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## The paradox of local ‘sanctuary’ policies

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Lawmakers in big cities ([Philadelphia](#)), counties ([Montgomery](#)), townships ([Haverford](#)), and small boroughs ([Narberth](#)) in our region are passing ordinances, directives, or resolutions instructing their police departments not to cooperate with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

These measures are wrapped in language **proclaiming to protect** the “safety and welfare” of their residents. While safeguarding residents is **upholding the social contract**, these actions reveal a paradox, if not outright hypocrisy, at the heart of their rationale. The promise of protecting the public may be undermined by the very directives meant to uphold it.

At the center of attention is the lack of **respect for authentic federalism**. Federalism — not just in its textbook sense but its practical sense — depends on each level of government recognizing and respecting the legitimate authority of the others. Federal, state, and local each have distinct lanes and immigration enforcement is unmistakably within the jurisdiction of the federal government. **ICE has a lawful duty** to enforce immigration laws on individuals who have committed civil offenses or more serious crimes. When local officials deliberately impede this process, they are not defending their community’s autonomy; they are undermining the cooperative framework our system was built upon.

A second contradiction is the rejection of [cooperative federalism](#). Shared authority between federal and state or local entities has worked well because of the spirit of cooperation, especially in matters of public safety — and has proven beneficial to all stakeholders. When local jurisdictions choose to opt out of such cooperative arrangements, it signals not a principled stance, but a political one. Cooperation in this case is not an abdication of local control; it is an acknowledgement that safety is a collective responsibility. Ignoring that tradition weakens the very safeguards local leaders ostensibly defend.

The notion of local “commitment to public safety” is questionable as well. Many localities adopting a “stand down” approach toward ICE simultaneously acknowledge that almost [eleven million individuals](#) were encountered in crossing the border at a non-official entry point during the past president’s administration, many without proper vetting. Among them are individuals with known criminal histories in their home countries and, in some cases, [ties to terrorist organizations](#). When local governments embrace policies that purposefully limit law enforcement engagement with federal authorities dealing with such risks, they invert the order of protection — placing residents behind political symbolism rather than in front of law-enforcement readiness.

Adding to the paradox is the branding of towns as “[welcoming](#),” inclusive,” or “safe” towns. These public declarations can send the unintended message that the locality is a soft target for lawbreakers. When a municipality announces that it will not cooperate with federal immigration enforcement, it implicitly signals a permissive environment. This does not enhance safety; it invites exploitation.

This posture provokes another question: Why was such a proclamation necessary? If a town is suddenly declared “welcoming” or “safe,” does that imply that it was previously unwelcoming or unsafe? Residents may reasonably wonder why their leaders felt the need to reassure outsiders before addressing longstanding concerns within their own communities. Civic virtue should begin with serving the people already living, working, and raising

families in the town — not with making sweeping symbolic statements for external applause.

Equally problematic is the argument that these policies are necessary because undocumented individuals might otherwise [fear cooperating with police](#). This is a specious claim. Communities rely on law enforcement to function impartially, and most local police already exercise discretion, prioritizing public safety rather than immigration status in routine encounters. Discouraging cooperation with federal authorities does not inspire trust—it sows confusion, erodes accountability, and fractures the very relationship officials claim they are protecting.

Finally, the assertion that these sanctuary-style actions prevent the waste of local police resources rings hollow. Local law enforcement has absorbed extraordinary costs in recent years, from policing mass protests associated with [BLM](#), to [Free Palestine demonstrations](#), to No Kings Day events, and [anti-ICE rallies](#) — virtually all tied to the political priorities of a single party affiliation. To argue suddenly that cooperation with ICE is an undue burden strains credibility. The resources have been spent; what is changing now is not the capacity, but the policymakers' will.

Many residents see these acts for what they are: not expressions of principled governance but actions of political theater — [virtue signaling](#), partisan posturing, and yet another symbolic rebuke of national figures they oppose. Local leaders must decide whether they are governing for the applause of national politics or for the safety of the people they represent.

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