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Immigration and Politics

University of Dayton

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In a new book published this week, a University of Dayton sociologist details how local politics can vilify immigrants while ignoring economic realities. Jamie Longazel conducted nearly 10 years of research for the book — *Undocumented Fears: Immigration and the Politics of Divide and Conquer in Hazleton, Pennsylvania* — after he saw the mayor of his hometown on national television promise to “eliminate illegal aliens” from Hazleton.
The interview followed passage of the town's controversial Illegal Immigration Relief Act, which sought to punish landlords renting to undocumented immigrants and companies employing them. The act also made English the city's official language.

“The main point is that too often as a society we engage in scapegoating, especially racialized scapegoating,” he said. “When we wrongly blame people of color, especially poor people of color, for social problems, it diverts attention away from the bigger, broader economic problems that confront all poor and working people. In this way, scapegoating contributes to racial subordination while also keeping us from asking critical questions about wealth inequality.”

The community conversation surrounding the ordinance divided working class people — encouraging residents to see themselves as “white” instead of “working class.” It also wrongly sent the message that Latino immigrants were crime-prone, although they accounted for just 0.25 percent of the city's crime in the years leading up to the ordinance, Longazel said.

“The version of events coming from officials was that immigrants arrived seemingly out of nowhere, committing crimes and draining social services. Suddenly, the consensus was ‘We need to do something about the immigration problem,’” he said. “But the real story involves a bigger political economic picture.”

Longazel notes the same “divide and conquer” politics are playing out in this year's presidential election, especially with Donald Trump's comments on building a wall at the US-Mexico border and banning Muslims from entering the country. In Hazleton, Longazel found the ordinance was passed after the city lost most of its manufacturing jobs, and developers brought in distribution centers, warehouses and a meatpacking plant.

“Those jobs attracted immigrants, who aren't actually committing more crimes, aren't draining social services, but are in fact just as impoverished as native-born residents experiencing demanufacturing, if not more,” said Longazel, a research fellow with the University of Dayton Human Rights Center. “There's no reason these two groups of people should be against each other. Rather, they should be working with each other to fight for economic justice.”

Ultimately, Hazleton's ordinance was overturned in court, and since then, “time has healed some wounds,” Longazel said. But he emphasizes that we will need to build broader social movements for racial and economic justice if we are to alleviate what is at the core of today's immigration debates.

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