

To Serve, Protect and Deport

With Violent Crime on the Rise, Anti-Immigration Backlash Skews Solution

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WASHINGTON -- Given the heated nature of the debate over U.S. immigration policy, it wasn't surprising that some politicians jumped to link the brutal slayings of three college students in Newark, N.J., with calls for a crackdown on illegal immigrants. Two of the six suspects are in the country illegally, one allowed to stay even after three felony arrests.

Republican presidential candidate Tom Tancredo hurried to New Jersey last week to "encourage the family of the victims to pursue a lawsuit against the city," suggesting that Newark's tolerance of illegal immigrants might be partly responsible for the killings. Fellow Republican candidate Mitt Romney suggested in a radio ad that Newark was tempting fate because its leniency is attracting more illegal immigrants. Rudolph Giuliani, considered the Republican front-runner, expressed frustration with the fact that "we don't throw (illegal immigrants who commit crimes) out of the country."

Posturing of this type is at best disingenuous. The number of deported illegal immigrants with criminal records has increased substantially in recent years, according to Homeland Security Department statistics. As a former prosecutor and mayor of New York City, Giuliani knows that successful crime reduction is based on a multifaceted approach that combines tougher enforcement with crime-prevention strategies. Targeting illegal immigrants was not a central element of crime fighting in Giuliani's New York.

In news reports, relatives of the victims and Newark residents have insisted that the problem is not immigration. James Harvey, father of one of the students killed, sees it as a failure of the criminal justice system. As he told The Washington Post, regardless of whether the suspect with a criminal record was a "citizen of our country or not, he was prone to violence and he should not have been released."

Newark Mayor Cory Booker also refused to jump onto the anti-immigration bandwagon. Announcing new measures to crack down on the flow of handguns into his city, Booker made clear where he sees immigration in relation to fighting crime: "It's important I don't have a climate in Newark where, documented or not, naturalized or not, people are afraid to talk with police."

When he was elected last year, Booker pledged to quash Newark's rising violent crime rate, the top concern of 80 percent of residents who had seen the city's homicide rate soar 50 percent between 2002 and 2006. Nationwide, violent crime increased in 2005. According to FBI crime data, murders increased for all cities of more than 250,000 people in 2006, with the largest increase (6.7 percent) occurring in cities of more than 1 million.

Crime experts say the increases are the consequence of new anti-terrorism priorities that divert law enforcement's attention and a lack of prevention policies. Curiously, those who choose to see the Newark murders as an immigration problem would further distract law enforcement from crime fighting by making local police the enforcer of immigration violations, a federal responsibility.

Under such an approach, hardened criminals stand to win -- twice. First, by the added distraction to law enforcement officers. And second, by discouraging both legal and illegal immigrants from seeking out police assistance or reporting crimes and suspicious activity.

The other social service aspect of crime reduction -- not likely to come from most Republicans pursuing the nomination -- demands increased funding for programs for at-risk youth, providing alternatives to gang culture and violence.

In fact, experts say the federal government needs to step up funding for such programs, particularly because those cities most affected are also the most impoverished. "How can we expect businesses in a city like Newark or Baltimore to support summer jobs for teenagers when they are on the brink of bankruptcy?" asked Jack Levin, director of the Brudnick Center on Violence at Northeastern University in Boston. Mayor Booker, in fact, had launched a summer job program for youth in Newark but ran out of money because the response was too great.

Some in this country would just assume that having police going after illegal immigrants -- all 12 million of them -- is a good crime-prevention method. But those who deal with crime and many of the people who have led them, including Giuliani and Romney, surely must know that fighting criminals requires a multifaceted approach and the cooperation of both the innocent and the victims.