Higher Immigration, Lower Crime

Today's "underclass" of newcomers seeks a day's work, not a drug deal

By Daniel Griswold

"MAJOR Cities' Plummeting Crime Rates Mystifying" proclaimed the headline atop a *Washington Post* article on July 20, 2009. The story went on to report that crime rates have dropped in New York, Los Angeles, and other large American cities to levels not seen in 40 years—"a trend criminologists describe as baffling and unexpected." An FBI report in September showed that a nationwide plunge in violent crime dating back to the early 1990s has continued largely unabated; it too offered little by way of explanation.

One plausible reason behind this welcome phenomenon, ironic as it may sound, is increased immigration, including low-skilled and illegal immigration. How can this be so?

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Opponents of expanded immigration through the process known as legalization argue that allowing more low-skilled workers, especially Spanish-speaking ones, into the United States or legalizing their presence here will swell the ranks of the underclass—broadly speaking, those residents confined to the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder, with low earnings, minimal education, and who (in the worst cases) exhibit dysfunctional behavior like drug addiction and higher illegitimacy rates. Our immigration regime is thus said to "import poverty," thereby bringing in its wake rising rates of crime and social chaos.

Chief among the eloquent worriers is Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan Institute, who warned in a 2006 article for *City Journal*:

> Our immigration policy is creating a second underclass, one with the potential to expand indefinitely if current immigration rates merely stay the same, much less treble, as they would under [proposed immigration reform]. Given the rapid increase in the Hispanic popu-

> lation, the prevalence of . . . socially destructive behavior among Hispanics should be cause for serious concern.

Mac Donald's logic may seem unassailable. And yet there is no arguing with the numbers. The past two decades have seen the fastest increase in immigration since the early part of the 20th century. The past 15 years have seen the most rapid drop in crime rates in the nation's history. At the same time, in all sorts of metrics, the social instability that has beset the United States since the 1960s has either stabilized or begun, happily, to reverse itself. The two should not be happening simultaneously if the critics are to be believed. And yet they are.

THIS debate has a familiar ring to students of immigration history. When the great waves of low-skilled immigrants flowed into American cities a century ago, many of them Italians and Eastern European Jews, some native-born Americans feared an explosion of crime and a general debasing of society. Harvard economics professor William Ripley took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* in June 1913 to warn that the "hordes of new immigrants" from Southern and Central Europe were "a menace to our Anglo Saxon civilization."

The influential United States Immigration Commission of 1907-11, also known as the Dillingham Commission, produced a massive 41-volume report on the consequences of the immigration phenomenon in the United States. It concluded that immigration from countries like Italy, Poland, and Russia posed a general threat to American society and culture and should be drastically curtailed. Interestingly, though, when it came to a specific, concrete issue like crime, the authors came up empty:

> No satisfactory evidence has yet been produced to show that immigration has resulted in an increase in crime disproportionate to the increase in adult population. Such comparable statistics of crime and population as it has been possible to obtain indicate that immigrants are less prone to commit crime than are native Americans.

Despite such findings, worries about immigrants and crime persisted into the 1920s and 30s, when Congress passed a series of restrictive quotas. In New York, many natives fretted about a "Jewish crime wave" that was supposedly plaguing the city during these decades. Young Jews in disturbing numbers, it was said, had joined crime "rackets"—that period's version of gangs—along with children of Irish and Italian immigrants. During Prohibition and again after World War II, legends grew about gambling and bootlegging rackets led by larger-than-life figures with names like Max "Kid Twist" Zwerbach, "Big" Jack Zelig, Vach "Cyclone Louie" Lewis Charles, and Louis "Lepke" Buchalter.

As colorful as some of this history was, the sociologist Stephen Steinberg has found that the supposed Jewish-immigrant crime wave was mostly an urban legend. Crime and population figures show that Jews in New York committed crimes at a rate far below the average for the wider society. During the 1920s, for example, when Jews constituted nearly a third of the city's population, they committed only one-sixth of the local felonies.

Along with their alleged propensity for committing crime, immigrants of the time were suspected of undermining America's social cohesion and Protestant ethic. Jews proved to be upwardly mobile over time, but the comparatively slow progression of Italian immigrants—the educational attainment of the second generation was well below the average for other American-born whites—fed suspicions that they too were unfit for assimilation.

The fear turned out to be unfounded. But though the history is suggestive, it is not determinative. The question we must ask is whether the immigration reforms proposed today, of the kind supported by former President George W. Bush and current President Obama, as well as the late Senator Edward Kennedy and the very much alive Senator John McCain, unleash on American society a wave of crime and "socially destructive behavior" of the sort Mac Donald worries about. And what about the notion that by legalizing illegal immigrants and allowing new immigrants to follow them, the United States is acquiescing in the expansion of the underclass?

