it’s Trump or people associated with his policies,” said Kevin Grisham, assistant director of research at the nonpartisan Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University San Bernardino. “These are significant increases. It’s not specific to a particular (political) party. It’s about rhetoric, and rhetoric matters.”

Physical and verbal attacks are captured on video, often becoming viral sensations that strike a nerve in local communities and showing how charged the issue has become.

A Santa Rosa woman was sentenced to jail time this month after striking a Latina woman and her 2-year-old son inside a Dollar Tree store in 2017, in what officials called a racially charged assault. A Sacramento woman alleged that she was fired from an Italian restaurant in Davis for speaking Spanish in the kitchen. A 91-year-old Mexican man in Southern California was beaten with a brick July 4 and told to “go back to your country,” sparking nationwide outrage.

For Marleni Quintano, a Honduran immigrant and child development professor at San Francisco City College, Trump’s rhetoric has manifested itself in familiar microaggressions: harsh looks from people who overhear her speaking Spanish and comments about her imperfect English.

“It’s hate. It’s racism,” said Quintano, a U.S. citizen. “What Trump is doing is instilling fear in people. What we have to do is fix the immigration system. Walls don’t hold anybody back.”

Still, about 23 percent of Latinos identify as Republican or Republican-leaning, according to Pew. Within this group, 59 percent approve of Trump's job performance.

Though she doesn't support Trump and doesn't necessarily agree with his policies, Leslia Mojica said his stance on illegal immigration is accurate.

"The worst of our countries come here," said Mojica, 72, of San Francisco. "Of course, his words make me feel bad because I'm not one of those people, but he speaks in general terms. It's a reality."

Trump has rallied for heightened border security amid what he says is a rush of drugs, rapists and gang members — criminals he referred to as "bad hombres" during a presidential debate ahead of the 2016 election — coming from Latin America.

Trump has since said, without proof, that in the past two years, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested 266,000 immigrants in the country illegally who had criminal records, including those charged with or convicted of 100,000 assaults, 30,000 sex crimes and 4,000 violent killings.

Trump made the 2015 shooting death of Kate Steinle a cornerstone of his presidential campaign. Steinle was shot in San Francisco by Jose Ines Garcia Zarate, an undocumented immigrant who said he had found a gun and fired it by accident, and who was convicted of being a felon in possession of a gun. Trump has blasted California — and in particular San Francisco — for sanctuary policies, which protect undocumented immigrants by limiting cooperation with immigration authorities. Trump said such policies allow undocumented immigrants freedom to commit crimes. He threatened to cut federal funds to sanctuary cities and states, a decision the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals deemed unconstitutional last year.

Studies suggest that immigrants may actually commit fewer crimes. A 2018 analysis by the libertarian Cato Institute found that U.S.-born people in Texas were much more likely to be convicted of a crime than immigrants in the country legally or illegally.

Meanwhile, sanctuary counties have significantly lower crime rates, according to a report by the Center for American Progress, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C.

Trump's rhetoric "brands a group of people as undesirable, as being dangerous and detrimental to our society," said UC Davis history Professor Susan Gilson Miller. "It feeds into paranoia, and it's not in accordance with the values of our country."

Frustrated with Trump's portrayal of immigrants, Angel Villatoro said he has stopped watching the news.

"It's always the same," said Villatoro, 40, who immigrated from Guatemala 10 years ago in search of better economic opportunities. He manages a tiny electronic repair business inside Floreria La Poblana on Mission Street.

"He does it to make the community feel worse. To feel less-than. It's psychological."