



The protective impact of immigrant concentration on juvenile recidivism: A statewide analysis of youth offenders



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The majority of existing research on immigration and crime suggests that immigrant concentration has either a null or negative impact on rates of criminal behavior. Far less research has examined the effect of immigration on the future outcomes for youth with prior criminal history. Youth who have had prior contact with the juvenile justice system represent an especially vulnerable population that could be expected to benefit most from the protective effects of immigration as identified in the literature.

Methods: We examine the effect of concentrated immigration on reoffending using a large sample of previously referred youth nested within 3,547 neighborhoods from the state of Florida. Hierarchical logistic regression is used in order to assess the effect of neighborhood conditions on juvenile recidivism, net of commonly considered individual-level attributes.

Results: Consistent with past research on the effect of immigrant concentration, results suggest a general protective effect of immigrant concentration on juvenile reoffending, controlling for levels of neighborhood disadvantage.

Conclusions: Neighborhood conditions impact the likelihood of juvenile offending, net of commonly considered individual characteristics. The current study adds to the literature suggesting a protective effect of immigrant concentration on criminal behavior. Study limitations and implications for future research are also discussed.

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Introduction

Over the last fifteen years there has been a significant amount of research devoted to the relationship between immigrant populations and criminal activity. The bulk of past research suggests that contrary to past theoretical perspectives, as well as public and political opinion, immigration or immigrant status is either unrelated or inversely related to criminal behavior. At the individual-level, a substantial body of literature has found that immigrants are less, not more, crime prone than their native-born counterparts (Bersani, 2014; Bersani, Loughran, & Piquero, 2014; Butcher & Piehl, 1998; Hagan & Palloni, 1998; Martinez & Lee, 2000; Ousey & Kubrin, 2009). Similarly, the basic consensus which emerges from community-level studies on the immigration-crime relationship suggests that larger immigrant populations are not associated with higher rates of crime in the aggregate (Lee & Martinez, 2002; Lee, Martinez, & Rosenfeld, 2001; Martinez, Lee, & Neilsen, 2004; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005;

Stowell & Martinez, 2007; Stowell, Messner, McGeever, & Raffalovich, 2009). Finally, two recent contextual studies have assessed the impact of immigrant communities on violence while controlling for individual factors known to contribute to criminal behavior, finding that communities with greater immigrant concentration have lower levels of violence, net of individual characteristics (Desmond & Kubrin, 2009; Sampson et al., 2005). Explanations of the protective effect of immigrant status (at the individual-level) or immigrant concentration (in the aggregate) have focused on the fact that immigrants and those living in their communities are insulated against the criminogenic influences of disadvantaged neighborhoods in a number of ways (Martinez, Stowell, & Lee, 2010; Sampson, 2008; Stowell et al., 2009).

While scholars have begun to examine whether the protective benefits of residing in areas with a large number of immigrants may impact the behavior of youth more generally, far less is known about the extent to which concentrated immigration may affect the reoffending behavior of delinquent youth. Although past research has demonstrated that immigrant concentration has a negative effect on primary criminal involvement among all youth living in the area (Desmond & Kubrin, 2009), to a large extent, research and theory on juvenile reentry has neglected to consider the potential for neighborhood factors to

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contribute significantly to adolescent outcomes post-release (Abrams & Snyder, 2010). The sole study that we are aware of, which examined the potential for immigrant concentration to inhibit further involvement in criminal behavior, found no relationship between returning to communities marked by concentrated immigration and the reoffending outcomes among 12,000 youth in a single county in the state of Arizona (Wright & Rodriguez, 2014). Importantly, the authors found evidence of ethnic- and gender-specific effects in their analysis, namely that concentrated immigration may serve as a protective factor for Latina girls. These findings, however, are not consistent with the bulk of recent immigration and crime literature, which suggests that a general protective effect of immigrant concentration on criminal outcomes should be expected. Furthermore, the results of their study have yet to be replicated in other, more diverse jurisdictions and therefore, may not be generalizable to youth in other areas.

In the present study, we seek to advance the literature on the connection between immigration and crime by expanding the analysis to a statewide sample of youth who resided in neighborhoods throughout the state of Florida. Specifically, we investigate the impact of community-level immigrant concentration on juvenile recidivism among 105,573 youth within 3,547 census tracts from across the state. Before describing our research design and discussing the results of our analysis, we begin by reviewing the factors known to be associated with juvenile recidivism at the individual level and outlining potential explanations for immigrant concentration to influence reoffending among youth included in the current study. We close with a discussion of our findings and implications for future research.

