

“Amigo Shopping”

On the Streets of America – Terrible Violence Against the Voiceless

J. R. Roberts Security Strategies LLC

Whoever named it “Harmony Village” either had never set foot in the place, or was possessed of a cruel sense of the ironic.

Located immediately outside the city limits of a mid-size southern town in an unincorporated area free of pesky and bothersome zoning restrictions and regulations, the “village” consisted of an unpaved dirt road leading back behind a band of thick trees and well out of sight. Clustered side by side were more than 100 dilapidated single wide trailers. Virtually all of the trailers were in poor condition. Yet all of the trailers were occupied with an average of 3-4 residents paying upwards of \$500.00 a month each to live in huddled and appalling squalor.

The residents of “Harmony Village” were comprised of almost 100% illegal immigrant workers, most day laborers working odd jobs, construction, washing dishes or bussing tables at the restaurants in the busy and prospering tourist destination nearby. These undocumented workers toiled away for 60 hour work weeks and less than minimum wage paid under the table and yet a surprising number managed to send monies back home to Mexico, Honduras, etc. every month.

The shocking living conditions and lack of any decent or common amenities (in some cases running water and electricity) were the price willingly paid by this invisible work force that has become so important to the American economy.

But weekends made a bad situation worse.

On weekends the residents of “Harmony Village” were subjected to assaults, shooting, and robberies, as gangs roamed the property and victimized the residents at will and with impunity.

F. Velasquez was one such victim.

On a warm summers evening, having completed a double shift, Velasquez had managed to catch the last bus back to the nearest bus stop- hiking the ½ mile to Harmony Village.

It was a Friday night, and like most of the residents, Velasquez had his week’s pay in cash in his wallet. He grabbed a cold beer and sat on the steps of the trailer as darkness fell (there were only a few pole lights in the encampment and visibility was poor.)

He had just begun to chat with one of his neighbors when the car rolled up.

Two young African American males jumped from the car which continued to idle as a third man sat behind the wheel.

The first man pointed a gun at Velasquez and after about 4 or 5 seconds, shot him at close range.

As Velasquez attempted to crawl to his trailer, the man approached him, and pulling the wallet from his victims’ pants, fired a second shot into Velasquez back, shattering his spine and leaving him a quadriplegic.

The neighbor was robbed as well.

The car drove off, its occupants hurling taunts at the terrified residents.

The frustration level of police and detectives attempting to get eyewitness identification was enormous.

These crimes were the rule rather than the exception, yet no one would speak to the police.

The assailants were never identified or arrested and remain at large.

After months of reports of shots fired and problems on Friday and Saturday nights, the property was declared a nuisance and “Harmony Village” was closed.

The police chief could only speculate as to the amount of crime that had occurred at the property, as so many went unreported.

Returning at about 9:00 on a Friday night from picking up lottery tickets and milk at a local convenience store, A. Romero was walking up the long driveway from the busy street in the Florida city where he worked as part of a migrant crew picking seasonal crops when he was confronted, robbed and shot dead. No arrests were ever made, nor any suspects identified.

A review of an unrelated domestic crime that had occurred almost a year before Romero was murdered provided details of a frightened pregnant woman who was regularly beaten by her boyfriend. While holding a gun to her head, the African American male subject bragged of being part of a street “crew” that trolled the streets on Friday and Saturday nights “looking for Mexicans” to rob. The “crew” found illegals to be the perfect victims. They were paid in cash as most didn’t have bank account and they were reluctant to report any crime to the police for fear of deportation. His gang called it “Amigo Shopping.”

A recent article in the *Florida St. Petersburg Times* was titled “*Hispanic Workers Tempting Target for Robbers*” and cited 55 such incidents in a one year period in the community while also noting that the majority of such incident go unreported.

