

A Tragedy Unnecessarily Exploited

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This month, three young people were murdered in Newark while a fourth survived the attack in a tragedy for their families and all residents of the city. Six men stand accused of the crime, all Latino, and two of which are undocumented immigrants. This sad loss of young life has led to near hysteria, not in Newark where the police and community leaders have been able to calm the waters, but at the national and regional level.

In Morristown where the harassment of Latino immigrants now poses as a populist campaign led by Mayor Cresitello, the tragedy in Newark emboldens his plan to deputize local law enforcement as federal immigration agents. Days later the candidate for the Republican nomination for President, Tom Tancredo, accused Newark government officials as accomplices in the murder because they, like in other cities, created a safe haven for the undocumented as a way to foster relations with that community. From America's South, the rejuvenated Newt Gingrich has thundered a set of falsehoods by proclaiming that the serious war we face now is not in Iraq, but right here against illegal and undocumented criminals who threaten our country. And in Trenton, instead of waiting the results of a new advisory panel created by the Governor, the Attorney General has issued new directives to regulate contact between police and the state's residents whose minority population increases by the day.

Creating norms to regulate immigration is complex, multi-layered and, unfortunately, characterized by racist motives, economic needs, dirty politics and scapegoating. It's always been that way and we doubt it will change. What we do need is a rational, measured dialogue. The Hispanic Bar Association of New Jersey which appointed the undersigned to the Governor's Advisory Panel recognizes that near-hysteria that faces us is a product of falsehoods and political machinations for two reasons.

First, the criminality within the immigrant community that supposedly flummoxes these politicians is nothing more than a dirty lie. The rate of criminality – that is, the rate in which persons are accused and convicted of crime, not all who commit it – is five times higher within the native born community than within immigrant communities. Accordingly, we cannot allow over-generalizations of the Newark tragedy to categorize Latino immigrants who compose an otherwise law-abiding and hard-working community.

Second, the deputization of local law enforcement as federal immigration officials in Morristown will serve to impair the safety of its immigrants who will never confide in

the police and thus jeopardize the safety of all of its residents. On the other hand, the new directives from the Attorney General deposit an extraordinary amount of power and discretion in the hands of law enforcement without sufficient safeguards to protect against the proliferation of racial profiling which has marred New Jersey's reputation recently.

Ironically, the same day that the media reported that the men accused in Newark included undocumented immigrants, it reported that the new crackdown on employers who hire undocumented workers announced by the federal administration would signal the "death of the American farmer."

In other words, the country can't decide if it wants us or wants to reject us. For these reasons we must proceed with caution, common sense, and wisdom in New Jersey.

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