

Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration leaves a lot unanswered for sanctuary cities like L.A.



Students march in downtown Los Angeles after walking out of class as part of an anti-Trump protest on Nov. 14, 2016. Demonstrators demanded local politicians to declare L.A. County a sanctuary. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

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NOVEMBER 15, 2016, 4:00 AM

Scores of communities across California and the nation over the last decade have declared themselves "sanctuary cities," a politically potent if largely symbolic designation aimed at expressing solidarity and granting protection for immigrants in this country illegally.

During the [Obama](#) years, becoming a sanctuary city came with few consequences because the [White House](#) pushed for immigration reform, including a path to citizenship for many here without proper documentation.

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But with President-elect [Donald Trump](#) vowing to deport millions of immigrants, the role of sanctuary cities is likely to get more complicated and controversial.

Trump made illegal immigration a central issue of his presidential campaign, vowing to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, deport people who are in the country illegally and unwind immigration relief created under President Obama.

During the campaign, Trump said he also would withhold federal funds to punish so-called sanctuary cities, including Los Angeles and Chicago, for their lenient policies toward illegal immigration.

In the wake of Trump's election, leaders in some cities are vowing to continue their policies. Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck said Monday the department had no plans to get involved in any deportation efforts by the federal government and would continue a longstanding policy against allowing officers to stop people solely to determine their immigration status.

Mayors in Philadelphia and Chicago also reaffirmed their cities' sanctuary policies and said they would fight efforts by the Trump administration to crack down.

"Chicago always will be a sanctuary city," Mayor Rahm Emanuel said Monday at a news conference.

Sanctuary policies have become good politics in cities with large Latino populations. But the protections cities afford to immigrants here illegally vary widely.

There is no neat definition of "sanctuary city," but in general cities that use the name seek to offer political support or practical protections to people who are in the country illegally.

For some cities, the "sanctuary" movement consists simply of encouraging people without legal status to get more involved in government. For instance, Huntington Park has never declared itself a sanctuary city but appointed two people without legal status to a city commission, a move that generated national attention.

Other places, such as San Francisco, adopt far-reaching policies, such as taking steps to cut ties with federal immigration officials and refusing to fully cooperate with them. San Francisco declared itself a sanctuary city in 1989, and city officials strengthened the stance in 2013 with its "Due Process for All" ordinance. The law declared local authorities could not hold immigrants for immigration officials if they had no violent felonies on their records and did not currently face charges.

That city entered the national debate over immigration this summer, when Kathryn Steinle was fatally shot by Mexican national Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez in the Embarcadero neighborhood.

Lopez-Sanchez had been deported five times before he shot Steinle. Trump described the murder as "a senseless and totally preventable violent act committed by an illegal immigrant."

L.A. no longer turns over people arrested for low-level crimes to federal agents for deportation and moved away from honoring federal requests to detain inmates who might be deportable past their jail terms. The action follows a 2014 federal court ruling that found an Oregon county was liable for damages after holding an inmate beyond her release date so she could be transferred to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. In September, a federal judge in Chicago ordered immigration enforcement authorities in Illinois and five nearby states to stop asking local law enforcement agencies to detain suspects who may be in the country illegally, stating that the practice was unconstitutional. That case is now being reviewed by an appeals court.

Los Angeles is known for its immigrant-friendly policies, but L.A. Mayor [Eric Garcetti](#) said he avoids using the phrase "sanctuary city," saying it's "ill-defined."

"We cooperate all the time with federal immigration officials when there are criminals that are in our midst and need to be deported,"

Garcetti said last week before a meeting with immigration rights groups. "With that said, we're a very welcoming city, where our law enforcement officers and LAPD don't go around asking people for their papers, nor should they."

More than 1 million of the estimated 11 million immigrants in the country without legal status live in Los Angeles County, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

The mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs helps both those in the country legally and illegally access community and government services. The office also holds free workshops to help Angelenos apply for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, an executive action that provides a work permit and deportation reprieve to people who were brought to the U.S. as children and stayed illegally.

Los Angeles' city-run libraries have "Citizenship Corners," places where literature about becoming citizens is offered.

More than 400 jurisdictions across the country have some sort of sanctuary policy.

About a dozen California cities have formal sanctuary policies, according to Avidah Moussavian, a policy attorney with the National Immigration Law Center in Washington, D.C., which advocates for immigrant rights.

None of the state's 58 counties complies with detainer requests by [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), she said.

As Trump rolls out his immigration policies, he'll have to first decide what it means to be a sanctuary city, said Louis DeSipio, a professor of political science at UC Irvine.

"Is it just the name, [a] purely symbolic thing, or specific policies in San Francisco or some other cities that he thinks counter federal laws?" DeSipio said. "What defines a sanctuary city in his eyes?"

A crackdown by Trump on sanctuary cities would probably find at least some support in the Republican-controlled Congress.

Democrats in the Senate last year blocked a bill by Sen. [David Vitter](#) (R-La.) that would have stopped law enforcement funding and community development grants to states and cities that don't hold immigrants for federal immigration officials.

It also would have enacted a five- to 10-year minimum prison sentence for a person convicted of a felony or drug-related misdemeanors who reenters the United States illegally.

Capt. Jeff Scroggin, a spokesman for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, said it is too soon to say how sheriff's officials would react to any changes required by the Trump administration. Those changes could be tied to federal funding, he noted.

Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington-based group opposed to illegal immigration, said it's hard for him to understand why cities embrace the "sanctuary label."

"I don't think there is a whole lot of appetite among the public to keep criminal aliens in this country," he said.

But some immigrant rights activists are now calling on "sanctuary cities" to do more for those here illegally in response to Trump's election.

Talia Inlender, senior staff attorney at Public Counsel's Immigrants' Rights Project, said cities could step up to create safe places, such as schools, to protect students from the threat of deportation. Cities could also inform communities about their legal rights and fund naturalization efforts, he said.

Moussavian noted that in the past, cities have won legal challenges defending some sanctuary policies, such as not complying with ICE detainers.

On Monday, more than 1,000 students staged a walk-out that ended at Los Angeles [City Hall](#). Organizers said the protest was aimed at asking local political leaders to declare all of Los Angeles County a sanctuary. The demonstrators also demanded their schools be

declared havens from the threat of deportation.

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