

VIEWPOINTS

Spanish can be vital for police



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The recent death of Juan Rodriguez was tragic because it illustrates just how vulnerable newcomers to Dallas can be when they have not had the time to become proficient in English. News reports described Mr. Rodriguez as an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who had been in this country little more than a year. He spoke virtually no English and was known to carry a gun to protect himself in his crime-ridden East Dallas neighborhood.

On the evening of his death, Mr. Rodriguez reportedly had some drinks and decided to try his recently purchased gun by firing it outdoors, a common practice in Mexico. Four plainclothes policemen in the area responded to a radio request for assistance, and one of them commanded Mr. Rodriguez at gunpoint to raise his hands.

The commands were in English, despite the fact that the officer recognized that Mr. Rodriguez was Hispanic. When Mr. Rodriguez reportedly reached for a pistol in his waistband, the officer shot him once in the arm and twice in the back.

Lest anyone think that Mr. Rodriguez deserved what he got, it would be wise to reflect on how anyone would want to be treated in a foreign country if suspected of wrongdoing: Would you expect the police, while pointing a gun, to shout commands only in their native language, or would some English be appreciated in such a life-threatening situation?

Also, should someone readily cooperate with an armed person who has no obvious evidence of authority, like a uniform?

There are many people like Juan Rodriguez in Dallas County: Between 1980 and 1990, the Hispanic population increased 104 percent, from 154,561 to 315,630. By the year 2000, the Hispanic population easily should reach 631,000.

Moreover, the language characteristics of Hispanics should give city officials further reason to ponder the logic behind this "English only" approach to law enforcement:

- Of the 89,929 Spanish-language households in Dallas County, 25 percent (22,613) have no one able to speak English.

If the 247,649 Spanish speakers, 28 percent (68,826) speak English "not well" or "not at all."

The census information confirms that Juan Rodriguez is not the only Hispanic in Dallas who cannot communicate well in English.

How, then, has the city dealt with this problem?

To its credit, the city has required new police officers within the last five years to take a 44-hour course in basic Spanish, although departmental policy does not require officers to use their Spanish, even in life-threatening situations. Apparently, Dallas Hispanics are supposed to be content that the resumes of police officers just look more impressive.

The public sector ought to take its lead from the more innovative private sector, whose philosophy has been to speak the language of the customer. By contrast, public agencies seem only too willing to embrace the "English only" mentality toward the Hispanic community.

Where life-or-death issues are concerned, however, city leaders cannot afford to turn a deaf ear to the growing Hispanic community. Law enforcement officials should:

- Ensure that *all* police officers, not just new recruits, pass a basic Spanish language course.
- Require officers to use Spanish and English whenever an identified Hispanic is confronted.
- Assign bilingual Hispanic police officers to Hispanic areas.
- Consider requiring officers to carry prerecorded commands in Spanish if they cannot speak the language themselves.

Linguistics expert Calvin Veltman says Hispanic immigrants are assimilating English more rapidly than previous waves of immigrants. Hispanics always have recognized the value of learning English to improve their employment prospects and standard of living.

Still, the rapid Hispanic growth rate virtually guarantees that Dallas always will have a segment of the Hispanic community that is not proficient in English.

Dallas' new police chief, Ben Click, should begin his administration by reassuring Hispanics that all officers will be required, not just encouraged, to communicate more effectively with an identified Hispanic before using deadly force. Indeed, it makes little sense for police officers to study Spanish and then not use what they have learned; such a practice appears both arrogant and insensitive.

Who knows, the extra effort even might result in fewer injuries and deaths and perhaps more support for "the blue" in the Hispanic community.

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