

# MURDER IN NEW BRITAIN: POLES AND PUERTO RICANS LIVING IN CONCENTRATED POVERTY

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“A fellow Pole got stabbed to death about 10 feet from his home. This happened in New Britain Connecticut where there is a large Polish population. The faggots that killed him were spics.”

Smokey on [www.polishsoccer.com](http://www.polishsoccer.com)<sup>1</sup>

This article examines the murder of a Polish immigrant in New Britain, Connecticut in January 2006 by a young Puerto Rican woman. While newspaper accounts and websites describe the murder as a random act, the use of ethnic slurs and characterization of the victim and perpetrator by their ethnic identities insinuate the murder was a result of conflict between Poles and Puerto Ricans. In this article, I suggest a counter narrative, one that focuses on the socio-economic conditions in the neighborhood where the murder took place. Using census tract data, I show that the Poles and Puerto Ricans were living together in a space of concentrated poverty related to high unemployment, low educational attainment, and high rates of poverty, social conditions that are related to higher rates of crime, delinquency, substance abuse, and violence.

**Keywords:** Polish, Puerto Rican, ethnic conflict, concentrated poverty, Connecticut

This murder between a Pole and a “spic” was presented as a random act of violence. On the same [polishsoccer.com](http://www.polishsoccer.com) website where Smokey posted, Pan Borkowski gave a more detailed version of the murder: “A 34 year old Polish

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Wake Up,’ 29 January 2006, at <[http:// www.polishsoccer.com/forum/viewtopic](http://www.polishsoccer.com/forum/viewtopic)>, 15 April 2011. A “spic” is an ethnic slur used in the U.S. to refer to Spanish-speakers from Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

guy was walking down High street (very Polish area) when 3 Puerto Ricans teens randomly stabbed and killed him. ... New Britain has a predominantly Polish born population so this has been huge in the community. Worst thing is that it was a completely random attack.”<sup>2</sup> Local newspaper reporters claimed it “was never clear what prompted the altercation between the defendants and Sawicki, whom they did not know.”<sup>3</sup> Even the young Puerto Rican convicted of the murder, Elsie Figueroa described the murder as a series of haphazard events that began by “bumping into” a “white guy” and unfolded into a tragedy that she “never meant” to happen.<sup>4</sup>

While reported as a random act between strangers, ethnic and racial identities are prominent in the stories – spic, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, white, Polish – and suggest that explanations for the murder could be found in the racial/ethnic identities of the perpetrator and the victim. One newspaper article with the bold title, “Relished Idea of Fight” reports that the young “Puerto Ricans” admitted to the police that they had a fight with a “Polish man.”<sup>5</sup> While the ethnic adjectives identifying the actors in this tragedy are ever-present, the newspaper accounts do not explore the larger group histories of Poles and Puerto Ricans in this area. There is no discussion of the growing population of Puerto Ricans co-residing in traditionally Polish neighborhoods. There is no discussion of any past conflicts between these two groups. Instead of analyzing group dynamics or inter-ethnic relations, the biographies of the individuals became the public canvas to search for clues as to why 17-year old Elsie Abigail Figueroa stabbed to death 34-year old Jaroslaw Sawicki.

## THE BIOGRAPHIES: ELSIE AND JAREK

The newspapers report a brutal childhood for Elsie and a deviant adulthood for Jaroslaw (Jarek). For Elsie, the life events that preceded the murder included poverty, violence, and untreated disabilities. Her parents, Jose Figueroa and Luz Gomez, moved from Puerto Rico to New Britain when Elsie was a child. After their divorce, when Elsie was a young teen, her mother tried to commit suicide

<sup>2</sup> ‘Wake Up,’ 29 January 2006.

<sup>3</sup> A.L. Becker, ‘Teen Admits Role in Murder,’ *Hartford Courant*, 27 September 2007, p. A1.

<sup>4</sup> This is from a letter Figueroa wrote while she was in jail awaiting trial for the murder. Reprinted in H. Munoz, ‘The Road to a Killing,’ *Hartford Courant*, 9 July 2006, p. A1.

<sup>5</sup> D.E. Goren, ‘Suspects Relish Idea of a Fight, Affidavit Says,’ *Hartford Courant*, 11 February 2006, p. B1.

– Elsie was in the apartment at the time. Elsie was one of eight children who shared a mother and three different fathers. In her short lifetime, Elsie had been diagnosed with depression, suicidal tendencies, and severe learning disabilities.

In 1996, the state child welfare agency, the Department of Children and Family (DCF), first showed up because someone complained about unsanitary living conditions. Her mother was cited by the housing inspector for “overcrowding and filth” and assigned a caseworker (who found nothing in the house that put children at risk). Elsie had also “missed more than 40 days of school” and she had head lice. The family distrusted DCF and other state agencies, which they saw as intruding into their personal lives.<sup>6</sup> By 2003, DCF was citing her family for abuse and neglect. Then in 2004, DCF took Elsie and her brother out of the home. She was placed in multiple foster homes and then was placed in “correctional” facilities (punitive incarceration) after she was charged with assault and later placed in “treatment” facilities (rehabilitative incarceration). In all, over the course of her young life leading up to the murder, she had been in Hartford Juvenile Detention (for running away from homes), Riverview Hospital (a state psychiatric residence), York Correctional Institution in Niantic (the state prison for women), and finally Stepping Stone, a high-security “treatment” institution for young women.

