

## Why Lawrence, Massachusetts is the City of the Damned

By Jay Atkinson - March 2012

**Crime is soaring, schools are failing, government has lost control, and Lawrence, the most godforsaken place in Massachusetts, has never been in worse shape. And here's the really bad news: it's up to controversial mayor William Lantigua to turn it all around.**



*Father Paul O'Brien, the pastor at Lawrence's St. Patrick's church, is willing to rail against corruption, but hopes his is not a lonely voice in the wilderness.*

**NORMALLY A CELEBRATORY EVENT**, this year's inauguration of Lawrence city council and school committee members is somber, almost funereal. Father Paul O'Brien, the pastor at St. Patrick's church in South Lawrence, takes to the podium at Lawrence High to deliver a prayer. "We live in a community that's not safe. We all know that," he says. A tall, imposing figure in his black clerical garb, O'Brien swivels his

head to the right, looking at the elected officials seated nearby — a group that includes Mayor William Lantigua. "Let us pray for those who serve in public safety. And for our elected officials, that they understand better that they must step away from corruption."

Times are hard in the state's poorest city. The mayor is under federal and state investigation for campaign-finance improprieties and other questionable behavior, while a state-appointed overseer is managing the city's municipal budget. Lawrence's public school system is in receivership — the former superintendent, Wilfredo Laboy, is under criminal indictment for fraud and embezzlement, and the high school dropout rate is more than 50 percent. Public-safety cuts have been drastic, and felony crimes have skyrocketed from 1,777 in 2009 to 2,597 during the first 11 months of 2011. Unemployment is as high as 18 percent, compared with the state average of less than 7 percent.

With 76,000 people squeezed into 6.93 square miles, violent crime on the rise, and a public school system that's the worst in the state, the once-proud "Immigrant City" has become an object lesson in how to screw things up.

Father O'Brien turns back to the audience. "Let us pray to be people who stand for the truth," he says, "who are not intimidated by corruption."

Afterward, I mention to O'Brien that his prayer sounded like something uttered by Karl Malden, who played a crusading priest in the 1954 film *On the Waterfront*. "In a place like Lawrence," he replies, buttoning himself into a black topcoat on the front steps of the high school, "you're either on the side of darkness or light."

**IN 1845**, Abbott Lawrence and his brother Amos raised a million dollars and created a holding company, the Boston Associates, which purchased seven square miles of land on either side of the Merrimack River. Abbott Lawrence then hired an engineer named Charles S. Storrow, from whose drafting table arose a planned industrial city that would produce textiles for the world. Just the Ayer Mill alone was equipped with 400 broadlooms, 44,732 spindles, and nine giant steam boilers rated at 600 horsepower each. The equipment was operated by workers of Italian, Polish, Lithuanian, Syrian, Irish, English, German, French-Canadian, and Portuguese origin.

Immigrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic began arriving by the middle of the 20th century, just as the textile industry was migrating south in search of cheaper labor. The city has had difficulty replacing the lost jobs, and for the past four decades, most people in Lawrence, an estimated 74 percent of whom are Latino, have struggled to get by. Lawrence saw its median household income fall more than 20 percent between 1979 and 2010 to \$31,631, the lowest in the state. (In comparison, Holyoke's median household income is \$31,948, Springfield's is \$34,628, and Chelsea's is \$40,487.) Over the past five years, Lawrence's median single-family home assessment value dropped 18 percent to \$221,800, second only to Peabody's 20.3 percent loss during the same period. And last year, in its scathing district review, the Massachusetts Department of Education noted that 23.8 percent of the 12,800 students in Lawrence public schools were less than proficient in English.

*Photos by Matt Kalinowski*

---



*Tow-truck driver Orlando Rosario knows Lawrence's streets — especially the seedy ones — better than anyone.*

**NEW HOPE AROSE** in January 2010 with the inauguration of William Lantigua, the first Dominican-born mayor in Massachusetts' history. Many in Lawrence believed they had found their champion.

