



Targeting immigrants for robbery deserves real punishment

Jarvis DeBerry

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In the most recent edition of JustSouth Quarterly, a newsletter published by Loyola University's Jesuit Social Research Institute, migration specialist Sue Weishar writes that "The moral imperative to treat strangers with hospitality is repeated more times in the Old Testament than any other except the commandment to worship one God."

That repetition would suggest that it's a really important commandment and that mistreating the stranger is especially despicable.

It is. Though you wouldn't know it by the slap on the wrist a former Kenner police officer got for targeting Hispanic drivers. Jan Gregory, 34, had been charged with five counts of malfeasance in office for stopping five Hispanic men who were driving without a license and then robbing them of a total of \$3,500. Gregory pleaded guilty to five counts of misdemeanor theft and Judge Donald Rowan Jr. sentenced him to 90 days of inactive probation.

In other words: nothing.

Gregory is not the first police officer in this area to have his criminal exploitation of the immigrant community all but tolerated by the courts.

In 2008, then-Slidell police officer Jonathan Lutman was arrested for stealing up to \$3,000 from Spanish-speaking drivers, and St. Tammany Parish Judge Peter Garcia gave him a five-year sentence, all of which was suspended.

If former U.S. Attorney Jim Letten was the white hat that the public said he was, a local attorney said to me about the Slidell case, then why didn't he help bring a civil rights case against an officer who was clearly singling out those drivers because of their ethnicity?

Similarly, one can ask why the feds didn't charge Gregory with civil rights violations. It's obvious that he was targeting his victims for the same reason that the former Slidell officer was targeting his victims: because of who they are.

In the 2011 report that the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice did on the New Orleans Police Department, investigators learned that members of Hispanic community felt

targeted by the police and others. The police would see them and assume that they couldn't be licensed drivers. Others would assume they were carrying cash and rob them. And they wouldn't want to call NOPD.

"We heard reports of specific incidents in which immigrant workers called to request police assistance after being victimized by crime," that 2011 report says, "but instead of providing assistance, NOPD officers questioned them about their immigration status. Consequently, we found a strong belief among some segments of the Latino community that reporting crime to NOPD may subject the reporter to unwanted attention or harassment."

That report is the main reason that New Orleans police no longer ask about the immigration status of the people they encounter. Asking immigration status was rightly seen as an impediment to the department's crime-fighting strategy. Any policy that discourages people from reporting crime ought to be abandoned.

After the report of the Kenner officer's plea deal and his unsupervised probation, I asked Chloe Sigal with the Congress of Day Laborers how common a problem this is, people here illegally getting robbed by people who feel emboldened to rob them because they're here illegally.

"This is definitely an issue," she said. "In fact, we're currently investigating a case involving a boss who committed wage theft in Kenner and abused immigrant workers and then immediately involved Kenner police when they tried to defend their rights and demand their wages." The Congress of Day Laborers is not only looking into what the employer did, Sigal said, but how the police officer responded when he was summoned.

In November 2017 at First Grace United Methodist Church, Sigal was the translator for Jose Torres, a native of El Salvador who was being threatened with immediate deportation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. "I've lived here in New Orleans for 14 years," Torres said as he sought sanctuary inside the church, "working shoulder to shoulder with other people here who love this city, helping to rebuild it after the storm."

I don't know when the men robbed by the Slidell officer arrived here or when the men robbed by the Kenner officer arrived here, but there's a good chance that they played an important role in helping people in the New Orleans area rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. Which makes it even more offensive that the officers have targeted those communities for theft.

Weishar point about the Old Testament's commandments is included in a piece called "Immigrants and Crime: Debunking the Myth." She cites a 2017 report from the CATO Institute which finds that the incarceration rate for native-born Americans is 1.53 percent, significantly higher than the 0.85 percent rate for those who immigrated here illegally. When one subtracts those who are only in jail for immigration violations, the incarceration rate drops to 0.5 percent.

We don't have as much to fear from those who are here illegally as they have to fear from us.

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