Working toward recovery and rehabilitation, Elsie begged to return to one of the foster families that she liked, and the foster family asked for her return as well. DCF denied her request and determined she would do better at Stepping Stone where she would get more specialized and professional services. The unwillingness of the program directors to grant her wishes further alienated her from state agencies.<sup>7</sup> Just as she was finishing the program, she was put on probation because of behavioral problems. Against the recommendations of the program directors, she left Stepping Stone and moved into her mother’s house in December 2005.

Three days before she murdered Sawicki, 17-year old Elsie was raped in her own bed by her brother’s friend – she fought him, he punched her, she fought him, he slapped her, she fought him, he raped her. The next day she told her siblings and mother. When the attacker came over the following night her friends and family members beat him up, Elsie broke a beer bottle over the rapist’s head, and the landlord called the police. Learning about the rape allegations, the police sent Elsie to the hospital.<sup>8</sup> The doctors gave her a prescription for

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<sup>6</sup> H. Munoz, ‘The Road to...,’ p. A6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. A7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. A1, A6.

painkillers for her bruised ribs and sent her home. She stayed in her bedroom for two days. She emerged in the evening on January 25 high on narcotics.<sup>9</sup> She walked down to *Walgreens*, a pharmacy chain store, with two Puerto Rican boys, ages 13 and 16, to refill her Percocet prescription. Walking home from the pharmacy, they got into a fight with “some Polish guy” who they punched, kicked and stabbed and afterward she went home and, as she later wrote, “I was so high I just cleaned the knife and took a shower and went to sleep.”<sup>10</sup>

The stabbing of Sawicki was caught on a surveillance tape outside a housing complex. From this tape, Elsie Figueroa was identified as the person stabbing Jarek Sawicki. She was charged with the murder, entered an Alford plea (which is a guilty plea with no admission of guilt), and was sentenced to 32 years in prison.<sup>11</sup> The Superior Court Judge Joan Alexander said to her at the sentencing, “the adults in your life have failed you miserably.”<sup>12</sup> In the public construction of Elsie’s biography, the narrative of the murder was a tragic ending to a miserable childhood – the blame was shifted to her parents, to abusive men, and to imprudent state child protection service workers.

While Elsie reclaimed some innocence with the public telling of her childhood, Sawicki lost some when his personal story was reported. The public learned that on January 25, 2006, a bitterly cold night, Jarek was walking home from a bar and that he was still on probation from a drunk driving charge he received six months earlier. In addition to the disclosure of his drinking problem, the newspapers also reported that he had spent five months in prison in 2003 for secondary assault with a pellet gun. The assault occurred outside the Pulaski Democratic Club on Grove Street (in the heart of New Britain Polonia).<sup>13</sup> As comic-tragedy, the public is told that Sawicki’s victim was found outside the Pulaski club with a pellet in his nose.

Jarek Sawicki was an immigrant who had lived in New Britain for 17 years and yet he had not moved out of the “Polish ghetto” suggesting a lack of assimilation and social mobility. He was an independent roofer, which in contrast to a unionized roofer or a worker employed by a company, means that he most

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<sup>9</sup> This information comes from three letters Elsie wrote from prison that were intercepted by the prison and used during her trial. Munoz, ‘The Road to...,’ pp. A6, A7.

<sup>10</sup> Quote taken from letter from prison, Becker, ‘Teen Admits,’ p. A12.

<sup>11</sup> Luis Gabrielle Rivera, age 16 at the time of the assault, was charged with murder and conspiracy to commit murder. The other boy was tried in juvenile court. Becker, ‘Teen Admits,’ p. A12.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Teen Gets 32 In Fatal Killing Of Man,’ *Hartford Courant*, 1 December 2006, p. A1.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Three Teens Face Murder Charges,’ *Hartford Courant*, 27 January 2006, p. B1.

likely had intermittent employment, without benefits, and could be classified as underemployed. His family life also included instability as he was divorced and had one daughter who lived with her mother and not him. The 34-year-old Jarek lived with his parents, which by U.S. standards can be seen as a failure to reach adult status.<sup>14</sup>

It was 10:00 pm on a Wednesday evening, January 25, 2006, when he was attacked. According to the arrest affidavit, Figueroa said that it started when the Polish man “had words” with them, and then pushed the 13-year-old Puerto Rican boy in the face. It ended with the three adolescents beating Sawicki, kicking him while he was down on the sidewalk, and Elsie stabbing him four times in the chest and once in the thigh. The attack did not stop until two other Poles from the area (Marek Modzeiewski and Pauline Bonifaciuk) drove by, slowed down, and then the attackers fled.<sup>15</sup> The newspapers received the surveillance image of a man stumbling and holding his chest and then falling where the police found him “lying in front of his parents’ High Street home.”<sup>16</sup> He was taken to New Britain General Hospital where he was pronounced dead.<sup>17</sup>

The police went to the home of his parents, Stanislaus and Theresa Kowalczyk Sawicki. Theresa opened the door to a police officer who did not speak Polish. The officer made stabbing gestures; Theresa called her son’s cell phone and no one answered. She started crying. The officer left and returned with a Polish-speaking officer.<sup>18</sup>

Jaroslaw Sawicki was buried in Poland.