On the night of the election, which Lantigua won with 54 percent of the vote, Luis Medina, a campaign volunteer who was born in the Dominican Republic and grew up in Lawrence, was among the throng of Lantigua supporters at his headquarters on Essex Street. When word spread that Lantigua had won, "it was a joyful moment," says Medina, 44, a union electrician who works in Boston. "Some were crying. The rest were jumping up and down."

But the honeymoon was short. Lantigua immediately generated controversy by trying to keep his job as a state representative while serving as mayor. He also feuded with the fire and police departments, the disagreements becoming acrimonious and personal and culminating in a claim that police officers had actually tried to run him down in an unmarked car. Two years into his first term as mayor, Lantigua has been the subject of four voter recall attempts, and is the target of a federal probe into campaign-finance improprieties.

**ON A BITTERLY COLD DAY**, we're in an SUV on our way to buy heroin. The driver is a burly fellow in an old ski vest who doesn't say much. In the back seat is a forty-something middleweight with a pugilist's flattened nose.

The two men resemble the small-time dope dealers they purport to be, but in reality they're members of a drug task force operating in Lawrence and surrounding communities. (Their identities are not being revealed because of the risk to their effectiveness and safety.) Street dealing and its attendant violence are worse than ever in Lawrence, but the task-force agents stay focused on the big picture — the major players in the area, and the out-of-town heavies bringing the stuff in.

The undercover cops are on their way to make a "controlled buy" from a house that's been identified as a major source of heroin. Crossing the bridge, we turn left and run alongside a park near South

Union Street, empty but for a man walking his dog. A squat man in his forties appears — the informant who will make the buy.

The informant climbs into the SUV and one of the task-force agents searches him, joking when his hand rests on the man's phone.

"Is that a gun?"

"Yeah, but I got a permit," says the informant. Everyone laughs.

"Let's buy small," an agent says. "I want to have it tested, see where it's coming from. See who's shipping."

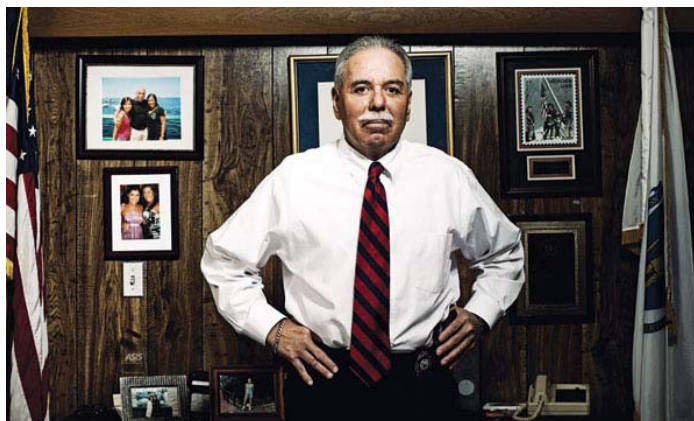
Minutes later, the informant gets out of the SUV and walks to the house. A tall man in a hoodie greets him in the driveway and leads him inside.

Five minutes crawl by. The longer it goes, the better the chance something bad is happening. Suddenly the door to the house swings open, and the informant jumps down from the porch and walks away, head down, hands in his pocket. Back in the car, he's holding a baggie with a gram of heroin. It's the size of a pencil eraser.

"That's a nice piece, bro," says the agent in the back seat. "He cut that off a finger?" The informant shakes his head. "He don't fuck around with fingers. Just fuckin' bricks."

Over the next half hour, the task-force agents point out a dozen more such targets, houses across the city where high-volume drug dealing is being done.

"We could do this all day, every day" in Lawrence, says the driver. "A house a day."



*Known for feuding with the mayor, police chief John Romero has had his forces cut drastically in the past two years.*

But they aren't able to. Lawrence's budget crunch has all but gutted the city's law enforcement. In

fiscal year 2011, Lantigua cut the police department from 151 officers to 110. (Staffing levels have subsequently risen to 118 officers through grant funding, according to police chief John Romero.) After the reductions, felony crimes — including murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, arson, larceny, and auto theft — rose 23 percent from the previous year, Romero says.

