

## Media's role in immigrant hysteria

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Should the media seek out and disseminate a person's immigration status?

I found myself asking that question this week, after Jose Melendez was charged in the strangulation death of a Worcester middle school instructional assistant.

Not long after the charges were leveled, Mr. Melendez's immigration status became cause for alarm by local bloggers and radio show hosts. They claimed he is an illegal immigrant, with some people saying that news agencies not pointing that out in their coverage were derelict in their duties.

I don't think his status matters at all.

Clearly, some people believe that this tragedy can be made more egregious if Mr. Melendez is shown to be in the country illegally. The idea, I suppose, is to suggest that if he wasn't here illegally, he wouldn't have had the chance to kill.

That sounds reasonable enough, except that logic breaks down, as it usually does, when applied broadly, that is, beyond the usual and narrow scope of Hispanic immigrants here illegally.

Using this logic we could say, for example, that thousands of Native Americans wouldn't have been killed and their tribal lands not confiscated had Europeans not settled in America.

That sounds reasonable enough. But should we assume that Europeans are killers and land-grabbers? Such assertions focus on humans as groups rather than on individual behavior in trying to understand the commission of a criminal act.

Of course, if your goal is to demonize a group of people, and if your intention is to use that information to attack your political opponent, it makes sense to highlight their crimes based on their geography, their immigration status, their religion and their ethnicity.

And when you have the president of the United States leading such a chorus — he has created a new office within the Department of Homeland Security to work with the victims of crimes committed by immigrants here illegally — the general public is given the green light to engage in this irrational thinking.

But to what end?

If a person's immigration status is unacceptable as supporting evidence for a murder charge in our courts, to what end do we in the media seek to disseminate it?

I should note that whole conversation of whether or not Mr. Melendez is here illegally has supplanted his presumed innocence until proven guilty under our Constitution. In some people's mind, an immigrant's status is the same as being found guilty.

City Councilor Michael Gaffney, for example, posted on his Facebook page the rantings of a local blogger, who suggested that Mayor Joe Petty, who has rallied immigrants locally, was responsible for getting the teacher killed.

I understand how someone like Mr. Gaffney might want to use the immigration status of a person charged with murder to push a particular political agenda, but should responsible media feed them the fuel?

There isn't a compelling causal relationship between a person's immigration status and crime. Indeed, studies have shown that immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born Americans, if we go by incarceration rates.

According to the Cato Institute, for example, among people ages 18 to 54, 1.53 percent of natives are incarcerated, as are 0.85 percent of undocumented immigrants and 0.47 percent of documented immigrants.

There will be times when the media will disclose a crime suspect's immigration status. It seems to me, however, that responsible media outlets shouldn't take it upon themselves to go looking for it in writing their crime stories.

To do so, it seems to me, would make them complicit in the type of profiling that has stigmatized and harmed so many of our fellow citizens and residents.