In his life story we see Sawicki in liminal space – not fully integrated in the United States, still living in a poor Polish-language community, and buried in Poland. He is a father but does not live with his child; he is an adult but still lives with his parents. He was in trouble with the law on two separate occasions and had a drinking problem, anger management issues, and poor impulse control. He is not described as an upstanding citizen or even a respectable U.S. resident. Sawicki’s public portrayal lends itself to a blaming of the victim, just as Figueroa’s narrative reconstructed her as a victim.

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Local Obituaries’, *The Courant*, 28 January 2006, at <<http://articles.courant.com/2006-01-28/news>>, 15 April 2011. Sawicki had three brothers and one sister living in Poland, and another sister living in Indiana.

<sup>15</sup> D.E. Goren, ‘Suspects Relish...’, p. B1. B5.

<sup>16</sup> A.L. Becker, ‘Teen Admits,’ p. A1.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Teens Face Murder Charge,’ p. B1; Goren, ‘Suspects Relish...’, p. B5.

<sup>18</sup> H. Munoz, ‘The Road to...’, p. A7.

## A RANDOM ACT? POLISH AND PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITIES

The story of Elsie and Jarek goes back to the mid-twentieth century. One version of their ethnic antagonism was played out in the 1960s Broadway musical by Jerome Robbins, *West Side Story*. The version in New Britain does not include a love story or gangs of Jets and Sharks, but the same antagonisms are present as the two groups share geographic space. A person does not “bump into” someone while walking home from the tavern who then dies on his own porch step without sharing public space. In this community and on these sidewalks, Poles and Puerto Ricans shared public space. One reporter wrote, “What triggered the altercation is unclear. No robbery, or drugs, or gang turf, no previous interaction between victims and alleged attackers, police say.”<sup>19</sup> And yet these two groups have a long history of interaction and coexistence. At the time of the attack, Polish immigrants and Puerto Ricans had been living side-by-side in one of the poorest communities in New Britain, Connecticut for over three decades.

### POLES AND PUERTO RICANS IN THE UNITED STATES

Poles began immigrating to the United States *en masse* in the 1870s and the peak period for migration was 1890 to 1914 when roughly 1.5 million ethnic Poles came to the United States and roughly one million stayed. Immigration was halted during WWI and resumed at a brisk pace until the National Origins Acts of the 1920s reduced the annual quota to about 3000 which, after WWII quotas were mortgaged for the refugees who were resettled by the Displaced Persons Act. Altogether this WWII wave produced another quarter of a million newcomers. The next large wave of immigrants started in the 1970s and crescendoed in the 1980s when immigrants and refugees arrived escaping economic decline and political persecution.<sup>20</sup> By 1990, almost 120,000 new immigrants and 50,000 refugees had arrived in the U.S. While Polish refugee arrivals ended with the dismantling of the communist system in Poland in 1989, Polish immigration continued to surge in the 1990s.<sup>21</sup>

The United States acquired the islands of Puerto Rico during the Spanish American war when Spain ceded its colony to the U.S. in 1898. Puerto Ricans were granted American citizenship in 1918, and Puerto Rico became

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. A6.

<sup>20</sup> J. Pula, *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community*, Twayne Publishers, New York 1995.

<sup>21</sup> M.P. Erdmans, ‘Polonia in the New Century: We Will Not Fade Away,’ *Polish American Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2000), pp. 5–24.

a semi-autonomous Commonwealth in 1952. Puerto Ricans began moving from the island to the U.S. mainland in large numbers after WWII as a result of cheaper air travel and high unemployment in Puerto Rico. The number of Puerto Ricans living on the mainland continued to climb in the 1950s with a slight dip in the 1960s attributable in part to circular migration. By the 1990s, roughly two million Puerto Ricans were living on the mainland, and the majority lived in the Northeastern region.<sup>22</sup>

#### POLES AND PUERTO RICANS IN NEW BRITAIN, CONNECTICUT

In 1970, there were 103,820 Polish Americans and Polish immigrants living in Connecticut (only 23 percent were foreign born). In contrast, according to the 1970 census, 38,144 Puerto Ricans lived in Connecticut, but 65 percent had been born in Puerto Rico indicating a larger migrant community than was the case for Polonia. Puerto Ricans are not immigrants, but moving from the island to the mainland is similar to migration, and therefore Puerto Ricans make a comparable case with Polish immigrants.<sup>23</sup>

By 1990, the number of Puerto Ricans living in Connecticut rose to 93,608, and then more than doubled in the next decade to 194,443 in 2000, with the majority living in urban areas of Hartford, Waterbury, Bridgeport, and New Britain (See Table 1). Poles also had a large increase in population by 1990, but this is mostly an artifact of a new census question. In 1980 the U.S. census included, for the first time, an open-ended question that asked people to name their ancestry. As a result, for many European ethnics, their population numbers increased as this new question now began to count third and later generation ethnics (prior to this question only “foreign stock” was counted which referred to those born abroad or children whose parents were born abroad). As a result, the number of Poles increased almost three-fold by 1980, when 287,016 people in Connecticut reported Polish ancestry.<sup>24</sup> In 1990, the census counted 312,587 people of Polish ancestry, but a decade later this dropped slightly to 284,272 (nine percent were foreign born) [See Table 1].

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<sup>22</sup> F.L. Rivera-Batiz, C. E. Santiago. *Island Paradox: Puerto Rico in the 1990s*, Russell Sage, New York 1998.

<sup>23</sup> 1970, Census of the Population, Characteristics of the Population, CT, p. 8–154.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Census of the Population, 1980, ‘Ancestry of the Population by State,’ Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1983.

