Across the U.S., Immigrants Find the Land of Resentment

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Body

On her way home from school recently, a Chinese ***immigrant*** girl was attacked by other teen-agers who spray-painted her face black. She and her guidance counselors at the Seward Park High School in lower Manhattan were horrified, but they were not shocked. Attacks on newly arrived ***immigrants*** are a routine occurrence at their school, they said.

Similarly, a Salvadoran dishwasher, assaulted and robbed recently on his way into a money-transfer agency in Hempstead, L.I., was frightened but not surprised by the message of his assailants, who were black: "You steal our jobs, we steal your money." Tensions had been building between the entrenched black community and the Central American newcomers to the town.

And on Staten Island, when a group of junior high school students repeatedly vandalized the house of Indian ***immigrants***, smashing windows and splattering blue paint on the facade, the final message, chalked on the driveway, was sadly predictable to the family. "Indians go home," it said. "Leave or die."

Across the country, ***immigrants*** say they are feeling the brunt of a growing and complex hostility, the same kind of antagonism that has cropped up periodically in ***United States*** history. As their numbers increase sharply and the recession lingers, ***immigrants*** ***find*** themselves the target of a mix of social anxieties: economic tension, free-floating anger seeking an outlet and the volatile ethnic discord plaguing many cities. And because most new ***immigrants*** are not white, there are racial overtones to the friction.

Even in New York, which proudly defines itself as a haven for ***immigrants***, the "gorgeous mosaic" of diverse populations, as Mayor David N. Dinkins calls it, has its chips. Some New Yorkers, particularly those down on their luck, seem to resent the presence of so many ***immigrants***, as if the American dream were in danger of becoming the exclusive province of newcomers.

"Unfortunately, ***immigrant***-bashing is no longer an unpopular activity," said Dennis deLeon, the city'***s*** Human Rights Commissioner. "I sense that ***immigrants*** are being scapegoated for a lot of our problems. A certain kind of xenophobic bigotry has come out of the closet."

Most advocates for ***immigrants*** stress, however, that the ***United States*** remains markedly tolerant compared with those Western European nations now grappling with surging hostility and violence toward foreigners. And while they acknowledge that the historically explosive mix of record numbers of ***immigrants*** and a weak economy has

generated undeniable frictions, immigration experts do not anticipate a return to the vehement nativism that followed World War I, or the overt hatred of the 1890's.

Most of the present antagonism is expressed in words, not violent acts, and most of the words are not reported to the authorities, ***immigrants*** and their advocates say. Rosa Perales, an ***immigrant*** from Mexico who sells flowers at an intersection in the Bronx, said drivers routinely spit at her and tell her to return to her country. And Sarah Benyaminova, a Russian refugee, said the antagonism she encountered while waiting in line at a bank in Queens last week was typical.

"I was staying in the line and we had some brief discussion about the candidate who became President," said Ms. Benyaminova, who runs the Russian Educational Bilingual and Cultural Association. "The lady who was standing behind me said, 'You better shut up because you came to this country and everything was given you for free.' I said: 'Oh, yeah? I'm working very hard from dawn to dawn. Could you point me out where I could get all this free lunch?' "

It is difficult to quantify anti-***immigrant*** sentiment. New York City's police statistics on bias complaints do not even have a separate category for bias against ***immigrants***. And the line between xenophobia and ethnic or racial hatred is a blurry one. Was the Seward Park High School student attacked because she was Asian or because she was a vulnerable newcomer? (Probably for both reasons.)

Further, most ***immigrants***, and particularly illegal ***immigrants***, do not make official complaints. For instance, M. K. Srinivasan, New York bureau chief for The Indian-American Magazine, told of a Sikh friend who said he was followed off a New York City bus recently by teen-agers who forcibly removed his turban and set it on fire. But he did not call the police because he was new to the country from India and feared they would be unreceptive.

