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Extremists Hijack Immigration Debate: Increased Reports of Hate Crimes and Discrimination Aimed at U.S.- and Foreign-Born Latinos

"The immigration debate has turned ugly and the result has been a growth in white supremacist hate groups and anti-Latino hate crime. The majority of anti-Latino hate crimes are carried out by people who think they're attacking immigrants, and very likely undocumented immigrants."

- Mark Potok, Southern Poverty Law Center

The national debate over immigration, currently raging from the halls of Congress to local communities and across family dinner tables, is a legitimate and important conversation. However, anti-immigrant extremists, white supremacists, and far-right-wing radio show hosts are using the debate to spew extreme views and stoke the fires of hatred and racism. In this climate of undeterred public immigrant-bashing, hatred and vigilantism can easily take root, and Latinos – both immigrant and native-born citizens – have suffered the negative consequences. Latinos, regardless of immigration status, are feeling the impact of the extremist rhetoric as they report increased discrimination and anxiety, and authorities report an increase in hate crimes. Established groups such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center, with their long track records and expertise in hate crimes and discrimination, have been increasingly involved in observing the treatment of Latinos and other immigrants as a result of recent disturbing trends. The following excerpts from recent reports highlight how the immigration debate has spurred discrimination, hatred, and violence:

Hate Groups Increase as the Immigration Debate Gets Uglier

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has been tracking anti-immigrant rhetoric and activities for several years and has noted a marked upswing in violence against Latinos coinciding with the national debate over immigration policy.

- The spring 2008 SPLC [*Intelligence Report*](#) found that the number of hate groups operating in the U.S. rose to 888 in 2007, up 5 percent from 2006. SPLC has documented a 48 percent increase in the number of hate groups since 2000, and approximately 300 anti-immigrant groups have formed in the last three years. This increase is attributed to the anti-immigrant fervor that is sweeping the country. "Hate groups continue to successfully exploit the immigration debate to their advantage, even though the immigration issue has largely disappeared from the presidential debate," said Mark Potok, editor of the *Intelligence Report*. "The fact is that they've been aided and abetted by mainstream pundits and politicians who give these haters a platform for their propaganda."
- The Federation for American Immigration Reform ([FAIR](#)), one of the leading anti-immigrant voices in the U.S., was labeled a hate group by SPLC because of its strong ties to white supremacists and white supremacist ideology. "FAIR has been taken seriously for years by both the media and Congress, but it shouldn't be," said Potok. "Its officials have repeatedly revealed an anti-Latino and anti-Catholic bias. It has energetically promoted

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racist conspiracy theories about the immigration situation. And it has ties to white supremacists and hate groups."

- The [National Socialist Movement](#) (NSM), one of the largest neo-Nazi groups in the U.S., is planning a march on Washington, D.C. on April 19, 2008 to protest "the illegal invasion of America." [According to the SPLC](#), the NSM believe that "only heterosexual 'pure-blood whites' should be allowed citizenship. All others should be stripped of their constitutional rights...The NSM further calls on the U.S. to...ban all 'non-white' immigration [and] to publicly execute black, Hispanic, and Jewish 'criminals'...."

Latinos – Regardless of Immigration Status – Experience Increased Discrimination

A [2007 Pew Hispanic Center survey](#) found that Hispanics across the U.S. – regardless of immigration status – are feeling anxious and discriminated against amid the intensifying debate over immigration and stepped-up enforcement by authorities.

- **Barriers to Success:** More than half of the 2,003 Hispanic adults – U.S. citizens and foreign-born – surveyed (54 percent) said that discrimination is a major problem keeping them from succeeding in the U.S. – up from 44 percent in 2002.
- **Fear of Deportation:** More than half of those surveyed, including U.S. citizens, said they worry that they or a close friend or family member might be deported. Nearly 2/3 believed that Congress's failure to pass a bill restructuring immigration law this year has made life more difficult for all Latinos.
- **Discrimination Experiences Increasing:** Four-in-ten Hispanic (41 percent) respondents say they, a family member or a close friend had experienced discrimination in the past five years. When the same question was posed in a 2002 survey, just 31 percent responded that they or someone close to them had had a personal experience with discrimination, signaling a 10 percent increase in 5 years.
- **Feeling the Impact:** The discrimination experienced by Latinos has had an impact on key aspects of their lives: 12 percent said they have had more trouble getting or keeping a job; 15 percent said they have had increased difficulty finding or keeping housing; and 19 percent said they have been asked to produce documents to prove their immigration status more often than in the past.
- **New Laws Targeting Unauthorized Immigrants Touch Legal Immigrants, Too:** A new ordinance in Prince William County, VA that allows local police to check an individual's immigration status for minor legal infractions has led many Latinos to feel unwanted. A resident stated, "Even though I am legal, I feel rejected. This law has ruined all the good feelings. When I came here 12 years ago, my neighbors sent me pies. Now they look at me differently."

Government Finds Increase in Hate Crimes Targeting Latinos

While statistics on hate crimes are generally unreliable due to underreporting and undercounting, the numbers that are available strongly suggest that ethnically motivated violence against all Latinos, regardless of immigration status, has increased in recent years.