“*They are easy targets*” Detective Michael Welek is quoted as saying “*There is a surge of these robberies*”

The Washington Post featured an article entitled *Robbers Stalk Hispanic Immigrants Seeing Ideal Prey* and observed that these crimes (non-Hispanics targeting Hispanics) were occurring with such frequency that police in Prince William County organized a special task force to deal with the issue. After one particularly brutal homicide, they found the event had been captured on a cell phone camera by one of the assailants, and the group could be heard prior to the assault talking about going out and “getting an amigo.”

Oklahoma City police have also seen a huge spike in these kinds of assaults, “*whatever in-roads the Oklahoma City Police Department has made with the Hispanic community has been eroded by these criminals that continue to target them*” said Michael Brooks-Jimenez an Oklahoma City immigration attorney.

Jason Willingham a spokesman for the Tulsa police department stated “*People are going into Hispanic neighborhoods and they are targeting them*”

The Raleigh North Carolina police department reported a rash of “Amigo Shopping” incidents- “*the victims in these cases have all been Hispanic*” in a 3 month period police responded to a dozen armed robberies, home invasions, and shootings all specifically targeting those who were perceived to be undocumented workers.

J. Cardoza had crossed the border 11 years ago.

He had initially worked his way across the country as a migrant farm worker, where after four years he met and married his wife Elena, also an undocumented worker.

The two had made their home in Memphis, Tennessee for 6 years.

J. found steady employment in a grocery store where he had twice been promoted, while Elena was happily employed at a day care center.

They had one 3 year old daughter and Elena was 7 months pregnant with their second child.

On a cold Friday night, J. returned home to the apartment they had lived in for almost a year.

Moments after his arrival, the door was literally kicked off the frame and two masked men entered.

One wielded a shotgun, while the other waived a pistol at the terrified family as they demanded money.

J. emptied the contents of his pockets, almost 350.00.

“Where the rest of the money at”? yelled one of the assailants “You got more hid- you people got a stash- where’s it at Pedro”?

As J. tried to explain the money was all they had, Elena screamed and the man holding the shot gun fired at Elena at point blank range. Elena and her unborn child died on the spot. The robbers then fled the apartment.

The MPD arrested two men shortly after the tragedy.

The leader worked at the apartment complex as a security guard.

He watched the coming and going of the mostly Hispanic residents and had previously orchestrated several other robberies of tenants.

“Them people got money and they don’t want to talk to no police.” He explained.

When asked why he shot and killed the pregnant Elena, he answered with a shrug “bitch got in the way”

Justice Department figures show that 21% of all robbery victims are Hispanic, reflecting a steady decade long rise.

From Newark to Atlanta, from Memphis to Seattle, law enforcement officials are facing a pandemic of violent street robberies.

Predators watch check cashing and wire transfer businesses on paydays and lie in wait outside bars and restaurants and in apartment parking lots of complexes housing a large Hispanic population.

Frustration levels from law enforcement and community activists are high.

Continued outreach programs like the “Basta, Ya” (“enough already”) campaign in Austin Texas can yield positive results in the education of population concerning their vulnerability.

But overcoming cultural suspicion, increased awareness, intensive outreach from Spanish speaking law enforcement without deportation threats remain as serious hurdles to reduction and prevention of this serious blight on American streets.

Crime Prevention is a responsibility shared by and in the best interest of us all.

If “sunshine is the best disinfectant” then surely tolerance and awareness protect everyone.

The dream of pursuing prosperity in a safe and sane nation depends upon our making that nation as crime free as possible- for everyone.

And isn’t that why America is seen as a beacon of hope around the globe?

Isn’t that part of what makes our country great?

Mr. Roberts is President of J. R. Roberts Security Strategies LLC and has 37 years of collective experience in Security and Crime Prevention.

J. R. has served on multiple task forces for the Cities of Atlanta and Savannah Georgia dealing with the problems of crime.

As a consultant J R regularly lectures for Private Security and Law Enforcement on a variety of topics, and has served as an expert witness for plaintiff or defense in over 350 cases in 31 states.

www.jrrobertssecurity.com