

# Hispanics in the crosshairs

By William C. Kashatus

**O**n July 12, 2008, six white teenagers confronted Luis Eduardo Ramirez Zavala, a 25-year-old father of three and an illegal immigrant from Mexico, in an alley in Shenandoah, Pa. Screaming racial slurs at him, the teens viciously kicked and beat him. He died in intensive care two days later.

Two of the six assailants — 17-year-old Brandon Piekarsky and 18-year-old Derrick Donchak — were acquitted of the most serious charges by a Schuylkill County jury, but they were charged with federal hate crimes last month. They could receive life in prison if convicted.

What makes the Shenandoah case even more disturbing is that three of the borough's police officers have been charged with obstructing the investigation into Ramirez's death. Police Chief Matthew Nestor, Lt. William Moyer, and Officer Jason Hayes are accused of helping the defendants dispose of crucial evidence, including the shoes used to deliver the final, fatal kick to Ramirez's head.

The Shenandoah case is not an isolated incident. It's part of a frightening national pattern of anti-Latino hate crimes in the United States, which has paralleled growing resentment of illegal immigrants. Hate crimes against Latinos have surged 40 percent nationwide since 2003, according to recent FBI statistics. (The statistics are thought to undercount total hate crimes, but nevertheless indicate real trends.)

Of the 1,347 victims attacked in this country because of their ethnicity or national origin in 2008, 62 percent were Hispanic. Though the most common offense was intimidation, there were at least nine murders and nonnegligent manslaughters. And convictions were rare.

Many of the hate crimes take place in towns like Shenandoah, where there has been a significant increase in the Latino population over the last decade, and where Hispanics are competing with white workers for jobs in a struggling economy.

## From Pa. to Calif., hate crimes against Latinos have risen with anti-immigration rhetoric.

Some of the towns are famous for having adopted harsh anti-immigrant ordinances. Hazleton, Pa., for example, approved an ordinance in 2006 making it illegal for individuals and businesses to aid undocumented workers, punishing landlords who rent or lease to them, suspending the licenses of businesses that hire them, and making English the city's official language. Similar measures targeting Hispanics have been passed in Riverside, N.J.; Palm Bay, Fla.; and San Bernardino, Calif. The measures echo the community-driven Repatriation Movement of the 1930s, which forced Mexicans to return to their native country.

Other towns have been hotbeds of white supremacist activity. Hemet, Calif., for example, was the scene of a vicious hate crime in November, when four reputed white supremacist gang members knocked a Latino man unconscious and then repeatedly stomped on him and kicked him in the head. The victim suffered permanent brain damage and has

been placed in a long-term-care facility.

The same month, in Patchogue, N.Y., seven teens, six of them white, decided to "go fight a Mexican." They ended up attacking an Ecuadorean immigrant, who died of a fatal stab wound.

According to investigators, both attacks were random, unprovoked, and motivated purely by racial hatred.

Still other American towns have struggled with cases of racial intimidation. In Avon Park, Fla., Jose Gonzales, a U.S. citizen and mechanic, had his car and garage destroyed by an arsonist who spray-painted "F— Puerto Rico" on his house in September 2007. The first documented anti-Latino attack of 2009 occurred on New Year's Day, when a Vallejo, Calif., motorist was arrested for gunning his vehicle toward a crowd of Latino day laborers.

Latinos are inevitably the most convenient targets for such hate crimes. Illegal immigration is still a hot-button issue, and many of the most fervent immigration opponents are either unable or unwilling to distinguish between legal and illegal immigrants.

Underlying this disturbing trend is the reality that the white establishment that once dominated education, business, and politics in this country is in decline. Latinos, meanwhile, are the fastest-growing segment of the population.

Instead of resenting Latinos, the white mainstream must learn to share power with them and other minority groups. It's the only way we can move forward as a nation and capitalize on the social, economic, and political benefits of our diversity.

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