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Life Under Alabama's Harsh Immigration Law

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The front door is locked on this brown-and-cream mobile home, an aluminum outpost at the end of a pine-tree trailer park beyond Birmingham, Ala. But the back door flaps open in a winter wind. Inside are a bag of red beans, some pet food, and a pair of high heels. Nothing else. Even the beds are gone. "Six people," a neighbor says in Spanish, struggling to recall something from the anonymity of immigrant life. "Men, women, children. The law came in, and one day they just didn't come home."

The law: that would be H.B. 56, Alabama's attempt at the nation's most rigorous crackdown on illegal immigrants. On Sept. 23, 2011, when H.B. 56 came into effect, it cut off all state and local services to the undocumented. No driver's licenses, no registration for cars, no scholarships, no hiring without a document check. Enrolling in one of Alabama's public colleges requires proof of legal residency in the United States. Hiring, renting property to, or simply "harboring" undocumented foreigners is illegal. H.B. 56's one-signature provision—deputizing local police officers to turn traffic stops into deportation proceedings—assumes powers long reserved to the federal government.

The law had its desired effect, sort of. Illegals did flee. Alabama reported a drop in school enrollment, especially in rural areas. This trailer and about 50 like it in a park of 300 were soon evacuated. Immigrants sold their possessions for cash and drove to Florida or California, wherever they felt safer. But Alabama's crackdown hasn't played out quite as expected. A group of Mexican men unloading a pickup truck explain they fled the state, but after just a month in Florida, they came back. They pointed out an obvious irony: as H.B. 56 scared off some immigrants, others found that jobs were now going begging. And these men had now rented the same trailer for less than they paid in September.

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Most studies calculate that illegal immigration boosts the American economy. Many immigrants contribute to Social Security without being eligible to draw on it. But the net gain in jobs is an abstraction compared with Alabama's low wages and stubborn unemployment, which ran more than 9 percent before the bill. Sponsors of H.B. 56 took credit for a subsequent decline to 8.7 percent unemployment, saying legal workers were getting the jobs of departed illegals

Are the toilet cleaners welcome? Carla and Ruben hide behind drawn blinds every night. They are Costa Ricans who ask to be called by new names. The apartment is cozy; their three handsome sons sit patiently on a white sofa. The couple is educated and middle class but got stuck cleaning toilets for cash in an underground economy. They work to provide for their family, they say, but haven't seen their own parents in 16 years.

Survival in Alabama 2.0: one shopping trip a week, to minimize exposure to the police. A carpool to St. Francis Xavier for the 1 p.m. mass in Spanish. (Parking at the church is easy since H.B. 56; one third of the lot is suddenly free.) When they set out in the morning, they remind their sons—the youngest a U.S. citizen—not to panic if they disappear. Move to your aunt's apartment, the parents say. Stay in school. We'll call you when we land in Costa Rica.

The couple recalls one of the houses they clean weekly. The owner is a "really important" figure in Alabama whom they won't identify. "He speaks against Latinos," Carla notes, "but hires Latinos to clean his house." The man threatened to fire them if they were illegals—then dropped the matter. If H.B. 56 sputters out, it may be because people in Alabama want a clean house more than they want to clean house.