Many advocates for ***immigrants*** believe that ***resentment*** toward ***immigrants*** built gradually in the late 1980's as the economy began to falter and as immigration reached its highest level since the early part of the century.

In ***U.S.***, Some Sticks, More Harsh Words

This year as many as a million new refugees and ***immigrants***, will enter the ***United States***. And, if patterns from the 1980's hold, about 15 percent will settle in the New York metropolitan area. Nationally, a majority are from Mexico and Asian countries; in New York, the majority hails from the Caribbean and Latin America.

"It is not a coincidence that as the ***immigrant*** pool has darkened, hostility has grown," said Rolando T. Acosta, New York City's First Deputy Commissioner of Human Rights.

Across the country, there are a few extreme examples of anti-***immigrant*** hostility. In Houston, for instance, two skinheads stomped a 15-year-old Vietnamese boy, Hung Truong, to death in late 1990. One of the assailants -- convicted of involuntary manslaughter while his partner was convicted of murder -- testified that Mr. Truong, dying, cried out: "God forgive me for coming to this country. I'm so sorry."

But some experts wonder whether the current problem is being exaggerated, whether some advocates for ***immigrants***, shaken by the events in Germany and the nativist oratory of some American political candidates, have become hypersensitive to prejudicial slights that have always existed.

Nativism Used In Political Campaigns

Nonetheless, in the last year and a half, political candidates, lobbyists, academics and writers who oppose current levels of immigration have capitalized on the frustration of some Americans. They have not advocated violence. "It was more a climate of hostility that was being created," said Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Forum.

Two politicians, Patrick Buchanan and David Duke, made nativism a key element of their campaigns, with a particular concern that new ***immigrants*** would "dilute," as Mr. Buchanan said, the country's European character.

Then this summer, a spate of magazine articles raised questions about the value of ***immigrants*** to American society -- questions rarely voiced publicly in this ***land*** of ***immigrants***.

The articles not only explored the idea of restricting immigration but of placing a moratorium on new ***immigrants***, who were blamed for displacing Americans from jobs, draining scarce Government resources, and even worsening the smog in Los Angeles.

The riots in Los Angeles and Washington Heights, during which ***immigrants*** were denounced for inciting violence, provided further fodder for such antagonism. Advocates for ***immigrants*** steeled themselves for a public battle during the fall Presidential race.

"We were quite concerned that the anti-***immigrant*** drum would beat so loudly that it might create a tide of xenophobia," said Mr. Sharry, whose organization collected scores of examples in a "Nativism Watch" last spring and summer.

But after the party conventions, even after the Republican Party plank called for "a barrier" -- a wall or trench -- along the border with Mexico, the issue faded. Immigration was scarcely mentioned by either George Bush or Bill Clinton. Those favoring a freeze on immigration were, however, not discouraged. "We assume that this last year has been just the beginning of a wave, and in the year to come, the justifiable backlash will solidify," said Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington-based group that supports a three-year freeze on most immigration.

In the metropolitan region, advocates for ***immigrants*** trace the first stirrings of a heightened antagonism to the 1986 law that created sanctions on employers who hire illegal ***immigrants***.

"The sanctions became an excuse for people to discriminate under the cover of meeting their legal obligations," said Elizabeth Aivars, director of the New York City'***s*** Office of ***Immigrant*** Affairs.

For some New Yorkers, the employer sanctions seemed to validate their anxieties that low-paid ***immigrants*** had been stealing their jobs after all, advocates for ***immigrants*** said. And the recession only heightened those fears.

"At times, we feel like the community would just as soon put out a 'Not Welcome' mat," said Cecilia Moran, director of the Center for Central American Refugees in Hempstead, L.I. "Some people are jealous, I guess, that we are ***finding*** and keeping work."

Occasionally ***immigrants*** are willing to fight back, especially as a group. In New York City, three Egyptian elevator operators at the Museum Tower condominium filed a discrimination complaint after years of being harassed by a supervisor who called them "camel jockeys" and threatened to have them sent back to Egypt.

