Enclaves of opportunity or "ghettos of last resort?" Assessing the effects of immigrant segregation on violent crime rates

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Ben Feldmeyer [a],*, Casey T. Harris [b], Jennifer Scroggins [c]

[a] School of Criminal Justice, University of Cincinnati, CRC Room 5323A, P.O. Box 210389, Cincinnati, OH 45221, United States
[b] Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, University of Arkansas, 211 Old Main, Fayetteville, AR 72701, United States
[c] Department of Social Sciences & Cultural Studies, Montana State University Billings, LA 813, Billings, MT 59101, United States

ABSTRACT

A growing body of research indicates that immigration to the U.S. has crime-reducing effects on aggregate levels of violence, which researchers have often attributed to the protective and revitalizing effects of immigrants settling in spatially concentrated neighborhoods. However, recent scholarship suggests that growing shares of the foreign-born population are bypassing these segregated immigrant enclaves and are dispersing more widely to other urban neighborhoods. Moreover, some scholars suggest that spatially isolating immigrant populations may not always be protective, but could actually contribute to social problems like crime, particularly in disadvantaged contexts. The current study offers one of the first analyses exploring the way that segregation of immigrant populations (relative to the U.S.-born) is related to year 2000 violent crime rates for nearly 500 census places in California and New York. Results of our analysis reveal no direct link between immigrant segregation and macro-level violence, but instead show that these effects are highly contextualized and depend on the resources present in locales. Specifically, immigrant segregation contributes to violence in highly disadvantaged places but is linked to lower violence in areas with greater resources.

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1. Introduction

Dating back to the early 20th century, interest in the effects of immigration on crime has risen and fallen in tandem with changes in U.S. immigration tides. Similar to the early waves of European immigration that first captured the attention of Chicago School sociologists, contemporary immigration to the U.S. has resurged to heightened levels, reviving public concern and political discourse about the social consequences of immigration. In turn, scholarly interest in immigration and crime has been rekindled as social scientists revisit these relationships for the newest waves of immigration. As a result, there is now a sizable and growing body of research examining aggregate-level relationships between immigration and crime (Desmond and Kubrin, 2009; Feldmeyer, 2009; Feldmeyer and Steffensmeier, 2009; Harris and Feldmeyer, 2013; Lyons et al., 2013; Martinez, 2002; Martinez et al., 2008, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2005; Ousey and Kubrin, 2009; Ramey, 2013; Reid et al., 2005; Sampson et al., 2005; Shihadeh and Barranco, 2010a, 2010b; Stowell, 2007; Wadsworth, 2010). The general conclusion from these studies is that the relative size of the immigration population has either neutral effects or is linked to lower rates of crime and violence in U.S. locales after controlling for other macro-structural conditions.

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: ben.feldmeyer@uc.edu (B. Feldmeyer), caseyh@uark.edu (C.T. Harris), jennifer.scroggins@msubillings.edu (J. Scroggins).

Although these studies have considerably advanced our knowledge of immigration and crime, several scholars have suggested that it is equally important to consider how these relationships are contextualized across different immigrant settlement patterns and structural circumstances (Harris and Feldmeyer, 2013; Kubrin and Ishizawa, 2012; Martinez et al., 2008; Mears, 2001; Shihadeh and Barranco, 2010a, 2010b). Drawing from the rich literatures on racial segregation and ethnic enclaves, a particularly salient issue is *how the segregation of immigrants within communities (relative to the U.S.-born) might affect violence rates.* To date, research on immigration and crime has largely focused on how the size or growth of immigrant populations (e.g., percent foreign born) is associated with crime rates *across* communities but has given far less consideration to how immigrants are spatially-distributed *within* macro-level units (for a notable exception, see Barranco, 2013). Certainly, two cities with similarly-sized immigrant populations may exhibit different degrees of immigrant segregation or integration with the U.S.-born. However, research has yet to fully explore whether (1) aggregate levels of violence are higher (or lower) when immigrants are isolated in ethnic neighborhoods and segregated from the U.S.-born, and relatedly, (2) whether the relationship between immigrant segregation and macro-level violence depends on broader structural conditions of the locale.

