

## Police Chief: Illegal Aliens a Problem

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM     **Mar 20, 6:07 PM EDT**  
Associated Press Writer

SCRANTON, Pa. (AP) -- The crime rate in Hazleton declined at the same time its Hispanic population was exploding, but the numbers do not tell the whole story, the police chief testified Tuesday at a federal trial over the city's crackdown on illegal immigrants.

Illegal immigrants and Hispanic groups are suing Hazleton to overturn a new city act that targets landlords who rent to illegal immigrants and businesses that employ them.

Mayor Lou Barletta has repeatedly invoked rising crime, and particularly violent crimes, as a justification for the crackdown. Violent crime in Hazleton increased more than 70 percent from 2001 to 2006, and Barletta testified last week that it was driving businesses away and making residents afraid to leave their homes.

In court Tuesday, Police Chief Robert Ferdinand was confronted with police records showing that only about 40 more total crimes - violent and nonviolent - were committed in 2006 than in 2001, a period when thousands of Hispanics moved to the city. Only a small number of illegal immigrants were arrested in that time.

Ferdinand said the records are just the "tip of the iceberg" of Hazleton's crime problem. He said he believes illegal immigrants are responsible for many more crimes than the statistics indicate because police officers often failed to indicate a suspect's immigration status on arrest reports.

"The thrust of the police department is to solve crimes. We're not concerned with (suspects' immigration) legality, we're concerned with their criminality," he said.

He also said the nature of crime in the city of 30,000 people is changing.

A number of street gangs have moved into Hazleton and started dealing drugs and stockpiling weapons, he said. He said the dealers are willing to use violence to protect their turf, and were recruiting illegal immigrants.

Between 1,500 and 3,400 illegal immigrants live in Hazleton, according to an estimate by Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration studies, a group that advocates for tighter controls on immigration.

The immigrants tend to earn less money and pay fewer taxes, increasing the costs to federal, state and local governments, Camarota testified.

"If the illegals leave, the costs leave with them," he said. "If other communities were to adopt the same policies as Hazleton, that itself would have a big effect and more illegals would decide to go home."

The nonjury trial is expected to conclude Thursday.

Hazleton's Illegal Immigration Relief Act has been emulated by towns around the nation that believe the federal government hasn't done enough to stop illegal immigration.

Enforcement of Hazleton's act was barred pending the trial, the first to examine local efforts to curb illegal immigration.