El Paso massacre suspect's racist manifesto spurs fears of race hate among Berks Latinos

Residents say they don't understand what could drive someone to hurt innocent people.

Catalina Candelaria spends her days looking after her grandchildren.

Deborah Monserrate is a student at Reading Area Community College.

Luz Rodriguez can be found at her beauty salon cutting and styling hair.

The journeys these three women took to get to the United States were distinct. And so are the lives they lead now. But they share a common fear: that they will perish at the hands of someone who hates them simply because of the color of their skin, the language that they speak or the various cultures that they represent.

There were about 59.9 million Latinos in the U.S. as of June 2018 — accounting for 18% of the population, according to U.S. Census Bureau population estimates. That percentage is even higher in Berks County, where an estimated 23% of the population is Latino.

For a number of Latinos in Berks County, the week following the shooting attack at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, that killed 22 people felt like a nightmare as they tried to cope with the devastating realization that the gunman had railed against their community in a racist manifesto. Whether they are immigrants, descendants of immigrants who arrived long ago or American citizens who moved from Puerto Rico, many said in interviews last week that they were rattled by the notion that a person driven by hate could commit such a violent act.

Living with the fear

"I feel like I could be targeted the same way," Candelaria said through a translator. "I feel really bad for those who were hurt by a man who was crazy. But it could happen here. It could happen anywhere."

Candelaria, a retired 62-year-old who lives in Reading, said the killings have made her fearful for the future of her grandchildren as they venture into the world. While she said she feels safe and free from discrimination in her own community, the incident has made her more wary of traveling outside the city limits.

Candelaria, who is a naturalized citizen, said she moved to the U.S. from Ecuador when she was 18 with her father for a chance at a better life. Before retiring to care for her grandchildren, she had worked as an operator at a printing company and packed clothing at a manufacturing business.

"After the shooting the fear for my family entered me in a way that it never did before," she said.

Monserrate, a 32-year-old who moved her family to Reading from Puerto Rico following the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria in 2017, said the shooting made her question her place in American society.

"It has been very scary," she said through a translator. "Sometimes — but not all the time — when I go to a place that is predominately white, I feel on edge. I feel out of place."
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How we got here

Michael Toledo, president and CEO of the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center in Reading, said he loves his country, too. But when it seems like there is a segment of the population that is being hunted, he said he feels the need to voice his heartbreak and frustration.

Toledo, who was born in Reading to parents who moved here from Puerto Rico, said he has heard from many terrified Latinos since the shooting happened. But he pointed out that many were on edge before the massacre because of promises made by President Donald Trump to begin “mass deportations” of undocumented immigrants.

“We, as a country, need to get to a better place,” he said. “There are people who were already living in fear because they were living in the shadows. And now they have to worry about being gunned down.”

Toledo said there has long been a dark underbelly in America where racism has been allowed to spread and grow. But something changed when Trump was elected.

He said Trump appears to have become a manifestation of the racism.

“To blame the president for this is wrong,” Toledo said. “But his demeanor and rhetoric has opened the door for people to say that it’s OK to be controversial, that it’s OK to say things that are unpopular. They see him do it and they feel like they can say and do anything without consequences.”

Javier Ortega, a State Farm insurance agent who was born in Puerto Rico, said our leaders need to be better than that. He said they have a responsibility to change the discussion about immigration in this country. And the best way to do that is by having an honest conversation about why those divisions have been growing.

“This is not accidental,” he said. “We are dealing with great disparity when it comes to income, education and housing. Many people are feeling disparate, and our leaders are making it look like a particular segment of the population is the cause of all those problems.”

But, Ortega said, the blame is misplaced.

“I think it may be an innate reaction to simplify the whole human disparity based on race,” he said. “But if we continue to address our problems from only the point of race then we will never solve anything and continue to live in fear of one another. And this goes back, unfortunately, to our current administration. I think that our commander-in-chief should change the topic. He is the leader — incompetent or not.”

Rick Olmos, chief operating officer and vice president of program operations at the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center, added that both sides of the aisle are to blame for the anger and hate that seem to be dividing people.

“Unfortunately, one mentally and emotionally injured person took it to the extreme,” he said.

Olmos said racism was not the cause of the shooting. He believes the failure to get those with mental illness the help they need was the cause, and he criticized the media for stoking fear by reporting only the facts that fit a certain narrative.

“In the end, it really comes down to: If you see someone who is acting poorly mentally, emotionally and has access to weapons, you need to tell someone,” he said. “We need to trust in each other that we are going to do the right thing.”

Olmos, who was born in Texas to a mother who emigrated from Spain and a Native American father, pointed out that some of the perpetrators of recent mass shootings have expressed a desire to create more divisions among those of different ethnicities and races in America. He said he refuses to take the bait.

“You cannot live your life in fear,” he said. “We need to choose to live our life in love.”

Next in this series

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Acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is one of a slew of immigration hardliners brought in by Trump to implement the...
**** shame good people have these fears. The main cause is obvious despite deflecting rhetoric and denials by hopelessly recalcitrant rw'ers.

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Please mobilize those legitimate fears and register to vote like never before to peacefully take power away from those who suppress the vote and vote for those who listen and work for everyone's benefit. The common good not those who believe that selfishness is a positive virtue!

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Well, we have a president who stokes fears of Latinos to his fan base. Maybe we should start there? Honestly, we've had a violent society long before the orange nightmare started stinking up the White House like stale flatulence.

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Matthew Walker- Trumps fan base does not encourage hate. The media tells you he does but I can tell you as well as other Latinos that what you are hearing is what a certain group wants you to he and creates fear for votes. If you want to continue to hate or believe about all the hate please stick with CNN/Dems. The people shooting up is a mental issue, raising your kids with discipline. Also listen to the news about what medications these sick individuals are on. 25 yr ago no drug commercials to battle (I'm sad or feeling bummed) Stand up make your like worth something. too many people wa happiness with a pill instead of working at it. Let me check Reading's shooting and stab rate had a high concentration of Latino vs. Latino... let that sink in. Are all Latinos bad? No, so don't let these sicko kids set the tone for whites.

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I guess if you are a legal resident you have nothing to fear.

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There is more hate in today's world than ever, sadly the majority of it is directed towards those who are actually working for all Americans. It seems the Democrats will never accept the fact that Trump won nor the reason so many were sick of the politicians on both sides who seem to care only about their own power. I am more afraid of the actual fascist, anarchist groups like ANTIFA which I feel stands for anti 1st amendment as they violently oppose anyone who thinks differently than they do. Kraschev warned us that they would destroy us from within and they continue working towards that goal. Follow the money and see who is backing all of the anti American groups.

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Why does a naturalized Citizen need a translator?
To earn respect perhaps they act and perform as a legal, lawful English speaking citizen.

Harry Stouffer
08.14.19 / 5:05 pm

well if you look at all the shooting in reading whos shooting who can anyone tell me
A soon-to-open farm near Elverson will allow clients to find tranquility and healing in nature.

What's got you wondering "what's that about?" in the Berks County area? Ask us your burning questions and we'll investigate. Please note that questions may be edited for clarity or brevity.

What do you wonder about that you'd like us to investigate?

Your contact info
We'll be in touch if we look into your question.

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