Table 1.

## Polish and Puerto Rican Populations, 1990 and 2010

	United States	Connecticut	New Britain
Polish			
1990	9,366,106 (70%)*	312,587	17,902
2000	8,977,444 (70%)	284,272	14,257
% Poles foreign-born	5%	9%	51%
2010	9,670,205 (67%)	293,689 (68%)	12,713
Puerto Rican			
1990	1,955,323 (96%)	93,608	10,325
2000	3,406,178	194,443	15,693
% PR born island	42%	47%	39%
2010	4,623,716	252,972	21,914

1990 Census of the Population, Detailed Ancestry Groups for States, Washington, DC: GPO, 1992; 2000 Census of the Population, Summary File 1 (Puerto Ricans) and Summary File 3 (Polish). And 2010 Census SF1 for Puerto Rican population (DEC\_10\_SF1\_QTP10); Estimates for Polish Ancestry (1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup>) (ACS\_12\_5YR\_B04001 & ACS\_12\_5YR\_B04002).

\* Ancestry is for those reporting at least one ancestry. The number in parenthesis refers to the percentage who reported Polish ancestry as their first ancestry.

New Britain, Connecticut has a significant Polish and Puerto Rican population. New Britain is historically and continues to be a working-class town. Over the twentieth century it attracted Polish, Italian, and Irish immigrants, and while it is still a primarily white community (82 percent according to the 1990 census, 69 percent white in 2000; and 67 percent in 2010), it has a growing Puerto Rican population (See Table 2). In the 1970 census, the Polish foreign stock in New Britain was 12,253, and by the 1980 census, 13,893 people claimed Polish ancestry in New Britain (this included foreign born as well as second, third, and subsequent generations).<sup>25</sup> The community continued to attract new immigrants from the post-1980 Solidarity migration – over 4,500 new Polish immigrants

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Census of the Population, 1970, Characteristics of the Population (Vol. 1), Connecticut (part 8), (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1973), Table 81, 8-202. U.S. Census of the Population, 1980. Characteristics of the Population (Vol. 1), Detailed Population Characteristics (Chapter D), Connecticut (Part 8), (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1983), Table 197, 8–19.

arrived between 1987 and 1997.<sup>26</sup> By 1990, almost 18,000 people in New Britain reported Polish ancestry, and the majority were Polish American ethnics (see Table 2). In 1990, Poles represented 24 percent of the city's population and 33 percent of the white non-Hispanic population. Their population peaked in 1990, however, and fell for the next two decades; by 2010, only 12,713 or (17%) of the city was reporting Polish ancestry.

The Puerto Rican population has had a steady growth in the state and in New Britain in particular. In 1970, the census counted 2,413 Puerto Ricans in New Britain, and the population doubled in each decade so that by 1990 there were over 10,000 Puerto Ricans.<sup>27</sup> By 2000, the Puerto Rican population of 15,693 was slightly larger than the Polish population. By the 2010 census, there were 21,914 Puerto Ricans counted, representing roughly 30% of the New Britain population.

Puerto Ricans in New Britain are concentrated in the census tracts located in the center of the city: tracts 4159, 4161, and 4162 (see Figure 1). Poles were more spread out over New Britain, but they also have a significant concentration in the central city in tracts 4159, 4160. I want now to examine two particular census tracts: tract 4159, where Jaroslaw Sawicki lived and died, and the tract adjacent to it, tract 4160, where Elsie Figueroa lived. All subsequent data is reported in Table 2.

Census data are limited. Most importantly, the data do not always indicate Polish or Puerto Rican so I use the proxies White and Hispanic. The Hispanic category is a better proxy for Puerto Ricans than the White category is for Poles. In 2000, Puerto Ricans made up 82 percent of the New Britain Hispanic population (and in some tracts such as 4162, they represented 91 percent of the Hispanic population). In 2010, the influx of Mexicans dropped the Puerto Rican population to 79 percent of Hispanics in the city, but Puerto Ricans still made up 87 percent of the Hispanic population in tract 4159.

In contrast, Poles made up only 33 percent of the White population in the city in 1990, only 29 percent in 2000 and 26 percent in 2010. In the census tracts where Poles were heavily concentrated, such as tract 4160, Poles represented 63 percent of the Whites in 1990. In 2000, Poles represented 60 and 62 percent of Whites in tracts 4159 and 4160, and by 2010, they represented 53 and 64 percent in tracts 4159 and 4160.

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<sup>26</sup> *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*. U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1987–1997, Table: Immigrants Admitted by Select Country of Birth and Selected Metropolitan Area of Intended Residence.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Census of the Population, 1970, Characteristics of the Population (Vol. 1), Connecticut (part 8), Table 81, 8-202. For 1990 to 2010 data see Table 2 in the text.

Table 2.

