Chapter 7 immigration and Social

Disorder

Peter Skerry

I wish someone would tell us how the hell we're supposed to act here! -Immigrant Leader in Addison, Illinois

If there is one thing that social scientists have learned since the 1960s and then succeeded in passing on to the wider society, it is the importance of the mundane, informal relations of daily life for the healthy functioning of our neighborhoods and institutions. Back in 1961, when urban planners were still buoyed by a professional hubris sustained by the arrogant abstractions of postwar modernism, Jane Jacobs wrote: "The first thing to understand is that the public peace. . . of cities is not kept primarily by the police, necessary as police cre. It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves. . . . No amount of police can enforce civilization where the normal, casual enforce-ment of it has broken down."'
Twenty years later James Q. Wilson and George Kelling were teaching the same lesson through the example of "broken windows."

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More than thirty years later, Robert Putnam sparked a similar national dis-cussion, this time focused on "social capital." In advanced societies the in-
formal, the nonprofessional, and the unofficial are continually being sub-
verted by our commitments to individual rights and bureaucratic accountability; hence, the apparent need to dedicate and rededicate ourselves
i to the value of what James C. Scott calls 'the microsociology of public
order."

1 In Stein Like a State, Scott reminds us that "the establishment and main-
tenance o f social order in large cities are, as we have increasingly learned,
fragile achievement^."^ This fragility is in pact traceable to the nonverbal nature of much of the interaction that defines and sustains the social fabric. Close observers of urban neighborhoods, like Gerald Sumles, certainly make this point. So does criminologist Mark H. Moore: "Producing community security depends on having or creating some combination of shared under-standings about acceptable behavior [emphasis added]
Such arrangements-what Jane Jacobs refers to as "eyes on the streetn-are also fragile because of their instrumental nature. As sociologist Robert Sarnpson reminds us, neighborhoods today are not-if they ever were- "urban villages" held together by intense bonds of ethnic solidarity, psycho-logical support, or deep friendship. They are based instead on relationships between neighbors and acquaintances who typically do not know each other well but who rely on one another to sustain norms of civility that result in

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ment contributing to substantial instability in American cities that is almost never mentioned: immigration. Just ask any public school teacher or prin-cipal who must deal with the continual comings and goings- of immigrant children, or any priest or church administrator trying to keep track of pa-rishioners who pledge to tithe to the congregation. There is certainly reason
to believe that the current influx of immigrants is putting serious strains on the social fabric of our cities.
Yet these social-order effects of immigration have been widely overlooked. There are several reasons why. The countless casual interactions between neighbors and acquaintances that occur on sidewalks and other public places are, according to Jane Jacobs, "ostensibly utterly trivial1'-though she im-mediately adds that "the sum is not trivial at all." Such impacts are also

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IMMIGRATION, CRIME, AND DISORDER

To get behind official crime statistics and explore the differences between common crime and neighborhood disorder, Wesley Skogan and his associates surveyed almost 13,000 adults in forty urban residential neighborhoods across the United States. In ten of these neighborhoods they did field research and interviewed hundreds of residents, organization leaders, merchants, police officers, and local officials. The results were highly suggestive for anyone trying to understand contemporary sources of anxiety about immigration. Asked to identify social as well as physical sources of disorder, urban residents mentioned, in rough order of frequency: public drinking, corner gangs, street harassment-especially of women and the elderly-drug use and sale, noisy neighbors, commercialized sex, vandalism, dilapidated and abandoned buildings, and trash. Skogan confirms that such signs of disorder are clearly associated with residents' anger, demoralization, and fear. He then emphasizes that "even though disorders are not in themselves life-threatening, fear may be a rational reaction to them."5
Strikingly, these and related signs of disorder are highly visible in immi-grant neighborhoods and have surfaced as the focus of disputes and contro-versies between immigrants and nonimmigrants across the United States. In San Bernardino and Riverside counties in Southern California, problems associated with Mexican residents have included crowing roosters that wake up the neighbors. In Waukegan, Illinois, north of Chicago, city officials concerned about overcrowded housing in Mexican immigrant neighbor-hoods pleased some residents but angered others when fire code enforcement was beefed up. Other Chicago-area municipalities have had difficulties ad-dressing parking problems in overcrowded immigrant neighborhoods. In Los Angeles there has been controversy over trash and health issues involving itinerant immigrant food vendors. In Santa ha, California, the very urban county seat of very suburban Orange County, police have had to move decisively against enclaves of homeless immigrants living under freeway bridges and near heavily used bicycle paths. Throughout Southern California there have been acrimonious disputes over the noise and exhaust hmes from gasoline-powered leaf blowers used by Mexican immigrant gardeners. The list could go on, and might also include concerns about high rates of pedestrian accidents in the immigrant neighborhoods of Santa Ana, or high accident rates for Hispanics working in construction in northern Car-olina. And while there are multiple factors involved in each of these issues,

