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U.S. Latinos Slammed by Immigration Debate Gone Ugly

A new [2008 National Survey of Latinos](#) by the Pew Hispanic Center reveals disturbing new evidence that Latinos – U.S. citizens as well as legal immigrants and undocumented immigrants—are feeling the effects of the immigration debate gone ugly. Regardless of immigration status, Latinos are feeling anxious and discriminated against amid sanctioned public immigrant-bashing and stepped-up immigration enforcement measures.

Survey of U.S. Born and Foreign-Born Latinos Paints Grim Picture

The Latinos surveyed by Pew have reason to be concerned. In the last few years, particularly after the failure of the immigration bill in June, 2007, anti-immigrant rhetoric in politics and the media has become nastier, and extremist factions have become more prominent. At the same time, the Administration has ramped up its policy of “attrition through enforcement,” an immigration enforcement strategy aimed at wearing down the will of immigrants to live and work in the United States. Meanwhile states and localities have passed policies intended to discourage undocumented immigrants from settling in their neighborhoods, but these have had negative consequences for the entire community.

- **General pessimism has increased.** Half of all Latinos surveyed said the situation of Latinos in the U.S. is worse off now than it was a year ago. Foreign-born Hispanics were even more downbeat – **63% of Latino immigrants say the situation of Latinos is worse than a year ago.** That’s up from 33% in 2007.
- **One in Ten Latinos Asked for Papers for LWL: Living While Latino.** Nearly one-in-ten Latino adults (9%) – U.S. citizens and immigrants alike -- reported that in the past year the police or other authorities have stopped them to ask about their immigration status. 10% of foreign-born Hispanics reported they had been asked to show their documents, and **8% of native-born U.S. citizens reported they were asked for proof of legal status.**

Extremism Bleeding Into the Mainstream

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](#), [media pundits](#), and [politicians](#) and are surely fueling the problems that Latinos are facing.

- **Immigration extremist nominated to public office.** Robert Duecaster, secretary of a local anti-immigrant group and one of the authors of the county’s anti-immigrant ordinance was [recently nominated](#) to Prince William County, Virginia’s human services task force. Duecaster has already suggested spending tax dollars to look into whether “illegal aliens have a preferred breeding season.”

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- **Local sheriff engages in public Latino bashing.** North Carolina's Johnston County Sheriff Steve Bizzell recently [gave an interview](#) to a reporter in which he accused undocumented immigrants of being "trashy," "breeding like rabbits" and spreading a culture of drunkenness and violence.
- **The media adds to anti-immigrant sentiment by perpetuating myths and misinformation.** In 2007 alone, [inaccurate information](#) about the alleged connection between illegal immigration and crime was discussed on 94 episodes of *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, 66 episodes of *The O'Reilly Factor*, and 29 episodes of *Glenn Beck*. All three programs presented as fact the "reconquista" myth stating that there is a movement for Mexico to take over the American Southwest. And Lou Dobbs reported on a "mythical explosion of leprosy cases" caused by undocumented immigrants.

Anti-immigrant and White Supremacist Extremists Gathering Power

Experts have found that the number of hate groups in the U.S. has increased, and much of the growth is in anti-immigrant activity.

- **Anti-immigrant groups proliferate.** 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 SPLC found that the number of [hate groups](#) operating in the U.S. has increased by 48% since 2000, an increase that SPLC analysts attribute to the anti-immigrant fervor that is sweeping the country. Approximately 300 anti-immigrant groups have formed in the last four years.
- **Extremist hate groups see immigration as growth area.** A 2007 [report by the Anti-Defamation League](#) (ADL) 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 an ethnic cleansing manual that details how white people can use force and violence to ethnically cleanse the U.S., and graphic video games that encourage players to shoot stereotypes of Mexicans crossing the border.
- **The FBI Findings:** According to annual hate crimes statistics published by the [FBI](#), anti-Latino hate crimes rose by almost 35% 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% were targeted because of anti-Latino bias.

Conclusion

Living in fear of deportation and discrimination and worrying about your livelihood and safety is no way to live and it's certainly not how Americans expect to live. In fact, it's the sort of life that our forefathers sought to protect us from. Debate, discussion, and disagreement around the pressing immigration issue are natural, legitimate, and necessary. Hate, fear and vitriol rhetoric are not.