## Census Data for New Britain and Tracts 4159 and 4160

<b>1990 CENSUS</b>	City of New Britain	Tract 4159	Tract 4160
<b>Population</b>	75,491	2,655	4,429
# Polish (% population)	17,902 (23.7%)	695 (26.2%)	2,396 (54.1%)
# Puerto Rican	10,325 (13.7%)	970 (36.5%)	353 (8.0%)
# White* (% Polish)	54,405 (32.9%)	1,394 (50%)	3,824 (62.7%)
# Hispanic (% PR)	12,284 (84%)	1,088 (89.2%)	447 (79%)
# Foreign Born^ (% pop.)	12,444 (16.5%)	666 (25.4%)	1,388 (31.3%)
<b>Residence</b>			
% White living abroad in 1985	3%	13%	8%
<b>High School Education+</b>			
% White	66.9%	52.1%	55.5%
% Hispanic	47.4%	27.0%	41.7%
<b>Linguistically Isolated Households**</b>			
% Span ling. isolated	42.5%	58.9%	4.3%
% Indo-Euro isolated	50.4%	38.1%	95.6%
<b>Unemployment~</b>			
% Hispanic	16.7%	33.4%	27.0%
% White	6.2%	14.2%	7.3%
<b>Median Family Income</b>	\$35, 711	\$18,587	\$35,199
Hispanic	\$16,313	\$11,705	\$11,900
White	\$38,855	\$25,000	\$36,463
<b>Poverty</b>	10.7%	29.3%	8.9%
% Hispanic	39.1%	49.3%	40.4%
% White	4.6%	9.1%	4.5%

<b>2000 CENSUS</b>	City of New Britain	Tract 4159	Tract 4160
<b>Population</b>	71,538	1,874	4,509
# Polish (% population)	14,257 (20%)	677 (37%)	2,044 (45%)
% Foreign-born (FB) Poles	44%	78%	66%
# FB Poles (% all FB)	6,263 (49%)	527 (87%)	1,350 (77%)
# Puerto Rican (% pop.)	15,693 (22%)	683 (37%)	839 (19%)
% Born in Puerto Rico (i.e., born on the island)	50%	73%	61%
# White* (% Polish)	49,634 (28.7%)	1,136 (59.6%)	3,309 (61.8%)
# Hispanic (% Puerto Rican)	19,138 (82%)	816 (84%)	1,046 (80%)
Foreign Born^ (% total pop)	12,863 (18%)	607 (32%)	1,744 (39%)
<b>Residence</b>			
% White living abroad 1995	5%	34%	14%
# White living abroad in 1995	1,842	298	387
% Hispan living in PR 1995	11%	19%	2%
# Hispan living in PR in 1995	1,886	153	15
<b>High School Education</b>			
% HS White	72%	63%	72%
% HS Hispanic	52%	35%	57%
<b>Linguistically Isolated</b>			
Total # Households	28,558	774	1,969
# people speak Spanish	5,834	309	279
% Span ling. Isolated household	26%	49%	21%
# people speak other Indo-European language	6,525	284	953

<b>2000 CENSUS</b>	City of New Britain	Tract 4159	Tract 4160
% Indo-euro isolated household	35%	71%	51%
<b>Unemployment</b>	5.6%	5.7%	6.3%
% Hispanic	NA	NA	NA
% White	NA	NA	NA
<b>Median Fam. Income \$</b>	\$41,056	\$26,435	\$39,338
Hispanic	\$22,925	\$21,250	\$21,912
White	\$50,064	\$35,625	\$43,125
<b>Poverty</b>	16%	31%	21%
% Hispanic	33%	46%	47%
% White	9%	19%	11%

<b>2010 CENSUS 2012 ACS^^</b>	City of New Britain	Tract 4159	Tract 4160
<b>Population</b>	73,206	1,788	4,516
# Polish (% total population)	12,713 (17.4%)	689 (38.5%)	2,214 (49%)
# Poles Foreign born (FB) (% all FB)^^	6,520 (44.6%)	505 (81.4%)	1,589 (80.2%)
# Puerto Rican (% total pop.)^^	21,914 (29.9%)	655 (36.6%)	1,145 (25.4%)
# born Puerto Rico (% Born in Puerto Rico)	8,607 (39.2%)	325 (49.6%)	506 (44.2%)
# White* (% Polish)^^	49,253 (25.8%)	1,291 (53.4%)	3,451 (64.2%)
# Hispanic (% Puerto Rican)^^	27,744 (79%)	755 (86.8%)	1,487 (77%)
# Foreign Born^ ^^	14,632	620	1,981
% Poles who are FB	51%	73%	72%
<b>High School Education+</b>	77%	68.6%	73.9%
% HS White	NA	NA	NA
% HS Hispanic	NA	NA	NA

<b>2010 CENSUS 2012 ACS<sup>^^</sup></b>	City of New Britain	Tract 4159	Tract 4160
<b>Linguistically Isolated<sup>**</sup></b>			
Total # Households <sup>^^</sup>	28,158	717	1,908
# people speak Span <sup>^^</sup>	20,800	541	1,155
% Span ling. Isolated household <sup>^^</sup>	26.4%	32.4%	18%
# people speak other Indo-European language <sup>^^</sup>	7,663	592	1,733
% Indo-euro isolated household <sup>^^</sup>	16.4%	56.7%	62%
<b>Unemployment<sup>~</sup></b>			
% Hispanic	18.6%	25.8%	19.9%
% White	12%	23.1%	18.5%
<b>Median Fam. Income \$<sup>^^</sup></b>			
Hispanic	\$30,023	\$10,469	\$35,059
White	\$42,009	\$27,764	\$40,026
<b>Poverty<sup>^^</sup></b>			
% Hispanic	NA	NA	NA
% White	NA	NA	NA

\* Whites, equal white non-Hispanic. The other larger white groups in New Britain are Italian, Irish, and German (8.2%).

<sup>^</sup> Foreign-born does not include Puerto Ricans, because PR is a US territory.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Linguistic isolation is a household where all people over the age of 14 speak another language other than English and no one over the age of 14 speaks English "very well."

