

Scripps Howard News Service

May 31, 2005, Tuesday

DOMESTIC NEWS

In rural California, thieves target immigrant laborers

EMILY BAZAR

On a recent stifling evening in Yuba City, Calif., nearly 20 Mexican immigrants gathered inside an even more stifling trailer to practice English for their upcoming citizenship exams.

Most are farmworkers or relatives of farmworkers whose jobs and pay are picking up with the temperatures.

Because all are legal permanent residents - also called green card holders - they have identification necessary to open bank accounts.

But they haven't always.

Like many farmworkers in the United States without papers, some of them carried wads of cash in their pockets or shoes, and stashed their savings in their mattresses after they were paid.

"This is a bigger problem for people who work here seasonally. They feel more comfortable carrying money because they never know where they'll be working the next season or the next day," said Juan Tovar, 49, a welder at a local nursery.

"I know two people who have been carrying \$10,000."

Thieves know, too.

Throughout the Central Valley and rural Sacramento region, California farmworkers are preyed upon for their money and often become victims of muggings.

Last year, Stockton, Calif., police noticed a spate of street robberies against Latino males and wondered whether they were part of a larger trend.

In their subsequent analysis of 459 street robberies against Latino males in 2004, they found that about 60 percent occurred in low-income neighborhoods in south Stockton, said Officer Sean Fenner, spokesman for the Stockton Police Department.

The majority of those victims were either farm laborers or somehow associated with the agricultural industry, he added.

The data showed that the robberies occurred most often in June, July and

September, when more farm laborers are concentrated in the area.

The analysis also revealed that a large number of the robberies occurred on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights between 5 p.m. and 3 a.m.

"They go to work. They get their check. They tend to go to places and cash their checks. They're vulnerable at that point because they have sums of money," Fenner said.

"We believe suspects are aware of that, and they (the farmworkers) become targets," he added.

Luis Magana, an immigrant-rights activist and regional organizer for the American Friends Service Committee, said street crimes against farmworkers have long been a problem.

He pointed to the deaths of two farmworkers who were shot after coming out of a south Stockton market in December.

"This is the season that the robberies start on the street," he said.

Sacramento's Mexican Consulate is trying to arrange a meeting with migrants in Stockton about this issue.

The consulate's press attache, Ivan Sierra, said his colleagues plan to urge farmworkers to stop carrying large amounts of cash.

"Until fairly recently back in Mexico, it was not very common to have a bank account," he said. "Many people are just now getting the message that when you open a bank account, you are making life easier for yourself."

Illegal immigrants can obtain a matricula consular ID card from the Mexican Consulate, which some banks accept as one form of identification for opening an account.

But even with the card, some migrant workers don't open bank accounts for a variety of reasons. Instead, they rely on stores and check cashing services to obtain cash, and carry their cash with them on the streets.

Farmworker victims - particularly if they're here illegally - often are hesitant to report the crimes, fearing deportation.

"There's a lot of noise about cooperation between immigration and police officers. Some farmworkers don't understand these are just rumors or proposals," Magana said. "But people are scared by the police anyway."

Yuba County law enforcement officials encountered that fear in August 2003. Over the course of two nights, a woman posing as a prostitute approached some farmworkers in a bar, said Yuba County Undersheriff Steven Durfor.

She took them to a remote location, where her accomplices would attack and rob them, he said.

During the course of the investigation, Durfor said, officials realized there were additional victims who had not come forward.

"Until it was reported, we were unaware this kind of activity was occurring," he said. "We are here to protect everyone. No one should be a victim."

This year, Durfor said, bilingual deputies will meet with ranchers, foremen, labor contractors and others to raise awareness about the problem and will ask them to pass along the information to farmworkers.

Stockton police officials also have released tips to help farmworkers avoid muggings.

They suggest the workers travel in groups, especially after dark, and walk purposefully with their heads up and eyes forward. They also caution farmworkers against carrying more money than they need and urge them to leave credit cards at home.

Stockton police have advised farmworkers to carry about \$10 with them in "muggers money" in case they are accosted.

"One of our goals in putting this information out is to let the Spanish-speaking community know that if you're a righteous victim, deportation is not an issue that comes up in a routine investigation, and they should not be afraid to report crimes they are victims in or witnesses to," Fenner said.