EVEN though the number of legal and illegal immigrants in the United States has risen sharply since the early 1990s, the size and condition of the economic underclass has not. In fact, by several measures the number of people in America living on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder has been in a long-term decline. Moreover, those immigrants who populate the underclass appear on the whole to be more socially functional than their native-born counterparts.

Consider the most basic measure of the underclass: the number of people subsisting below the official poverty line as measured by the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (which measures

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all individuals residing in the United States, regardless of status). Between 1993 and 2007—that is, before the current recession took hold—the number of individuals living in poverty declined from 39 million to 37 million. The number of immigrants living in poverty increased by a million, but this was offset by a drop of 3 million in the number of native-born Americans in poverty. The period saw an increase of 1.8 million in the number of Hispanics living in poverty, but this was dwarfed by the 3.8 million decline among non-Hispanics, including a 1.6 million decline among blacks.

Another measure of the underclass is the number of adults without a high-school diploma. An adult or a head of household without a high-school education is almost invariably confined to lower-wage occupations with limited prospects for advancement. Sure enough, the trend in education follows that of poverty. From 1993 through 2006, the number of adults in America age 25 and older without a diploma declined from 32 million to 28 million. The number of adult Hispanic dropouts rose by 3.9 million, much of that due to the progeny of low-skilled illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central America. But among the rest of the population, the number of dropouts plunged by 8.1 million.

Educational attainment by citizenship status covers a slightly different period but confirms the trend. From 1995 to 2004, the number of adults without a high-school diploma declined by 2.9 million. An increase of 2.4 million in the number of immigrant dropouts was overwhelmed by a decline of 5.3 million in native-born dropouts. As a result of these underlying trends, the underclass in our society has been shrinking as its face has become more Hispanic and foreign-born.

MULTIPLE causes lie behind the long-run decline of poverty, and the effect of immigration cannot be discounted. The arrival of low-skilled foreign-born workers in the labor force increases the incentive for young native-born Americans to stay in school and for older workers to upgrade their skills to avoid having to compete with immigrants for low-wage jobs. At the same time, the addition of low-skilled immigrants expands the size of the overall economy, creating higher-wage openings for managers, craftsmen, accountants, and the like. The net result is a greater financial reward and relatively more opportunities for those Americans who finish high school.

An August study for the Cato Institute by Peter Dixon and Maureen Rimmer estimated that a 29 percent increase in low-skilled immigration would boost the total income of U.S. households by as much as $180 billion a year. Such an influx would no doubt increase nominal government spending on welfare, school, and crime abatement, but the fiscal cost would be overwhelmed by direct economic gains to American households.

Immigration restrictionists are fond of arguing that the gains only accrue to the relatively well-to-do in the form of docile domestic servants, but Dixon and Rimmer refute this by noting what they call an "occupation-mix effect": the creation through low-skilled labor of better-paying jobs further up the occupational ladder that over time steer more Americans into the middle class. For example, someone overqualified for work as a short-order cook need not necessarily settle for that job but can rather go out for the chef's position to which he aspires. And so on. A certain portion of the native-born underclass will remain in such straits because of their own particular circumstances, but over time the creation of a slightly better mix of jobs allows the more functional members of the underclass to escape. Most important, the presence of low-skilled immigrants in the workforce helps new labor-force entrants avoid joining the underclass in the first place.

A dynamic like this may have been at work in the early 20th century, when millions of Jewish and Italian immigrants were stoking fears of a permanent underclass. Most of them were low-skilled compared with native-born Americans, and their arrival exerted downward pressure on wages at the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. But it was probably not a coincidence that during that same period, the number of Americans staying in school to earn a diploma increased dramatically, setting off what sociologists call the High School Movement. From 1910 to 1940, the share of American 18-year-olds graduating from high school rose from less than 10 percent to 50 percent in a generation. Today's immigrants are arguably contributing to the same positive trend.

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Restrictionists argue in response that Southern and Central European and Jewish immigrants of a century ago were of better cultural stock than today's newcomers and that American society of the time exerted more pressure to assimilate. Of course, the same kind of argument was invoked then looking back to an earlier period, as it was invoked in the mid-19th century when hordes of unwashed Irish flooded New York and Boston.

The existence of the American welfare state, to be sure, is a profound difference between now and then, and the present-day obsession with multiculturalism is certainly a hindrance to integration. But despite follies like bilingual education, the evidence shows that the children of today's immigrants speak fluent English and otherwise outperform their parents in terms of education and earnings. America remains a great engine of assimilation.