+ Education: Population 25 years and over; high school completion includes equivalency tests.

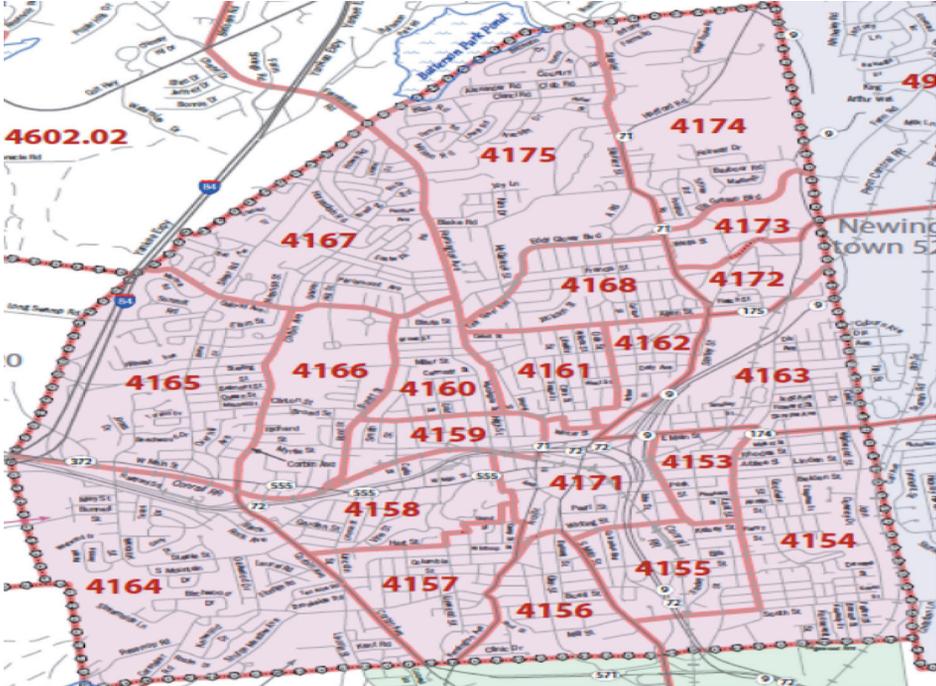
<sup>~</sup> Unemployed refers to percent in labor force that are unemployed and actively looking for work.

<sup>^^</sup> 2012 American Community Survey.

Sources: 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Characteristics for Census Tracts and Block Numbering Areas, New Britain, CT, PMSA, April 1993, DC: GPO; CP-1-8 1990 Census of Population General Population Characteristics, Connecticut, U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration. 2000 Census, Summary File 3, and Summary File 1 (sample data). 2010 Census, Summary File 3, and Summary File 1 (sample data). 2012 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, Summary File 3, and Summary File 1 (sample data).

Figure 1.

Census Tracts in New Britain Connecticut



For much of the data on income, occupation, and education I have to rely on the categories of White and Hispanic. I use these data as indicators of class or economic conditions of the neighborhood. As for language acquisition and isolation, for Poles I have to look at households where residents speak an Indo-European language. With Puerto Ricans I can locate households where Spanish is spoken.

One final problem with the data is that the census changes, and not all information is available for each decennial census. For 2010, I also relied on data from the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS). I have indicated when ACS data are used.

## ELSIE AND JAREK: TRACTS 4159 AND 4160

Elsie said she carried her knife for “protection.”<sup>28</sup> She walked from her home on Gold Street (tract 4160) with two young boys to the *Walgreens* store (tract 4159), and walked home on High Street (tract 4159) where Sawicki lived and where Elsie stabbed him. The border between the two tracts is Broad Street – the main street for New Britain Polonia. This street has over 50 Polish shops, bakeries, green grocers, travel agencies, a bookstore, gift shops, and restaurants including *Staropolska* and *Cracovia*, as well as the Polish Army Veteran’s Association of America 111 General Haller Post, Sacred Heart Church, and the Pulaski Democratic Club where Sawicki lodged a pellet in another man’s nose.

TRACT 4159: THE POOR TRACT  
– MULTI-ETHNIC CONCENTRATED POVERTY

This is one of the smallest tracts in the city. In 1990, only 2,655 people were recorded in the census including 695 of Polish ancestry (26%) and 970 Puerto Ricans (36%). The population declined to 1,874 residents by 2000, with roughly one-third of the population recording Polish ancestry (n=677) and one-third Puerto Rican (n=683). The tract also became more concentrated with immigrants. In 1990, only a quarter of the population were foreign born but by 2000, almost a third of the population was born abroad. In the U.S. census, Puerto Ricans are not counted as foreign born. By 2000, 78 percent of the Poles in this tract were foreign born (n=527); it was the epicenter for Polish immigration in New Britain. And many of the foreign born were recent immigrants as roughly one-third of the foreign born in 2000 had been living abroad in 1995.

While it has historically been *the* Polish immigrant community, by the turn of the twenty-first century there was an increase in Puerto Ricans, and almost three-quarters of the Puerto Ricans had been born on the island according to the 2000 census. By 2010, the number of Poles in this area remained roughly the same (n=689) representing 38.5 percent of the population, but the percent of Poles who were immigrants increased to 81 percent (n=505). The number of Puerto Ricans also did not change, representing 37 percent of the population, but the percent born on the island decreased to 50 percent.

