

# IMMIGRATION

## Landlords aren't federal agents

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Landlords should not serve as agents of the immigration service. They are not allowed to in California, thanks to a new law, and that's the way it should be all over the country.

On Oct. 10, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill that prohibits California cities from passing municipal ordinances requiring landlords to ask the immigration status of their tenants. The law takes effect at the beginning of next year.

It passed after a bitter fight. The Concerned Women for America, a fundamentalist Christian group, argued that cities should restrict undocumented immigrants to "prevent squalor that is dangerous not only to the individuals involved, but also to the surrounding neighborhoods where sanitation, parking and other troubles ensue."

But "squalor" is not a result of immigration; it is a result of the low wages paid to undocumented immigrants. And if sanitation is an issue, why not enforce already existing housing ordinances instead?

Cities are finding themselves in the midst of demographic changes as immigrants, both documented and undocumented, relocate to areas that have been traditionally white. In some places, this influx has sparked an ugly reaction.

For example, in 2006, the city of Hazleton, Pa., passed a law that penalized landlords who rent to undocumented immigrants by imposing a \$1,000-a-day fine. Hazleton's Mayor Louis J. Barletta said the intention was to "get rid of illegal people. It's that simple. They must leave." When the city council passed the ordinance, business went down, and the mayor pointed to the fact that business at some Mexican restaurants was down by 75 percent as proof. In July, the ordinance was struck down in court.

Last year, when the city of Escondido, Calif., passed a bill requiring landlords to check on tenants' immigration status and penalizing landlords for renting to undocumented immigrants, civil-rights groups successfully challenged the law. Arguing that it would lead to discrimination against all immigrants, opponents also said it would turn landlords into de facto immigration police.

The hostility toward immigrants is not a new phenomenon in America. In the mid-19th century, the Irish were targets of some of the same accusations Mexicans face today. Americans responded to the arrival of other European immigrant groups in similar ways, arguing that they were prone to crime, would not learn English and could not become a functioning part of U.S. society. Then, as now, immigrants (both "legal" and "illegal,"

although the legal entry process was much easier then) were viewed as a threat to this nation.

Why haven't we learned to look beyond the fear? While studies have shown that undocumented immigrants are more likely to be the victims of crimes rather than the perpetrators, or that they pay billions of dollars into our tax system each year (far less than they will ever draw in any benefits), we prefer to make them monsters.

What's more, laws such as those in Escondido and Hazleton lead to discrimination against not only immigrants but also U.S. citizens who are perceived as foreign. It's easier not to rent to a Latino than to go through the hassle of checking immigration status.

The increasing globalization of the economy, the migration of peoples all over the world, changing demographics in the United States and economic fears all play into our negative perceptions of immigrants.

It's easy to rush to blame immigrants. It's easy to say, "They must leave."

But that's not what America is supposed to be about.

The governor of California recognizes this, as we all should.

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