THE great recession of 2008-09 has obviously reversed some of the national gains against poverty, but the recent growth of the underclass cannot be blamed on low-skilled illegal immigration. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of illegal immigrants living in the United States has declined since 2007 as jobs in construction and other sectors where they have traditionally found work have dried up. Fewer are entering the country, and a growing number of them have returned home. Those that remain are far more likely to be working than loitering on street corners. There has been no uptick in crime.

Over the long term, the inflow of low-skilled immigrants has not only coincided with the underclass's shrinking but with its transformation into a less socially destructive one. One striking fact about low-skilled immigrants in America today, legal and illegal, is their propensity to work. In 2008, the rate of labor-force participation of foreign-born Hispanics was 71 percent, while that of native-born Americans was 66 percent. Immigrant dropouts—those 25 years or older without a high-school diploma—were far more likely than native-born dropouts to be participating in the labor force (61 percent vs. 38 percent). According to estimates by the Pew Hispanic Center, male illegal immigrants, ages 18 to 64, had a labor-force participation rate in 2004 of an amazing 92 percent. Illegal immigrants are typically poor, but they are almost all working poor.

Across all ethnicities and educational levels, immigrants are less prone to commit crimes and land behind bars than their native-born counterparts. In congressional testimony in 2007, Anne Morrison Piehl of Rutgers University told the House Judiciary Committee that "immigrants have much lower institutionalization rates than the native-born—on the order of one-fifth the rate of natives. More recently arrived immigrants had the lowest relative institutionalization rates, and the gap with natives increased from 1980 to 2000." Piehl found no evidence that the immigrant incarceration rate was lower because of the deportation of illegal immigrants who might otherwise serve time.

Crime rates are even lower than average among the poorly educated and Hispanic immigrants—those who arouse the most concern from skeptics of immigration reform. The scholar Rubén Rumbaut analyzed census data from the year 2000 and found that incarceration rates among legal and illegal immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala were less than half the rate of U.S.-born whites. Immigrants without a high-school diploma had an incarceration rate that was only one-seventh that of native-born high-school dropouts.

The reasons are several. Applicants for legal immigration are screened for criminal records, increasing the odds that those admitted will be the law abiding. Illegal immigrants have the incentive to avoid committing crimes to minimize the risk of deportation. Legal or illegal, immigrants come to America for the opportunity to work in a more open and prosperous free-market economy. Running afoul of the law puts that opportunity in jeopardy. As a rule, low-skilled Hispanic immigrants get down to the business of earning money, sending remittances to their home countries, and staying out of trouble. In comparison, 15 years ago, a member of today's underclass standing on a street corner is more likely waiting for a day's work than for a drug deal.

YET JUST as was true a century ago, fears remain. No politician has done more to exploit worries about illegal immigrants and crime than Lou Barletta, mayor of the small Pennsylvania

city of Hazleton. In 2006 he made national headlines by convincing the City Council to enact a law revoking the business license of any local employer who was found hiring illegal immigrants and fining landlords who rented to them. The mayor justified the crackdown by blaming illegal immigrants for a rise in local crime. But during a court hearing on a challenge to the law, it was pointed out that Hazleton's own police records showed that of the 8,575 felonies committed in the city since 2000, only about 20 were linked to illegal immigrants. Like all those Jewish "racketeers" of the Depression era, today's low-skilled Hispanic migrants are victims of a stereotype unsupported by the preponderance of evidence.

In fact, the major social challenges facing the Hispanic community are not among Hispanic immigrants themselves but among their progeny in the second and third generations. As Heather Mac Donald and others have correctly reported, the children and grandchildren of Hispanic immigrants are far more likely to become unwed parents than first-generation immigrants, and far more likely to drop out of high school than non-Hispanic whites.

But as troubling as these trends may be, they have not spilled over to a general breakdown in social order, as the crime figures persisting into the recessionary period clearly attest. Our focus should be on addressing social problems directly, which after all are not unique to the Hispanic community, rather than suppressing Hispanic immigration at great cost to our economy. Similar social fears about Italian immigrants early in the 20th century proved to be unfounded, as their children and grandchildren eventually assimilated into the middle class.

Based on recent and historical experience, the argument in favor of a policy allowing more low-skilled workers to enter the United States legally is a strong one. Such a policy might plausibly continue to transform the underclass into a more socially functional segment of society while enhancing the incentives for native-born Americans to acquire the education and skills they need to prosper.