- **The FBI Findings:** According to annual hate crimes statistics published by the [FBI](#), **anti-Latino hate crimes rose by almost 35 percent between 2003 and 2006.** Of the 1,305

victims of hate crimes motivated by ethnicity or national origin reported to the FBI in 2006, **62.8 percent** were targeted because of **anti-Latino bias**.

- **California:** Even a state with a long history of immigration and a significant Latino population is reporting an increase in hate crimes aimed at Latinos. The [2006 California Attorney General's report](#) on hate crimes found that in 2006, 218 anti-Latino offenses were reported, an increase of 16 percent from 2005.

Anti-immigrant and White Supremacist Extremists Use Immigration Debate As Springboard

A 2007 [report by the Anti-Defamation League](#) (ADL) entitled *Extremists Declare 'Open Season' on Immigrants: Hispanics Target of Incitement and Violence* examines “how white supremacists, racist skinheads, and others are using the national debate over immigration reform as a means to encourage likeminded racists to speak out, or even commit violent acts against immigrants.” The ADL cites examples of virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric including:

- **New Jersey radio talk show host Hal Turner, October 2005:** “Slowly but surely we are headed toward the solution that I have been advocating for years: KILL ILLEGAL ALIENS AS THEY CROSS INTO THE U.S. When the stench of rotting corpses gets bad enough, the rest will stay away.” In **May 2006** Turner posted to his Web site a 145-page “ethnic cleansing manual” that explained “in graphic detail why WHITE people need to prepare to ethnically cleanse this nation and HOW TO DO IT using force and violence.”
- **Web site of Aryan Nations faction leader August Kreis, October 2005:** “This infestation of cockroaches needs deportation or extermination!” “We now have another game animal to add to our list of available targets for our favorite pastime, hunting, and we’ll declare permanent OPEN SEASON on these dirty wetbacks! From what I’ve heard through the grapevine, the Skinheads and Klans across the country are more than prepared for this type of action. I say let’s play by state and see which state can claim the most kills and let the jewsmedia whores keep score!”
- **Internet games** and shoot-to-kill video games have become popular on extremist and anti-immigrant Web sites. In “Border Patrol,” one of the more popular games, the object is to “kill” caricatures of Mexicans as they attempt to cross the border and enter the U.S. and get to the “Welfare Office.” Players control a gun and try to kill stereotypical Mexicans. Targets include a “Mexican nationalist,” who carries a Mexican flag and a pistol; a “drug smuggler,” wearing a sombrero and carrying a bag of marijuana; and a “breeder,” a pregnant woman with two small children in tow.

Hate Crimes and Violence Against Latinos Worsens

A [2007 SPLC report](#), *Immigration Backlash: Violence Engulfs Latinos* examines recent crimes perpetrated against Latinos, regardless of immigration status. It finds that vicious public denunciations of undocumented, brown-skinned immigrants -- once limited to hard-core white supremacists and a handful of border-state extremists -- are increasingly common among supposedly mainstream anti-immigration activists, radio hosts, and politicians. While their dehumanizing rhetoric typically stops short of openly sanctioning bloodshed, much of it implicitly encourages or even endorses violence by characterizing immigrants from Mexico and Central America as ‘invaders,’ ‘criminal aliens,’ and ‘cockroaches.’

The report details dozens of heinous, ethnically-motivated crimes committed since 2004. A few examples include:

- **New York, July, 2005.** A 61-year-old Ecuadorean immigrant was badly beaten by three white men as he pushed a shopping cart through the streets collecting cans. Before the attack, the man was asked if he had a green card.
- **New Jersey, July, 2005.** A young Latino was chased by two white men as he rode his bike to work. Minutes later another Latino was attacked by the same duo. According to the Monmouth County Prosecutor, both victims were attacked “solely because of their Latino ethnicity.”
- **Texas, April, 2006.** A Latino teen was brutally attacked by racist skinheads after supposedly trying to kiss a white girl. An assailant broke the victims jaw and knocked him unconscious while screaming “white power,!” “spic” “wetback.” Another attacker joined in, and both two attackers burned the victim with cigarettes, kicked him with steel-toed boots, attempted to carve a swastika into his chest, poured bleach on him and finally violently sodomized him with a patio umbrella pole. The victim eventually went public and testified before the U.S. House of Representatives in support of strengthening federal hate crime legislation. Less than three months later he committed suicide.
- **New York, June, 2006.** Two Mexican men fishing at a jetty were asked for their green cards, accused of stealing jobs from Americans and were beaten and robbed by four teens posing as federal agents.
- **California, August, 2007.** An immigrant working as a janitor at a fast-food restaurant, was taunted with racist threats such as “Go back to Mexico, you wetback!” and then attacked by three men, one of whom was carrying a loaded gun.

Immigration is a complex and difficult issue. Debate, discussion, and disagreement around the pressing issues related to immigration reform are legitimate and necessary. However, everyone involved in this debate must act responsibly and not encourage or tolerate hatred, racism, or violence with vitriolic rhetoric or actions.