



# Walking ATMs and the immigration spillover effect: The link between Latino immigration and robbery victimization



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## ABSTRACT

Media reports and prior research suggest that undocumented Latino migrants are disproportionately robbed because they rely on a cash-only economy and they are reluctant to report crimes to law-enforcement (the Walking ATM phenomenon). From this we generate two specific research questions. First, we probe for an immigration spillover effect – defined as increased native and documented Latino robbery victimization due to offenders' inability to distinguish between the statuses of potential victims. Second, we examine the oft-repeated claim that Blacks robbers disproportionately target Latino victims. Using National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data from 282 counties, results show (1) support for an immigration spillover effect but, (2) no support for the claim that Latinos are disproportionately singled out by Black robbers. We discuss the implications of our findings.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, the number of Latinos in the United States has increased, going from 14.6 million in 1980 to an estimated 50 million in 2010 (U.S. Census 2010). As their numbers have grown, there are increasing reports of robbers targeting Latinos, especially undocumented Latino migrants, because of the latter's reliance on the cash economy. Indeed, [Fussell \(2011\)](#) finds that migrants are in fact being specifically targeted both because they carry cash and because they are reluctant to report crimes to the police.

Additional media reports have suggested that it is Black robbers who are responsible for the disproportionate targeting of Latinos (e.g. [Medina, 2007](#); [Sanders, 2012](#)). One possible explanation for this targeting can be found in Group Threat Theory, which predicts that increased economic competition from Latinos might result in a violent, protective response from Blacks, finding expression in serious crimes like robbery.

While previous work is instructive, we believe it can be expanded upon in three interconnected ways. (1) Whether Latino immigration is associated with higher levels of robbery victimization for *all* Latinos (i.e. is there an immigration spillover effect?), (2) whether this spillover effect is only present in areas with a large proportion of foreign-born Latinos, and (3) whether Black robbers are more likely than non-Black robbers to single out Latinos for victimization. Lastly, we examine this phenomenon with a nationwide sample of counties in order to make stronger inferences than those possible in previous studies which focus on a single city (e.g. [Cancino et al., 2009](#); [Fussell, 2011](#); [Negi et al., 2013](#)). We examine this issue for 2010 using American Community Survey and the National Incident-Based Reporting System data.

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## 2. Latino immigration and robbery victimization

The link between immigration and crime has been a popular topic among criminologists since it was first examined by Chicago school researchers in the 1920s and 1930s. While most of the research from that period found a positive association between immigration and crime (i.e. Shaw and McKay, 1969; Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958), the nature of immigration in the United States has changed dramatically over the past century. For instance, the country of origin of most immigrants has shifted from Eastern Europe in the 1920s and 1930s to Latin America in the 1990s and early 2000s. More recent criminological research has recognized this change and re-examined the link established by previous researchers.

These studies have clearly supported the idea that there is no longer a link between immigration and crime, or if the link still exists, immigration is now associated with lower crime rates (i.e. Butcher and Piehl, 1998; Martinez, 2000; Lee et al., 2001; Reid et al., 2005; Ousey and Kubrin, 2009; Martinez et al., 2010; Wadsworth, 2010; MacDonald et al., 2013). Other researchers have focused specifically on the impact of Latino immigration on crime rates. Although some suggest the effects of Latino immigration vary depending on where the migrants settle (i.e. Barranco, 2013; Harris and Feldmeyer, 2013; Shihadeh and Barranco, 2013), most argue that Latino immigration either has no effect on crime or lowers it (i.e. Hagan and Palloni, 1999; Martinez et al., 2003; Sampson, 2006, 2008; Stowell and Martinez, 2007, 2009; Desmond and Kubrin, 2009).

While these studies have been instructive in a number of ways, for instance, explaining the crime drop of the 1990s (i.e. Sampson, 2006, 2008; Wadsworth, 2010) or fleshing out the “immigrant revitalization” perspective (Martinez et al., 2010; Velez and Lyons, 2012; Ramey, 2013), most focus their attention on how immigration affects criminal offending. Few studies have examined how immigration affects victimization of the migrants themselves. But since the mid-2000s, there have been a growing number of media reports suggesting that undocumented Latino migrants are being specifically targeted by robbers (e.g. Brady, 2007; Medina, 2007; Nossiter, 2009; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2009; Sanders, 2012). These migrants may be enticing targets for several reasons. First, illegal immigrants are more likely to be paid in cash, often quietly and under the table, so that employers minimize the legal exposure associated with hiring undocumented workers. Second, this cash payment stays as raw currency since migrants are reluctant, or unable, to engage the formal economy and open a bank account. Third, this reluctance is further compounded by the fact that migrants tend to have poor facility with English. Finally, unauthorized migrants are much less likely to report a robbery to police for fear of exposing their immigration status to authorities. For these reasons, undocumented workers are conspicuous members of a cash-only, underground economy that makes them enticing targets for robbery – the so-called “Walking ATM” phenomenon (Nossiter, 2009).

A recent article by Fussell (2011) tested these assertions and found that Latino migrants were, in fact, being targeted by robbers and, more importantly, provides a framework to explain the finding. She outlines four steps in what is called the deportation threat dynamic: (1) an unauthorized migrant finds employment, (2) a potential criminal assumes the migrant is unauthorized, (3) the person takes advantage of the migrant by robbing them, and (4) the migrant does not report the crime to police because he/she fears that any contact with law enforcement might lead to deportation.

This fear of deportation was confirmed in a national survey of Latinos, where two-thirds of all foreign-born Latinos were worried that they or their friends could be deported (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007), a justifiable fear given that between 2002 and 2011, 90% of all deported aliens were Latino (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011). This vulnerability to deportation may be why Latinos are less likely to report victimization to local law enforcement (Brown, 2009; Rennison, 2007, 2010), who in turn are sometimes compelled to enforce immigration law (Menjivar and Bejarano, 2004).

In sum, research suggests that robbers are attempting to target undocumented Latino migrants because they are members of a cash-only economy and are reluctant to report victimization to the police. While this research is instructive – that robbers *are* targeting undocumented migrants – there is an opportunity to expand the focus beyond just undocumented migrants to consider potential “spillover effects” on the broader population of Latinos.

## 3. Immigration spillover effects

In this research, we consider the possibility that robbery rates among documented and native-born Latinos will increase as a result of the Walking ATM phenomenon. That is, given that the presence of undocumented migrants in an area enhances the opportunity structure for robbery for the reasons outlined above, this effect may reverberate to the rest of the local Latino population, who too may experience greater robbery victimization – regardless of their immigration or legal status. These “spillover” victimizations will result from the robbers’ inability to distinguish between undocumented, documented, and native-born Latinos. As Fussell (2011) points out in the second step of the deportation threat dynamic, robbers “assume” a Latino is undocumented. Fussell (2011; 607) goes on to explain this in more detail – “legal status is not visually apparent to those who take advantage of Latino migrants. Only their appearance and language is observable, so employers and criminals infer Latino migrants’ legal status on this basis. This makes all Latino migrants into targets for criminals.”

If the presence of *undocumented* migrants increases the robbery risk for *documented* migrants, we suspect there might be a collateral effect for all Latinos in the area, regardless of their immigration status and whether they are native or foreign born. If appearance and language alone are the cues that trigger potential robbers to commit crime, there is little to distinguish a foreign-born from a native-born Latino. Appearance alone provides insufficient information for robbers to distinguish between the two groups. And language is no better a cue since many native-born Latinos speak Spanish. Even if that were not

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