

Texas is getting a new ‘sanctuary cities’ law, and the Mexican government isn’t happy

By Alex Horton and Joshua Partlow July 6



Protesters take part in a rally to oppose a new Texas “sanctuary cities” bill that aligns with President Trump’s tougher stance on illegal immigration on June 26 in San Antonio outside a federal courthouse. A judge heard arguments before he decides whether the “sanctuary cities” crackdown backed by the Trump administration can take effect. (Eric Gay/AP)

A new Texas law has pushed the fight about sanctuary cities over the border, as Mexican officials grow increasingly concerned about Mexican nationals being caught in an expanding immigration dragnet while American authorities worry the measure might derail economic activity.

Senate Bill 4, signed on May 7, gives greater freedom to local Texas police to ask people, who have been detained, about their immigration status, and mandates cooperation with federal immigration authorities. Officials who don’t comply could be fined or even jailed. The bill has become a national flash point in an already hyperpartisan debate over the rights of immigrants and the government’s ability to press them on their legal status.

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Advocates of the law point to measures meant to increase safety, while critics worry about eroding protections and triggering negative diplomatic and economic consequences.

In late June, the Mexican government filed a sworn statement with the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas, in San Antonio, to argue why the law should not go into effect. The 11 Mexican consulates in Texas met and shared information about how Mexican immigrants were reacting to the law, which showed broad levels of fear and anxiety.

“We started to receive more and more calls,” showing a “fear of the population about what might be happening,” said Carlos Sada, a deputy secretary at the Foreign Ministry in charge of North American affairs.

The number of Mexicans in Texas calling the Center for Information and Assistance for Mexicans (CIAM) during May and June this year increased 678 percent compared to the same period last year.

During the six weeks before the approval of SB4, 585 Mexican citizens requested legal advice from the Mexican consulates in Texas. In the ensuing six weeks, that number was 926 cases, a 60 percent increase.

With an estimated 30 million people of Mexican descent living in the United States, there is a sense that “an immigrant equals a Mexican,” said one Mexican official. “Now the great concern to us is that being an immigrant equals being a criminal.”

While President Enrique Peña Nieto has refrained from directly attacking President Trump, his administration has vowed to defend the rights of Mexicans living in the United States. The foreign ministry has committed an additional \$15 million to the network of consulates in the U.S. so they can boost outreach to Mexicans and inform them of their rights as immigrants in response to the Texas legislation.

Trump’s promises to build a border wall and ramp up deportations have been broadly opposed by Mexicans across the political spectrum.

Texas cities take the state to court

El Cenizo, a Texas town of 3,300 south of Laredo and carved into the border with Mexico, sued the state of Texas in May, along with nearby Maverick County, claiming the legislation is unlawful and would tie up police resources as they wait for immigration authorities to make determinations on custody of detained unlawful immigrants.

Austin, the capital of Texas, joined San Antonio in the suit in June, claiming the law violates constitutional protections against unlawful seizures and for equal protection. Houston, Dallas, El Paso and the counties home to San Antonio and Austin also joined the case.

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Austin Mayor Steve Adler told The Washington Post the measure will “make our cities less safe” by eroding the trust between police and communities and discouraging victims and witnesses to speak with authorities.

“When evil, bad people start to see people won’t turn them in, then it creates problems,” Adler said Tuesday.

Over a three-month span this spring, an Austin immigrant rights shelter serving mostly Hispanics [reported an 80 percent increase in sexual assault victims declining to report rape](#) to law enforcement, compared to the same span last year. [Los Angeles’s police chief observed a similar issue in March](#).

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott blasted “fearmongering” opponents of the bill in [a May op-ed for the San Antonio Express-News](#) that he wrote with two border-law-enforcement chiefs — Hidalgo County Sheriff J.E. “Eddie” Guerra and McAllen Police Chief Victor Rodriguez. Following publication, 23 law enforcement officials in south Texas endorsed the op-ed.

The op-ed seeks to dispel the claim that any undocumented immigrant could be subject to harsher laws.

Abbott says the bill requires police to comply with “ICE detainers,” a request from Immigration and Customs Enforcement to hold violent offenders, and includes provisions aimed at discouraging police from asking the legal status of crime witnesses and victims.

“Until recently, Texas law enforcement has been honoring immigration detainers for years, and this law reinforces those efforts to keep dangerous criminals off the streets,” John Wittman, Abbott’s press secretary, said in a statement to The Post on Wednesday. “The governor believes this law will help secure the safety of all Texans — including the millions of Mexican nationals living in Texas.”

Potential to complicate economic, diplomatic ties

The Texas law threatens to add further tension to U.S.-Mexico relations at a time when major policy changes are on the table, including the renegotiation of NAFTA, the border wall project, and potential shifts on how the two countries cooperate on immigration and security issues.

Texas is the centerpiece of U.S.-Mexico commerce as its own economic powerhouse, with a higher GDP in 2015 than Canada, Russia and Mexico itself.

“One of the ways the [Texas] economy is powered, and has been for decades, is labor from Mexico and other places,” Adler said. “We send a conflicting message. On one hand we say ‘don’t come into the country unless you’re properly documented.’ On the other hand, we barely prosecute employers who hire undocumented laborers.”

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Stringent immigration policies have already led to economic decline along the border, offering a glimpse into potential second-order effects of the Texas law, said Chris Wilson, deputy director of the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center, a Washington think tank.

Arizona Senate Bill 1070, a 2010 regulation allowing police to question the immigration status of anyone they suspect might be in the country illegally and derided by critics as the “show me your papers law,” had a chilling effect on business, Wilson said.

The Phoenix Convention Center itself saw a [\\$132 million direct revenue decline in 2013](#) versus 2009, before the law was implemented. Companies skipped over Arizona in favor of other places as the state [became a symbol for harsh immigration reform](#).

“There is a consensus in the state that [the law] produced problems,” Wilson said. “The business wing of the Republican Party worked hard to restore relationships” with Mexico and the rest of the country, he said.

“There are real opportunities for their state on the line.”

Wittman, the Texas governor’s spokesman, did not say whether Abbott took potentially negative economic fallout into account over SB4’s implementation.

“People want to do business and raise their families in a state that has safe communities, and this law helps achieve that. The business reality is far different than the press narrative,” Wittman said.

On Wednesday, Secretary of Homeland Security John F. Kelly met with Peña Nieto and Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray in Mexico City to discuss security and immigration issues.

In a statement after the meeting, Peña Nieto said that he welcomed the recent decision by the Trump administration to keep in place protections against deportation for immigrants who’d come to the U.S. as children, a population known as “dreamers.”

Local resources stretched

Meanwhile, local advocacy groups and government officials are bracing for more tension and worry among tightknit immigrant populations.

Carlos González Gutiérrez, the consul general of Mexico in Austin, has seen ballooning demand for services in the 23 counties he oversees in central Texas, which include immigration attorney consultations and workshops to answer concerns as Texas grows closer to implementing SB4.

Gutiérrez said he has been stopped constantly in the community by people looking for help, including an Austin restaurant in March, where a waiter told him several women in

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the kitchen, all Mexican nationals from the same town in the state of Guerrero, had questions for him.

Typical questions revolve around issues like acquiring documents or verifying a current immigration status, he said. But these women were different.

The group of women had lived in the U.S. for more than two decades and owned their own houses where their U.S.-born children grew up. They were worried they would lose their homes, and if the mothers were deported, that their children would be forced to live in an unrecognizable state ravaged by cartel violence.

The children would feel alien in Mexico, the women told Gutiérrez.