In sum, in the beginning of the century this tract represented a multi-ethnic community of Poles and Puerto Ricans, with a significant percent having been

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<sup>28</sup> D.E. Goren, ‘Suspects Relish...’, p. B1.

born in Poland or Puerto Rico. While the populations were roughly equal in size, the majority of the businesses, organizations, churches and other institutions along Broad street were Polish. They co-exist as residents but the evidence of Poles' longer history in this region was noticeable among the businesses and organizations on Broad Street.

Concentrated Poverty: Both Whites and Hispanics lag behind the general population of in the city with a higher percent living in poverty, and the median family income less than in other parts of the city. In 1990, almost 30 percent of the residents lived in poverty (49 percent of Hispanics and 9 percent of Whites) and the median family income for the tract was almost half of what was for the city of New Britain with both Whites and Hispanics below their group aggregate incomes. In fact, both Whites and Hispanics in this tract had the lowest median family income across all tracts in the city.

By 2000, the percent living in poverty had not changed much for the tract as a whole, but the percent of Whites living in poverty almost doubled (19 percent of Whites lived in poverty). This corresponds with the increase in Polish immigrants during this decade. The median family income was still less than the city average. By 2010, the poverty rate was almost double the rate for New Britain (45 percent for tract 4159 but only 23 percent for the city). The median family income showed disparity between Whites and Hispanics, yet even Whites fell below the city average (the White median family income was around \$28,000 while the median income for Whites in the city was around \$42,000). The median income for Hispanics in this tract was around \$10,500 but the median income for Hispanics in the city it was around \$30,000. Thus by 2010, this tract was one of the poorest areas for Hispanics in this city and for Whites it was very close to the bottom. While Whites had more resources than Hispanics, it nonetheless represented an area of concentrated poverty for both groups.

Other Indicators of Social Disadvantage: Both Whites and Hispanics in this tract lag behind in areas of education and employment – fewer had completed high school and more were unemployed. In 1990, only 52 percent of Whites and 27 percent of Hispanics had completed high school (well below their completion rates for the city in general – 67 percent for Whites and 47 for Hispanics). By 2000, the education rates improved slightly to roughly two-thirds of Whites and one-third of Hispanics completing high school, but these percentages were still below the city (72 percent for Whites and 52 percent for Hispanics). Data were not available for 2010.

Regarding rates of unemployment, in 1990 one-third of Hispanics were unemployed in this tract (higher than in any other tract in the city), and 14 percent of Whites (also higher than any other tract in the city). By 2010, fewer Hispanics

were unemployed, but the percent was still the highest in the city with 26 percent unemployed. For Whites in this area, unemployed almost doubled, with 23 percent of Whites being unemployed, having the highest percent of Whites unemployed in any area of the city.

Linguistic Isolation: Linguistic isolation is a household indicator that refers to households where all people over the age of 14 speak another language other than English, and no one speaks English “very well.” Linguistic isolation is a marker of a household that is not culturally assimilated into the dominant language culture. English language proficiency also affects education and employment. In 1990, over 38 percent of the households where an Indo-European language was spoken were linguistically isolated, and 59 percent of the households where Spanish was spoken were linguistically isolated. By 2000, again after an increase in Polish immigration, 71 percent of the households where an Indo-European language was spoken were linguistically isolated, and 49 percent of those living in Spanish speaking households were linguistically isolated. By 2010, the percent living in linguistically isolated households dropped to 57 percent for Indo-European speakers and 32 percent for Spanish speakers.

These data suggest that neither Poles nor Puerto Ricans were doing well in this community (census tract). They were not behaviorally assimilated (using language as an indicator) nor structurally assimilated (using income and employment as indicators). These are indicators of an area of concentrated poverty and social isolation.

#### TRACT 4160: MIXED-ETHNIC WORKING CLASS

This is the census tract where Elsie lived, it is adjacent to tract 4159. This tract is less economically depressed and its residents more behaviorally and structurally assimilated. But it still is not an affluent part of the city, nor is it a stable middle-class neighborhood. It is a neighborhood with a heavy concentration of new Polish immigrants, and a growing population of Puerto Ricans. As such, it is a neighborhood with many new residents. At the turn of the twenty-first century the vast majority of Poles and Puerto Ricans living in this neighborhood were migrants, having been born in Poland or in Puerto Rico.

Population: Poles composed roughly half of population since 1990, but the Puerto Rican population has steadily increased from 8 percent to 25 percent between 1990 and 2010. In 1990, the census recorded 2,396 people with Polish ancestry (and Poles represented 63 percent of all Whites in the tract). One-third of the Whites were foreign born, and it had the largest number of foreign-born

Whites of any tract in the city. By 2000, the census counted 2,044 people of Polish ancestry and 66 percent (n=1,350) of the Poles were foreign-born. By 2010, the population of Poles increased as did the percent who were immigrants with 2,214 people claiming Polish ancestry and 80 percent of them foreign born.

The Puerto Rican community in 1990 was relatively small, with only 353 residents. By 2000, their numbers increased to 839, and 61 percent had been born on the island. The number of Puerto Ricans continued to increase and by 2010, one-quarter of the community was Puerto Rican (n=1,145) but fewer of them were migrants as only 44 percent of the population was born in Puerto Rico.

