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Robbers Stalk Hispanic Immigrants, Seeing Ideal Prey

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By the time they set upon Victor Hernandez, knocking him to the pavement and kicking him furiously, the teenagers were deep into a weeks-long spree of robbing Hispanic immigrants.

They coined a term for the assaults, one that reflected the uniformity of the victims they selected: "amigo shopping." The teenagers recorded some of the attacks with a cellphone camera, saving one of the videos under the file name "amigo," a source familiar with the case said.

Hernandez, a dishwasher in Montgomery County, was an ideal target that August night in a type of robbery that law enforcement officials say has become alarmingly common in parts of the Washington region. Hispanic immigrants are being targeted, often in gratuitously violent attacks by non-Hispanics, because they are thought to carry cash rather than use banks and to be reluctant to report crimes to police, the officials said.

The attacks are occurring with such frequency that police in Prince William County have created a task force, and Montgomery police have assigned a specialized unit to tackle the problem. The crimes are having profound effects in the neighborhoods where they occur, causing some residents to alter their routines.

"Everyone leaves with someone else, in groups of two or three," said Woodbridge resident Joaquin Rodriquez, describing the change that has occurred since the fatal shooting of a Mexican immigrant during a robbery in September 2006.

Authorities say the teenage assailants in that case targeted Serafin "Pedro" Alvarez Negrete after agreeing to "get an amigo." They attacked Negrete, 32, as he walked home from a shopping center.

"Like alligators waiting for the gazelle to cross the river," Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney John B. Arledge said as one of the men was sentenced last week.

Police say recent immigrants, particularly laborers who return home on foot at night, are most vulnerable. Assailants have been known to lurk between shopping centers, even sometimes outside of cash-checking businesses on payday, police say.

Policing experts expressed concern that attacks on immigrants, already believed to be under-reported, might be reported less and less as local police agencies become increasingly involved in enforcing immigration policy.

"The reason that this issue is becoming so acute is the fear that people who are here illegally will stop reporting crime or will be afraid to serve as witnesses," said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive

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Research Forum, a think tank in the District. "That only puts that population at greater risk for greater harm."

A suspect in one such robbery recently told police in Prince William that he had robbed several other Hispanics in the same area over several months, said 1st Sgt. Daniel Hess, commander of the county department's street crimes unit. He said police then searched department files but found no record of the robberies, suggesting they had not been reported.

"We've had people severely injured for less than a hundred dollars in their pocket," Hess said. "It's nonsensical. No one should have to worry about, 'If I walk to the convenient store tonight, I might be jumped by a group of thugs and killed for having to go down and buy a half-gallon of milk.' "

Despite their brutality, the robberies are not necessarily motivated by ethnic bigotry, authorities say. Rather, they are typically crimes of opportunity. While the majority of the perpetrators have been identified as black men, Latinos and whites have also been charged in some cases, authorities said.

"All you need is a shadow and a victim," said Warren Jensen, a Montgomery police officer who is a member of the unit assigned to combat such robberies.

Jensen spoke as he and a fellow officer patrolled on foot recently in a Silver Spring apartment complex. Members of the unit say that, even when the robberies are reported, the investigations are often hindered by the language barrier.

Many of the assailants who are charged are juveniles, which means they are not in custody for as long as they would be if they were charged as adults.

Hernandez, 59, a legal immigrant from Honduras who works at two restaurants on Rockville Pike, was attacked within blocks of his home shortly after midnight Aug. 23. The teenagers approached and asked him for money. He said he had none and kept walking.

"They ganged up on me, throwing punches," he said in an interview.

Curled up on the ground, Hernandez was kicked repeatedly in the face and lost consciousness. The teenagers made off with about \$160, but detectives recovered a prized possession, his work authorization document, which they delivered to him in his hospital room.

Police arrested two 15-year-olds and a 14-year-old, charging them as juveniles with robbery, assault and conspiracy to commit robbery. Each has since admitted responsibility in court or agreed to do so.

According to a source with knowledge of the events, one of the youths told investigators that he and his friends used the phrase "amigo shopping" to refer to the search for victims. The source spoke on the condition of anonymity because aspects of the investigation remain open.

The arrests of the three juveniles, and the discovery of the videos, allowed police to close investigations into four similar robberies in the preceding weeks. Five teenagers were charged.

Rene Sandler, an attorney for one of the three teenagers, said her client took responsibility for his actions and has cooperated with police. Though the juvenile's parents are not Hispanic immigrants, she said of her client, "He keeps thinking this could have happened to one of his parents."

Negrete, the victim in the Prince William case, arrived from Mexico in 2005, moving into a room in a faded trailer park and sending money back to his wife and three children. He was walking to that room, a simple space furnished with little more than a bed with no sheets, in September 2006 when he was confronted by the teenage robbers.

At the entrance to the trailer park, Negrete was shot at least eight times. A weathered shrine marks the spot where his body fell. Fastened to a chain-link fence is a wooden cross covered with white lilies, plastic and permanent.

Georgino Napier, who was 18 at the time, and Carlito McToy, who was 17, were charged as adults with first-degree murder. They have pleaded guilty and been sentenced to 28 and 33 years in prison, respectively.

Much in the neighborhood has changed since the slaying. Overhead lighting was installed, police began to patrol the area more aggressively and residents learned to change their habits. Relatives of Negrete have returned to Mexico.

When Negrete was killed, Prince William police had already noticed a spike in robberies of immigrants. The county's crime rate in 2006 was the lowest in five years, but robberies were up 40 percent. Of the 351 reported, 83 percent were street robberies, many of which involved Latino victims.

In Montgomery, 285 robberies reported last year were committed by three or more people, police said. The majority of the victims in the "pack robberies" were recent immigrants, county police said.

In both counties, police said they remain concerned about the robberies but believe recent efforts to curb them have been effective.

After several men were robbed in her Manassas neighborhood last year, Yanette Herrera said the victims spoke of possibly striking back. They figured that if they retaliated, hurting one of the assailants, it might send a message, she said.

"We are very patient, but when we see something not changing . . .," she said in an interview. "You know how bad it is working 12 hours a day and someone just takes it in a minute?"

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