The Lawrence Police Department's "special operations" units have been especially hard hit by the cuts. The street narcotics unit, consisting of seven experienced plainclothes officers, was shut down by Lantigua (who declined to comment for this story) on July 1, 2010, along with five other special units that focused on gangs, burglaries, auto theft and insurance fraud, domestic violence, and community policing.

From July 1 to December 31, 2009, when the special ops units were fully staffed with a total of 35 cops, there were 990 felonies committed in Lawrence. During the same period a year later, after the cuts, that number rose to 1,410.

"Drugs fuel most of the crime in the city," says Romero, who was a New York City cop for 30 years before becoming Lawrence's chief in 1999. He says that, on the one hand, he can understand the staff cuts. "I get it — there was no money. But I told the [city] council, you need to understand what's going to happen."

One of the task-force agents from the drug buy says the cuts have been devastating. "We've had 24 murders in the last 30 months," he says. "I'd say 80 percent of those are drug-related. Taking away special operations has set the city back 15 or 20 years."

Orlando Rosario drives a tow truck through the streets of Lawrence. A stout Latino Falstaff with a permanent 5 o'clock shadow, Rosario has been working for Sheehan's Towing for more than a decade and knows every shopkeeper, cop, and crackhead in the city. Driving along, he points to where an expensive SUV has been left running at the curb — an incongruous sight in this neighborhood filled with junk cars and taxis.

"Watch," he says. "That's a drug house."

As we cruise by, an attractive fortyish blonde walks briskly outside and slams herself into the driver's seat. She has something in her hand and stares down lovingly at it. In the passenger seat is a young boy who'd been left alone in the car.

Rosario points out one drug house after another. Passing a fast-food restaurant at the intersection of Essex Street and Broadway, he says, “Here’s where all the crackheads and prostitutes go in the morning. You’ll see ’em here every day between 7 and 9. It’s like their office.”

Broadway is thick with traffic between Essex and Lowell streets. A short while later, a guy pulls up alongside, calling out in Spanish to Rosario.

“He’s a teacher,” Rosario says. “Bigtime drug dealer.”



*Josue Hernandez is leading a recall effort against the mayor.*

**BORN IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**, William Lantigua moved to the U.S. in 1974 at the age of 19, settling in Lawrence. He worked as a technician at Schneider Electric in North Andover for 23 years while doubling as a community organizer and volunteer campaign strategist in local elections. In 2002, he was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives from Lawrence’s 16th Essex District. He was reelected four times before announcing his candidacy for mayor of Lawrence in 2008.

Lantigua’s victory brought new hope to the overwhelmingly Latino population of the city: Here was a guy, like many of them, who had come to Lawrence from the Dominican Republic looking for an opportunity. A tall, slender man with a shaved head, Lantigua, now 57, possesses a kind of endearing clumsiness in front of a crowd. But his mien can quickly turn cold, and he’s often surrounded by a dozen or more grim-faced men wearing baggy suits that look like they came from the Russian politburo’s thrift shop.

Unfortunately for the city, Lantigua’s political persona changed as quickly as his moods. First, there was his refusal to give up his position as state rep, claiming he could do both jobs simultaneously — and collect both salaries. (Finally, in February 2010, his colleagues in the House forced him out by saying they’d deny Lawrence \$35 million in bailout money unless he quit.) Then, last May, it became known that Lantigua and his live-in girlfriend, Lorenza Ortega — who works in the city’s personnel office — were accepting federal fuel assistance to pay the heating bills for their condominium. Since

the mayor is paid more than \$100,000 a year, he and Ortega were clearly ineligible for the approximately \$1,165 annual fuel subsidy that's meant for struggling families. Lantigua bristled when questioned by reporters, claiming he didn't know he was receiving fuel assistance and that he was preoccupied with city business.

Meanwhile, the mayor has prevented his department heads, including the police and fire chiefs, from releasing information or talking to the press without his permission. That gag order is just one source of Lantigua's strained relations with his public safety departments. He has stated that firefighters get paid to sleep, and that Lawrence police are "intimidating" and "lazy." Certainly, the current administration inherited severe budget problems from the previous mayor, Michael Sullivan. But Lantigua's dismissiveness hasn't helped him win points with the fire or police departments.