Review of individual-level factors that impact recidivism

Researchers and practitioners alike have documented that the majority of youth who are released from the juvenile justice system will recidivate within the first few months or year following their release. Specific to Florida, the average youth who re-offends does so during the 5th month post-completion of services (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2014). The current section reviews several of the most salient individual-level characteristics known to be associated with juvenile recidivism outlined by past research and included in our analyses.

Gender

Gender is one of the single best predictors of future delinquency, with males more likely to recidivate regardless of time period, age, country, or culture (Farrington, 1986; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Moffitt, 1993). This truth holds regardless of using self-report, official data, or victimization reports (Heimer & De Coster, 1999). Some suggest gender arguably may be the strongest risk factor for future involvement in delinquency activity (Giordano & Cernkovich, 1997; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010).

Age

The age-crime curve is one of the most commonly accepted extant relationships in the field of criminology (Farrington, 1986; Nagin & Land, 1993; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003; Sweeten, Piquero, & Steinberg, 2013; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Specifically, aggregate crime rises in early adolescence, peaks around 17 years of age, and declines significantly thereafter until reaching a stable low that levels off in young adulthood (Farrington, 1986).

Age at first offense

Relatedly, research on the risk factors associated with offending has identified a history of antisocial behavior evident from a young age, in a variety of settings, and involving a variety of different acts, as one of the

four strongest predictors of offending (Andrews & Bonta, 2003). The correlation between early-onset and higher levels of frequency and seriousness of crime has been well documented (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Tolan, 1987; Tolan & Thomas, 1995). Early age of onset is typically referenced as 12 years old or younger at the time of the first offense. Meta-analyses have demonstrated that the strongest childhood predictors of subsequent serious or violent offenses at ages 15–25 are involvement in delinquency and drug use at ages 6–11 (Howell, 2009; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). Over 20 longitudinal studies have reported a significant relationship between early onset and later crime, with similar findings for both males and females (Howell, 2009; see also Krohn, Thornberry, Rivera, & Le Blanc, 2001). Research has also demonstrated that early onset offenders have a two to three times higher risk of later violence, serious offenses, and chronic offending, and they are more likely to carry weapons, and engage in substance use (Howell, 2009, 2012; Krohn et al., 2001; Loeber & Farrington, 2001). Young offenders have been found to have a larger percentage of serious, violent, and chronic offending careers (Baglivio, Jackowski, Greenwald, & Howell, 2014; Howell, 2009; Snyder, 1998), and they are more likely to become juveniles who persist into adulthood (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). Studies have shown this relationship holds regardless of race and gender (Loeber, Farrington, & Petechuk, 2003).

Antisocial peer association

Antisocial peer association has consistently been shown to be among the most robust predictors of delinquency risk (Akers, 1998; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). Recent research has proposed a two-pronged impact of peer influence with both a historical risk component through deviant normative influence, as well as a form of situational risk through immediate temptations and opportunities (Thomas & McGloin, 2013; see also Haynie & Osgood, 2005), rather than arguing for one or the other.

Parental criminality

Much like peers, family members play an important role in the development and maintenance of criminal behavior. It has been suggested that youth who have family members that engage in deviant behaviors such as drug use and criminal activity, are more likely to persist in delinquency than young offenders with less deviant family members. In an analysis of the males in the Cambridge Study, West (1978) found parental criminality to be an important predictor of persistent offending. More recent studies have also provided further support for this connection (Dean, Brame, & Piquero, 1996; Paternoster, Dean, Piquero, Mazerolle, & Brame, 1997; Visher, Lattimore, & Linster, 1991).¹

Substance use

Alcohol and drug use is included in the “Big Eight” risk factors of the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model promoted by Andrews and Bonta (2003) upon which a plethora of risk/needs assessment instruments have been constructed (such as the C-PACT used in the current study). Similarly, a number of reviews devoted to the predictors of juvenile recidivism, suggest substance abuse represents a salient predictor of continued criminal involvement (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001; Dowden & Brown, 2002). Drug abuse has also been identified as a stepping stone to serious, violent, and chronic (SVC) offending and gang membership for females (Howell, 2012), with nearly fifty percent of persistent female delinquents being drug users (Huizinga, Weiher, Espiritu, & Esbensen, 2003).

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