An administrative law judge, Linda A. Stagno, ***found*** they were subjected to a consistent barrage of slurs, awarded them $10,000 each in damages.

Similarly, several Hispanic ***immigrant*** cleaning women working nights at office buildings in Manhattan won damages after complaining that they were pressured to have sex by supervisors who threatened them with deportation.

But some ***immigrants***, tired of being harassed, try to accommodate their offenders. Navpreet Satara, a 27-year-old ***immigrant*** from New Dehli, now avoids conflicts by wearing a baseball cap instead of a turban to cover his hair when he goes out on the town or to the beach. He is sick of being called "Ayatollah," "Saddam Hussein" or "Hare Krishna," he said.

A couple of years ago, when he was a graduate student at Temple University in Philadelphia, he arrived late at a college basketball game and as he was crossing the court to the bleachers a spectator rose and shouted, "Ali Baba." Then the entire crowd rose to their feet and chanted "Ali Baba, Ali Baba," he said.

"There is a lot of ignorance, I guess, and insecurity about all these people who come to America and hold onto their identity with pride," Mr. Satara said.

In New York City, A Different Climate

Unlike in California, where mainstream politicians of both parties have blamed ***immigrants*** for the state'***s*** economic woes, it remains virtually taboo for public figures in New York to question the value of ***immigrants*** in society. There is usually an instant uproar.

For example, Hazel N. Dukes, the New York State president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was quickly pushed to issue an apology when she remarked in a radio interview in 1990 that black men have lost jobs to ***immigrants*** who do not speak English.

Similarly, in 1991, the Rev. Calvin O. Butts 3d, executive minister of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, appeared on the WABC-TV program "Tiempo" and suggested stopping "the influx of people into this city," adding "if it must come to this nation, send it elsewhere." But outrage began to build immediately, and Mr. Butts was quick to praise ***immigrants*** in opinion columns for El Diario and The Carib News.

And when City Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan of Staten Island wrote the city'***s*** Office of ***Immigrant*** Affairs to suggest that the Immigration and Naturalization Service be asked to "identify and/or deport illegal aliens" who were a "strain on the economy," Mr. Dinkins sent a stern letter in response, remarking that all ***immigrants*** were a part of his "gorgeous mosaic."

Compared with other large city governments, the Dinkins administration takes an unusually strong advocacy position for ***immigrants***, which many ***immigrants*** say sets a tone for public debate and prevents some confrontrations from escalating. For example, when residents of Woodside, Queens, complained about the ***immigrant*** laborers who hang out in their streets waiting for daily jobs, the city'***s*** Human Rights Commission ***found*** a church parking lot for their pickup point and made T-shirts for them saying "Trabajadores Unidos," or United Workers.

But public officials in New Jersey have not been so quick to defend ***immigrants***, advocates for ***immigrants*** say. Responding to public outrage that illegal ***immigrants*** were allowed to obtain driver'***s*** licenses, the New Jersey Legislature is moving to forbid them licenses. The New Jersey Legislature also recently eliminated general assistance benefits -- $140 a month plus some medical benefits -- to illegal ***immigrants***.

In response to antagonism, most ***immigrants*** choose to avoid confrontation at all costs.

"What can you do if the Americans laugh at you on the subway or look at you like you're an animal or insult you?" said Jonathan Lee, a Vietnamese refugee and caseworker at the New York Association for New Americans. "You must keep quiet and get away from them fast."

Graphic

Photo: The tension between entrenched minorities and newcomers is nearly as old as the country, but ***immigrants*** to the ***United States*** ***find*** the hostility particularly sharp in times of economic distress. In an effort to fit in and avoid conflict, Navpreet Satara often sheds his turban and dons a baseball cap when he leaves his midtown leather-coat exporting business. "There is a lot of ignorance," he said. (Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times) (pg. B4)

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