

The problem is criminals, not immigrants

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"Get off your ENGLISH speaking butts and make a life for your selves. If wave after wave of immigrants can arrive in Newark with not much more than shirt on their back and in short time succeed, then your ENGLISH speaking but should take life lessons from them."

That paragraph, exactly as it was posted, is from an online comment in response to a column about Newark's summer work program for kids.

The comment was written before four young Newarkers were shot, three of them killed, at Mount Vernon School -- before a number of Hispanic immigrants were arrested in connection with that outrage.

Comments about immigration have taken a different tone since then.

This country has always been schizophrenic about immigration. We pride ourselves on being a nation built by immigrants, quote Emma Lazarus from one side of the national mouth and spout hate from the other.

For many people, "good" immigration ended the day after the first in their family passed through Ellis Island.

I don't think my ancestors came in that way.

How many people, prior to the first arrests in the Mount Vernon case, were convinced that they knew who the assailants were and had African-American faces in mind when they said something had to be done about "those people"? How many were happy to substitute "those illegals" without missing a breath?

From what is known about the suspects arrested for the schoolyard shootings, one man might have been locked up as an illegal immigrant had officials checked his status after he was charged with raping a child.

So now there is great concern about the way the law checks for immigration status. There should be some concern about the way the law handles someone charged with multiple sexual assaults on a child -- immigrant or not, illegal or not.

Another suspect was wanted on a robbery warrant and was living near Mount Vernon School -- openly, not in hiding. The sheriff's office had stopped looking for him.

There are thousands of open warrants, not just for parking ticket scofflaws but for people wanted for serious crimes. That backlog is a problem, a dangerous one, whatever the immigration status of the folks with the warrants on their heads.

People in the Ivy Hill Apartments say that some of the young suspects arrested in the Mount Vernon case had been strong-arming residents for money, creating an atmosphere of fear. Did the law respond as it should have to that problem before four young people got shot? Will it once the schoolyard shooting case goes to bed?

The arrests in that case suggest good police work. The case also shows that before those kids were shot, law and the authorities stumbled in ways that are dangerous -- whatever the race, creed, color, national origin, immigration status or ZIP code of the bad guys.

Early in the morning at Ivy Hill, I see men waiting for vans to take them off to paint, landscape or do other work. I don't know if they are legal immigrants or not. You cannot tell by looking whether someone is an immigrant or native-born. You can only make assumptions.

It is true, however, that some of the newer immigrants are coming from parts of the world with pockets of social problems and lawlessness that would make Newark look tame. Whether the bad guys are from Eastern Europe, South or Central America, Newark's wards or upper-crust suburbs, the law has to do its job, without assumptions, without needing one horror of a crime to kick itself into gear.

That need is not just about the murders at Mount Vernon, or the murder of the 23-year-old Montclair man who was gunned down in another part of the West Ward that same weekend, or the two teenagers shot dead on Ellery Avenue a few weeks before and a few blocks away from Mount Vernon School or any of the killings before or since.

It is the way things should be.

And now, because I need some comic relief:

According to a rumor, which city hall says is false, Mayor Cory Booker was dating political blog queen and older woman Arianna Huffington. Chuckle.

According to ex-Mayor Sharpe James' ex-attorneys, James did not have enough money to pay them. James is under indictment for flipping city land to a female friend and using a city credit card for personal travel, wining and dining and ferrying his personal Rolls-Royce (as if there were a municipal one) to Martha's Vineyard.

Last I heard, James had a home in Newark, one at the Shore, a boat, that Rolls and an office building downtown and was rolling in pension cash. He once told me that he amassed what sure looks like wealth by being "thrifty." Maybe the lawyers' fees weren't to a thrifty man's liking -- not that the replacements James chose come cheap.

Of course if James, who says he is innocent, beats the charges, the city could end up paying the tab since he was accused of doing wrong while in office.

Another chuckle? Nope. I can't spell the noise I made when I heard that one.

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