Addressing this gap in research is important not only for extending immigration-crime research, but also for addressing mainstream perspectives that offer conflicting portrayals of immigrant settlement patterns and their potential effects on community social problems, like crime and violence. On the one hand, the emerging "immigrant revitalization" perspectives suggest that (a) immigrant populations are often filtered into spatially-concentrated ethnic neighborhoods or enclaves and that (b) these segregated immigrant communities provide a "protective shell" of social resources (e.g., social capital, kinship ties, assistance with housing and employment, collective efficacy) that insulate locales from crime and other social problems (Martinez, 2002; Martinez et al., 2008, 2010; Sampson and Bean, 2006; see review in Shihadeh and Winters, 2010: 633).

On the other hand, several other lines of research suggest that this depiction of immigrant settlement may not match the experiences of a growing segment of the foreign-born population. First, there is mounting evidence that immigration is shifting away from the types of concentrated ethnic neighborhoods described by the revitalization perspectives. Instead, foreign-born populations (particularly from Latin America) have become more spatially dispersed *within* urban areas and are increasingly settling in neighborhoods that are more integrated with the U.S.-born and which may not have the concentrated, protective immigrant communities described in prior research (Durand et al., 2000; Frey, 2006; Lichter and Johnson, 2009; McConnell, 2008; Singer, 2004; Shihadeh and Barranco, 2010b). Second, in contrast to the insulating effects of immigrant enclaves described by revitalization perspectives, other research suggests that the segregation of immigrants may not always be advantageous. Research on both immigrant assimilation and residential segregation argues that concentrating minority groups (including immigrants) into segregated residential clusters and ethnic neighborhoods may increase macro-level crime, *particularly in disadvantaged contexts.* That is, rather than creating protective enclaves of opportunity, isolating foreign-born populations into disadvantaged neighborhoods with few resources could actually restrict social mobility, create "ghettos of last resort," and foster broader patterns of macro-level violence in urban environments (Glaser et al., 2008: 526; Marcuse, 2005; Peach, 1996; see reviews in Alba et al., 1999; Desmond and Kubrin, 2009).

Taken together, the divergent depictions highlighted above and the scarcity of research on immigrant segregation and violence suggest that there is a pressing need for empirical research that explores these relationships. Using year 2000 data on arrests and population characteristics for approximately 480 census places in California and New York, the current study offers one of the first analyses aimed at addressing this gap in research (see also Barranco, 2013). Specifically, our goals are twofold: to assess (1) whether immigrant segregation from the U.S.-born contributes to higher or lower place-level rates of violent crime and (2) whether the relationships between immigrant segregation and violence are uniform across locales or depend on levels of structural disadvantage. Notably, exploring these connections is important for advancing knowledge on the social impact of immigration and for contextualizing immigration-crime research, topics which hold relevance for a wide range of social science audiences interested in crime, immigration, demography, stratification, race/ethnicity, and urbanization. In addition, the current study also seeks to provide a conceptual framework outlining the complex links between immigrant segregation and crime by bridging the literatures described above ("immigrant revitalization" perspectives and segregation research) and empirically addressing conflicts and inconsistencies between the two.

2. Prior research on immigration and crime

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the early 2000s, the U.S. experienced a rise in immigration unmatched since the early 20th century waves of European immigration to the U.S. The foreign-born population more than doubled from approximately 13.6 million in 1980 (6% of the population) up to nearly 40 million residents by 2010 (13% of the population) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Although this trend slowed somewhat after the year 2000, the inflow of immigrants has continued well into the 21st century at rates that far surpass pre-1980 levels. As a result, population projections indicate that if current trends continue, nearly 1 in 5 U.S. residents will be foreign-born by the year 2050 (Passel and Cohn, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

In response to this rapidly changing demographic landscape, public and political discourse concerning the social consequences of immigration has greatly intensified. Both lawmakers and much of the U.S. populous have come to believe that immigration contributes to a host of social problems in U.S. society, including rising healthcare and social service costs, decreased employment options for U.S. citizens, dilution of American culture, and heightened levels of crime and violence