Lantigua's ham-fisted patronage system is also drawing heat. One personnel change in the police department has fueled an ongoing circus of accusations and finger pointing, not to mention suspicions of a secret federal investigation. Right after his inauguration in January 2010, Lantigua demoted deputy police chief Mike Driscoll, a 20-year veteran of the department, and replaced him with sergeant Melix Bonilla, who'd been a top Lantigua campaign aide.

It wasn't long before Bonilla was caught up in controversy of his own. Approximately a year after Bonilla's appointment, his 17-year-old son, Jamel Bonilla, allegedly used his father's gun in a home invasion. (According to the *Eagle-Tribune* newspaper, Melix admitted as much as part of a deal that gave him immunity from prosecution; Jamel was indicted and pleaded not guilty.) Then, in April 2010, Bonilla sent police chief John Romero a memo suggesting the department trade several seized vehicles to a local car dealer, Bernardo Pena, who had ties to Lantigua. In the end, the police department gave up 13 vehicles, including a Lexus, a Cadillac, and an Acura, for four used Chevrolet Impalas.

Lawrence's state-appointed fiscal overseer, Robert Nunes, estimated that the city lost \$36,408 on the deal, and stated that the swap violated state and federal laws. (According to the *Eagle-Tribune*, the Essex County district attorney's office and the state inspector general are still investigating the deal, and the FBI has also questioned people involved in it.)

---

Subsequent revelations raised questions about Pena's relationship with Lantigua. As the controversial car deal was under way, Pena donated \$200 to Lantigua's campaign war chest, and in February of last year, Pena's company, Santo Domingo Motors, cosponsored a birthday party/fundraiser for the mayor, with tickets costing as much as \$100.

Lantigua is also under federal investigation, according to several press reports, for shipping city and private vehicles to the Dominican Republic, including a garbage truck, undercover police vehicles, and a school bus.

Lantigua's many issues have led not just to discontent, but also to a determined recall effort. Standing at the corner of South Broadway and Andover Street, several volunteers, all Latino, are holding signs in English and Spanish, asking passersby to sign a petition calling for Lantigua's removal from office. Twenty-four-year-old Josue Hernandez stoops into a car window, using an app on his cell phone to determine whether the person who wants to sign the petition is a registered Lawrence voter. Last summer, a different recall effort failed when the city ruled that many of the signatures collected did not belong to registered voters. Recall organizers suspected sabotage. Now, Hernandez and his colleagues must gather the signatures of 5,382 registered Lawrence voters — 15 percent of the number who cast ballots in the last election — to force a special election. They have 30 days to do so, and in the first three days have collected more than 500 of them.

Hernandez's public criticism of the mayor may have had repercussions — his juvenile record, including arrests for armed robbery, assault, and more, was posted on a pro-Lantigua Facebook page, the information coming from pages originally printed from a police department computer. (Chief Romero immediately opened an investigation, which is ongoing, into who did it.) Standing on the corner, Hernandez shows me a YouTube video on his phone of Lantigua confronting residents at a Walk for Peace last July. In the video, residents are trying to engage Lantigua as he repeatedly and angrily points at the ground in front of him — implying that his critics can kiss his feet. Finally, a political ally standing beside Lantigua takes him by the arm and convinces him to stop. "It's a peace march," Hernandez says, "and here he is acting like a thug."

**NEARLY 13,000 CHILDREN** attend Lawrence's troubled public schools. The past three superintendents were fired, including the most recent, Wilfredo Laboy, who's currently under criminal indictment and awaiting trial. Last fall, the state declared Lawrence a "chronically underperforming" system, and for the first time in Massachusetts history took over an entire district, essentially saying the city isn't competent to run its own schools.



The Department of Education completed its review of the district last fall. Among the reasons it cited for the takeover are a dropout rate that's three times the state average; a high school graduation rate of less than 50 percent; a pattern of "disrespectful and intimidating behavior" exhibited by school committee members; systemwide underperformance in math; an English language aptitude that's among the bottom one percent of all Massachusetts districts; chronic absenteeism; and a rate of in-school disciplinary suspensions more than triple the state average. And in a city where the student body is 90 percent Hispanic or Latino, the schools have been deemed woefully understaffed with teachers qualified to teach English-language learners.

