



The immigration–crime relationship: Evidence across US metropolitan areas

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Abstract

Despite popular commentary claiming a link between immigration and crime, empirical research exploring this relationship is sparse. Especially missing from the literature on immigration and crime is a consideration of how immigration affects rates of crime at the macro-level. Although individual-level studies of immigrant criminality and victimization tend to demonstrate that immigrants typically engage in less crime than their native-born counterparts, the effect of immigration on aggregate criminal offending is less clear. In this research, we attempt to address this weakness in the literature by examining the effects of aspects of immigration on crime rates in metropolitan areas. We combine 2000 US Census data and 2000 Uniform Crime Report data to explore how the foreign-born population influences criminal offending across a sample of metropolitan areas. After controlling for a host of demographic and economic characteristics, we find that immigration does not increase crime rates, and some aspects of immigration lessen crime in metropolitan areas.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two centuries, stereotypical images of the criminal immigrant have appeared in the popular press, political discourse, and public opinion; but the pervasiveness of these images has fluctuated (Hagan and Palloni, 1999; Massey and Denton, 1993). During the heavy migration of Eastern Europeans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was great concern about the impact of immigrants on social problems, especially crime, in American cities. These concerns fueled restrictive legislation that aimed to slow, or even to stop, certain immigrants from entering the United States (Hagan and Palloni, 1999). With a strong US economy and declining numbers of immigrants, rampant public expression of such fears waned after World War II (Hagan and Palloni, 1999).

In recent years, however, public opinion has once again turned negative toward immigrants. Since the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act, which allowed immigrants from non-European countries easier entry, Asian and Latin American immigrants have dominated the migratory streams into the US (Heer, 1996). Like a century before, there are concerns about the impact of these “new” immigrants on urban crime. Popular anti-immigrant commentary has frequently cited the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act as the cause of subsequent increases in rates of crime, arguing that “under current immigration laws and procedures, frighteningly large numbers of newcomers see crime as their avenue to the American dream” (Tanton and Lutton, 1993, pp. 217). Such commentary argues that immigration has fueled all types of crime, from youth gangs (Miller, 1990) to white collar offending (O’Kane, 1992).

Despite this body of commentary on the alleged link between immigration and crime, empirical research exploring this link is sparse (Martinez and Lee, 1999). Noticeably missing from the literature on immigration and crime is a consideration of how immigration affects rates of crime at the macro-level. Because immigrants enter a pre-existing socioeconomic urban structure, macro-level analyses of the relationship between immigration and crime are essential. Research on the relationship between immigration and crime must take into account the ecological impacts of immigrants that may influence rates of criminal offending. Thus, while individual-level studies of immigrant criminality tend to show that immigrants typically engage in *less* crime than their native-born counterparts, the effect of macro-level aspects of immigration on rates of criminal offending is unclear. On the one hand, it is possible that a large immigrant population in a metropolitan area could contribute to structural factors conducive to crime. For example, a large immigrant population could flood the low-wage labor market forcing the native-born population out of the labor market and into chronic unemployment, leading to criminal offending by those displaced workers (Grogger, 1998). On the other hand, a large immigrant population could rejuvenate economically stagnant metropolitan areas, thus contributing to structural factors that lessen crime (Lee et al., 2001). The existing literature on the relationship between immigration and crime at the aggregate level provides insufficient guidance as to which alternative is most accurate.

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