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The Usual Suspects; [FINAL Edition]

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IN PRINCE WILLIAM County, police have busied themselves lately rounding up the usual suspects: Hispanic day laborers with the temerity to congregate in front of a 7-Eleven on Route 1 each morning awaiting the chance of employment as construction workers, landscapers or house painters. Ostensibly, their crime was loitering (translation: being annoying to local merchants); there were mutterings about public urination, littering and wolf whistles. But the punishment in some of these cases has been harsher than the usual \$100 fine for loitering. Of the 27 men arrested, 11 have been turned over to federal immigration authorities and face possible deportation. We understand that police were responding to complaints from local citizens, some of whom regard the day laborers as an unsightly nuisance. But the arrests are a bad idea, not to mention arbitrary. Officers put out the word that the workers were free to await day jobs at the site before 9 a.m. -- but not after. Far from being "good police work," as one officer confidently told The Post, the arrests will almost certainly have the counterproductive effect of alienating the fast-growing Hispanic community, which comprises 16 percent of the county -- nearly double the portion five years ago. Like other large suburban jurisdictions in this region, Prince William is having to learn how to deal with an unfamiliar population of immigrants; the county needs to build bridges to them if it is to tackle more threatening problems (such as gangs) than day laborers loitering on Route 1. Tim Freilich of the Virginia Justice Center had it right when he told The Post: "From a policy standpoint, the arrests don't make any sense. It's not going to solve the issue of day laborers. . . . It's just going to frighten the immigrant community."

The broader point is that federal authorities have failed to enforce immigration law strictly or patrol the nation's borders tightly. The nation is of two minds on this: It doesn't like the idea of illegal aliens, but it welcomes their contributions to the economy. Local authorities such as the Prince William police get caught in the middle. But rounding up a couple of dozen Salvadorans, Hondurans and Guatemalans on loosely defined loitering charges smacks of harassment. After all, most of those who were arrested in Prince William were in this country legally; all of them were seeking work in a job market with robust demand for their labor. If Prince William has problems at the 7-Eleven, let county officials try what some other jurisdictions have done: open an official day-laborer site. Hilda M. Barg, the county supervisor who represents the Woodbridge area, seems inclined to do just that, with the help of local charities and nonprofits. Her degree of success will be a measure of the county's compassion and intelligence in absorbing a dynamic group of new residents.

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