Inside the schools, the problems are difficult to overstate. One day last fall, a middle school teacher found students huddled in the back of the classroom, according to attorney Linda Harvey, who represents the teacher. "He's got a knife," said a student, pointing at a boy holding a four-inch blade. The teacher ran to the classroom door and yelled for a security officer, who removed the boy. The teacher advised the security officer to call the police and an ambulance. Ninety minutes later, the student was sent back to the classroom without the knife, Harvey says.

---

Neither the police nor an ambulance was summoned, Harvey says, speculating that the incident went unreported "in order for the school to have a lower suspension and police intervention rate."

Harvey says the teacher later found out there was no incident report, or any punishment. "It's a feeling of hopelessness regarding the future," the lawyer says. "These teachers hope the receiver" — Jeffrey Riley, formerly the chief innovation officer for the Boston public schools, who was appointed in mid-January — "talks to them, because they haven't been heard from in years, and they're on the front lines."

Francis McLaughlin, 56, president of the Lawrence Teachers' Union, has taught computer science and history at Lawrence High for the past 32 years. "We have failed the kids. It's not a safe city," he says. "Kids can't learn if they don't feel safe. Teachers can't teach if they don't feel safe."

McLaughlin says the district doesn't make the students its priority. "For a long time, they've been running the school system for the benefit of certain individuals," he says. "The problem has been politics, and a corrupt administration. It's not just been the last few years — it's been the last 10 years. I hope justice will be served."

As he speaks, McLaughlin has to crane his neck around the stacks of reports and articles about the impending criminal trial of former superintendent Wilfredo Laboy that are on his desk. In March 2010, Laboy was indicted on eight counts of fraud and embezzlement and one count of illegal possession of alcohol on school property. At the same time, his right-hand man, Mark Rivera, was charged with seven counts of larceny over \$250 after he was caught using the school department's graphic designers and printers to create fliers and other literature for a political campaign.

After several requests, I am allowed to visit the public schools. The five-year-old campus of Lawrence High is a vast, forbidding structure in South Lawrence. The school and its grounds are staffed by 10 uniformed security officers. A police captain, a detective, and two patrolmen are headquartered there as well, but are also responsible for the other 27 schools in the district.

Lawrence is in the top third of Massachusetts towns when it comes to spending per pupil — more than even tony suburbs like Westwood, Sharon, and Cohasset — but success has been elusive. On my tour, I see some students and teachers working hard, but passing one classroom, I notice a kid in the front row reading a newspaper while his classmates are busy trying to solve math problems. And later I am startled to witness a skinny kid in a black sweatshirt confronting a hulking security officer in front of several other adults. “You’re talkin’ shit right now,” the kid says to the officer. “What are you gonna do if I let your blood flow?”

At lunchtime, I join three 16-year-old Dominican girls as they text friends and discuss the rumors that, once the state takes over, the school day will be extended to 4 p.m. It may sound like a good idea, but one of the girls is skeptical. “More kids will drop out,” she says.

---

**IN MID-JANUARY**, the fourth attempt to recall Lantigua fails. A large number of signatures Hernandez’s team collected over that first weekend are disqualified by City Attorney Charles Boddy and City Clerk William Maloney. The officials rule that the petition, despite having been previously approved by the city and entirely bilingual on one side, is missing a few lines of Spanish on the other. The city replaces the petition with a thoroughly bilingual one — but refuses to reset the 30 days allowed to collect the signatures. The volunteers have to start all over again, and eventually run out of time.

“Sometimes I feel discouraged, but the news is getting out,” Hernandez says. “As a Christian, I pray for Lantigua. But he’s gotten like a dictator.”

I stop by St. Patrick's church to speak with Father O'Brien, who stared down Lantigua during the inauguration at the high school. "We're surrounded by the drug industry," O'Brien says. He'd been driving past the Beacon projects recently, he continues, when he recognized two teenage boys loitering on a corner. O'Brien waved and the two boys waved back, each with a gun in his hand.

"They pulled them down quickly — they didn't mean to do that — but we're this casual about guns now," O'Brien says. "It's like the Wild West."