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none of these are serious crimes, but rather sources of disorder that never-theless prove bothersome or at times threatening to immigrant and non-immigrant residents.
While these issues often have an ethnic or even racial edge, they don't always. Graciela Diaz is a waitress at a Mexican restaurant in a giant Las Vegas hotel casino. A native of Jalisco, Mexico, who came to the United States illegally, she met her husband, Manuel, when they were both working in a Los Angeles sweatshop. Two years ago the Diazes bought a $125,000 house in a gated community ten miles north of downtown Las Vegas. Ex-plaining why they left their old neighborhood, Mr. Diaz recently told the New York Times: "People from Mexico-I call them paesanos-were burning tires. They played radios real loud. I was afraid of Cecilia (their daughter) playing outside, that someone would run her over. Here it's quiet and safe for her."
One issue that involves many of these concerns is day-laborer hiring sites. Go to a Home Depot some morning in almost any part of the United States, and you will find individuals congregating at the edge of the parking lot, waiting to sell their labor to passing homeowners and subcontractors. These jomakros are almost always foreign-born males, overwhelmingly Latino, and usually undocumented. While their services are obviously in demand by some, their very presence frustrates and even frightens many others. While waiting to be hired, these men may drink, urinate in public, or make noises and gestures to women passing by. Sidewalks get littered. Fights and petty crime are often problems. Traffic is tied up, sometimes causing accidents. For their part, workers complain frequently of being cheated out of their wages. And police report that criminals, pafticularly drug dealers, lurkamong day-laborers and ply their trade.
The real challenges arise when local authorities attempt to regulate these sites. The efforts of some municipalities to ban them outright have been successhlly challenged in the courts by immigrant advocates. Other juris-dictions have sought to impose order on the incipient chaos by providing services to jomakros and certifying their bona fides and skills to prospective employers. But such efforts are usually not successful, either because the workers are sufficiently independent and entrepreneurial that they are not interested, or because some residents regard such programs as condoning illegal immigration. Caught in these cross-currents, most public officials eventually back off.