Working Poor Community: On indicators of income and poverty, the Whites in this community were roughly similar to the city average, but the Hispanics fell well below the city average. In 1990, the median family income for Whites was around \$36,000 comparable to the family income for Whites in New Britain in general, but the income for Hispanics was only around \$12,000, well below the city average income of \$35,000, and even below the average for Hispanics in the city (\$16,000). By 2000, the median family income for Whites rose to \$43,000, slightly above the city median but well below the median for Whites in New Britain. The Hispanic median family income also rose to nearly \$22,000, still well below New Britain's median income level but similar to median income for all Hispanics in the city. By 2010, the median family income for Whites decreased to \$40,000, again, still below the median income for all Whites in the city. The Hispanic income increased significantly, to \$35,000, and was at that time much closer to the income for Whites in this tract and above the income for Hispanics in the city. In these data we see a trend of Hispanics (mostly Puerto Ricans) in this community having more income than Hispanics in other parts of the city and approaching parity with Whites in this community.

Rates of poverty are similar to median income trends with Whites having lower rates of poverty than Hispanics in the tract, and roughly on par with whites in other parts of the city. In 1990, the poverty rate for Whites was 4.5 percent while it was 40 percent for Hispanics in this tract. By 2000, the rates increased (11 percent for Whites and 47 percent for Hispanics). So despite rising median income levels for Hispanics living in this area, these data suggest it was still a disproportionately poor population.

Other Indicators of Social Disadvantage: Both Whites and Hispanics lag behind city averages when it comes to high school completion. In 1990, only 55.5 percent of Whites and 42 percent of Hispanics had completed high school, compared to 67 percent for Whites and 47 percent for Hispanics in New Britain in general. By 2000 things had improved as 72 percent of Whites and 57 percent of Hispanics had completed high school. The White rate was similar to the high

school completion rate for Whites in New Britain, and the Hispanic rate was higher than it was for Hispanics in New Britain (only 52 percent). By 2010, the high school completion rate for all residents in this tract was 74 percent, only slightly lower than the city's high school completion rate of 77 percent.

As for unemployment rates, in 1990 the Hispanic rate in this tract was significantly higher than the White rate (27 percent compared to 7 percent). The Hispanic rate was also significantly higher than the city-wide rate for Hispanics (17 percent) while the White rate was only slightly higher (6 percent). By 2010, however, the White and Hispanic rates were fairly similar at 20 percent for Hispanics and 18.5 percent for Whites. The Hispanic rate was only slightly higher than the Hispanic city rate (19 percent) but the White rate was significantly higher than the overall unemployment rate for Whites in New Britain (12 percent).

Linguistic Isolation: The important trend here is the decline and then rise in linguistically isolated households for those speaking Indo-European languages other than English, and a rise in Spanish-speaking linguistically isolated households between 1990 and 2010. In 1990, when roughly two-thirds of the Whites in this tract were Polish, 96 percent of the households where an Indo-European language was spoken were linguistically isolated. In that same census, when only 447 Hispanics lived in that tract, only 4 percent of the households where Spanish was spoken were linguistically isolated. In 2000, roughly one-half of the households where an Indo-European language was spoken was linguistically isolated, and 21 percent of those in Spanish-speaking households were linguistically isolated. By 2010, the percent of linguistically isolated households increased to 62 percent for Indo-European speakers, which corresponds with a increase in foreign-born residents in this community – 72 percent of the Poles living in this tract were foreign born. For Spanish speakers, despite the increase in the number of Puerto Ricans in this community, more of them had been born on the mainland and only 18 percent of households where Spanish was spoken were linguistically isolated.

In sum, while this tract cannot be characterized as one of concentrated poverty it does represent a community undergoing demographic transition and social isolation. The number of Puerto Ricans increased as did the number of Poles who were immigrants. As new groups come in contact with each other they found themselves in competition for jobs and resources. Neither group was desperately poor, but this cannot in any way be characterized as a middle-class community.

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## CONCLUSION

While the killing of Sawicki by Figueroa may have been “random” it was certainly not a coincidence that a Pole and Puerto Ricans would be walking by each other on High Street in New Britain; it is not anomalous that Poles and Puerto Ricans in this community would be carrying personal histories of pain and suffering connected to their social location of poverty and migration; and it was not happenstance that their paths would cross. When people share social space, they are likely to “bump into” each other on the street. When the space they share is impoverished, they are also more at risk of abusing drugs and alcohol, more likely to be carrying weapons and frustration, and more likely to be at risk for getting in fights. If we understand the murder within a social context of concentrated poverty, the murder does not appear so random.

In the United States, the term “concentrated poverty” or “the underclass” is almost always used as a reference to African American and Latino communities. The concept of “black-on-black” crime is used as a reference to the large numbers of murders that occur in areas of black concentrated poverty. While it is common to attribute this black-on-black crime to a moral failing in the black culture, social scientists more often understand these murders as a consequence of joblessness, poverty, and family instability – factors that are linked to concentrated poverty.<sup>29</sup> The purpose of this article is to offer a similar interpretation of the murder in New Britain, and to suggest that it was not random, nor was it a function of ethnic conflict or cultural failing, but instead it arose from the conditions that are intertwined with living in impoverished neighborhoods.

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<sup>29</sup> R. Sampson, ‘Urban Black Violence: The Effect of Male Joblessness and Family Disruption,’ *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (1986), pp. 348–383; L.J. Krivo, R.D. Peterson, ‘Extremely Disadvantaged Neighborhoods and Urban Crime,’ *Social Forces*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (1996), pp. 619–648.