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THE CASE OF ADDISON

Another drama raising these issues has been developing for some years in the village of Addison, a suburb of Chicago, that came to a head in late 1990s. Addison is a blue-collar community about twenty-five miles west of downtown Chicago, not far from O'Hare Airport. In August 1997, the village found itself on the front page of the New York Emes, where it was an-nounced that this municipality of 32,000 residents was agreeing to one of the largest financial settlements in a federal housing discrimination suit, in which the Justice Department had charged village officials with bias against Latino immigrants.
Until after World War 11, Addison was mostly farmland. But soon the village experienced an influx of the adult children of Italian, Polish, and Greek immigrants who had grown up in Chicago's urban neighborhoods and who were buying their first homes. The single-family houses in Addison, especially those involved in this controversy, were built in the 1950s and 1960s. They are typically small but solid structures, one-story brick houses capable of withstanding the harsh midwestern winters. Not coincidentally, many of Addison's homeowners work in the construction trades.
But not all of Addison's dwellings are single-family houses. Many are also small, square apartment buildings of the sort found throughout Chicago and its suburbs: two- and three-storey structures with a central entry and stairwell accommodating two to four apartments per floor. In Addison many such buildings were constructed during the 19Gos in clusters near the village's main thoroughfare and its civic center. For ambiguous if not downright shady reasons, these apartments were afforded zoning waivers that allowed them to be built close together, with minimal off-street parking.
At first there were no particular problems, especially since the landlords screened prospective tenants, who were typically flight attendants working
out of nearby O'Hare. But things soon began to deteriorate. Tenant screen-
ing grew lax or nonexistent. Poor whites took up residence, and by the early
1980s, Mexicans, mostly from the barrios of Chicago but soon also directly
from Mexico, were moving in. They were-and continue to be-drawn to
the area by abundant employment opportunities in nearby warehouses and
light industries. As T i e landlords

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brating July 4, for example. As one longtime Addison homeowner, who lived
a block from one group of apartments, observed: "It's like the housing pro-jects"-which he and his wife had fled forty years before when they left the Chicago neighborhoods where their immigrant parents had raised them.
The response of Addison officials was not surprising. Police presence in
and around the apartments was increased. There were also some initiatives with social programs for neighborhood youths. The police even organized soccer matches between the immigrants and themselves, and according to the chief, his men's defeat was the basis of renewed mutual respect between officers and the Mexicans. An on-street parking ban, consistent with the rest of Addison, was implemented despite criticism that it discriminated against immigrants.
But the most controversial measures were those intended to reduce pop-
ulation density by condemning and then razing several of the apartment
buildings. Addison officials then proposed a business redevelopment plan
that would have resulted in the rezoning and demolition of several more
buildings-and of course, the relocation of many immigrants.
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moving in because the local schools have been overwhelmed by non-English-speaking children, their comments seem driven neither by racism nor pock-etbook calculations. They are expressing anxieties about how the community where they raised their families is threatened.
Still another factor not relevant to events in Addison is the presence of illegal immigrants. To be sure, a good number of the immigrants drawn there and to metropolitan Chicago generally are illegals. And these disgrun-tled homeowners are, like most Americans, quick to disparage them. Yet the problems in Addison have had little to do with these immigrants being undocumented and more to do with being "target earners" focused on re-turning home with as much savings as possible, or with the disruptions to family life that immigrants have always had to cope with.
Finally, the problems in this and other such communities are rooted not so much in crime as in disorder. This is not exactly news to Addison home-owners. As one housewife who had raised two boys down the street from the apartments noted, "All we need here is some control." She then con-trasted the situation in Addison with her own experience, raised by Polish immigrant parents in an apartment building near what later became the Cabrini-Green housing project. She noted how she and her friends would seldom risk stepping on the grassy plot in front of their building-not out of any deep sense of propriety, but out of fear that the resident janitor would scold them or perhaps speak to their parents.
This insight was echoed not only by municipal officials in Addison, but also by one of the Mexican immigrant leaders. Emphasizing how little his countrymen understand about American practices and expectations, this leader pointed out that many of them come from rural areas of Mexico and lack familiarity even with calling 911 in an emergency. Nor, at first, do they understand the seriousness of driving without a license, auto registration, or insurance-until they get caught. At one point

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11, there have been enormous efforts among political and policy elites to draw a sharp line between immigrants and terrorists. We have been reminded over and over that "most immigrants are not terrorists." The logic of this perspective was carried to its extreme, not surprisingly, by the Wall Street Journal editorial page, commenting on the federal government's failed suit against Tyson Foods for procuring illegal immigrant workers: "We are con-soled that Justice lost this case, which should never have been pursued. The government's resources are limited. Time and money spent chasing Mexicans out of chicken plants is better spent