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Re-examining the relationship between Latino immigration and racial/ethnic violence[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Whether immigration increases crime has long been a source of political debate and scholarly interest. Despite widespread public opinion to the contrary, the weight of evidence suggests the most recent wave of U.S. immigration has not increased crime, and may have actually helped reduce criminal violence. However, with recent shifts in immigrant settlement patterns away from traditional receiving destinations, a series of contemporary studies suggests a more complicated immigration-crime relationship, whereby Latino immigration is said to increase violence in newer immigrant destinations (but not in established destinations) and has varied effects for different racial/ethnic groups. With few exceptions, these more recent studies rely on cross-sectional analyses, thus limiting their ability to examine the longitudinal nexus between Latino immigration and violent crime. This study brings to bear the first longitudinal data set to test the relationship between immigration and racial/ethnic homicide in U.S. metropolitan areas between 1990 and 2010. Results from bivariate longitudinal associations and multivariate fixed effects models are contrary to recent findings – Latino immigration is generally associated with decreases in homicide victimization for whites, blacks, and Hispanics in both established and non-established immigrant destinations, though these associations are not significant in all cases.

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1. Re-examining the relationship between Latino immigration and racial/ethnic violence

Whether immigration increases crime has been a central question in sociology and criminology dating back to the Chicago School tradition of the early 20th century (Shaw and McKay, 1942). This question has received resurgent interest in recent years as the United States experienced the largest influx of immigrants over the past two decades – in both absolute and relative numbers – in its history. Between 1990 and 2010, the foreign-born population more than doubled, from 19.8 million to 40 million, driven primarily by Latin American growth (Wilson and Singer, 2011). This wave of immigration has triggered substantial public angst regarding the criminality of immigrants, resulting in immigration-reform legislation and public policies aimed at reducing immigration-induced crime (Bohn et al., 2014). Yet, despite the widespread perception that immigrants are associated with increases in criminal activity, the weight of evidence suggests that immigration does not

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increase crime, and may actually be associated with reductions in criminal violence over time (Feldmeyer, 2009; Martinez et al., 2010; Ousey and Kubrin, 2009; Wadsworth, 2010). The predominant explanation for this collective set of findings is rooted in the immigrant revitalization perspective, whereby immigration is said to reduce criminal violence in urban communities by strengthening community institutions and bolstering processes of informal social control (Lyons et al., 2013).

However, a series of recent macro-level studies suggests a more complicated immigration-crime relationship along two dimensions: destination type and race/ethnicity (Harris and Feldmeyer, 2013; Shihadeh and Barranco, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). In recent decades, the settlement patterns of many newly arriving Latino immigrants have shifted away from traditional receiving communities (e.g. California and New York) to areas with little history of immigration (e.g. North Carolina and Nebraska). According to this more recent body of work, which draws from the social disorganization perspective, these shifts likely condition the links between immigration and violence. That is, while an “umbrella of social control” (Shihadeh and Winters, 2010) may characterize traditional destinations, Latino¹ immigration may weaken social organization in communities that are unaccustomed to the arrival of immigrants, thus increasing rates of criminal violence. In addition, these studies suggest immigration may not affect all racial/ethnic groups equally. Shihadeh and Barranco (2010b, 2013), for example, argue that recent Latino immigration increased black and Latino violence by displacing low-skilled black workers and destabilizing minority communities (see also Harris and Feldmeyer, 2013).

With few exceptions (see Ferraro, 2016), however, this more recent body of work has relied on cross-sectional analyses to examine the relationship between immigration and racial/ethnic violence. While appropriate for understanding *stock* effects (whether stable features of macro-social units are correlated with one another), this approach cannot address the central question in immigration-crime debates: do *increases* in immigration result in *increases* in criminality? This question is fundamentally one that involves a process of social change that unfolds *over time* (Ousey and Kubrin, 2009, 2014), thus necessitating the use of longitudinal methods. In addition to this substantive concern, longitudinal analyses provide important methodological strengths over cross-sectional studies. Most notably, the use of fixed effects estimators affords considerably more analytical leverage to understand the links between recent immigration and violence by focusing only on within-unit change, thus removing the effects of all time-invariant causes of violence (whether measured or not) that potentially confound the immigration-crime relationship in cross-sectional analyses (Allison, 2005).

Motivated by these conceptual and methodological concerns, and in an effort to inform competing theoretical views in contemporary immigration-crime research, in this article I reexamine the immigration-racial/ethnic violence nexus using a longitudinal, nationally representative data set that includes race/ethnicity-specific measures for homicide victimization and theoretically relevant constructs. By combining death records from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and multiple data sources to capture the socioeconomic, demographic, and legal context of 132 of the largest metropolitan areas between 1990 and 2010, this study is the first to provide even descriptive information on the trends between Latino immigration and separate measures for white, black, and Hispanic homicide in recent decades.

In this article, I pursue two related questions that have direct theoretical and policy relevance for contemporary immigration debates. First, did immigration increase violent crime for whites, blacks, and Hispanics in recent decades? Second, are these relationships conditioned by the type of immigrant destination (e.g. traditional v. non-traditional)? Answering these questions informs several salient themes germane to our understanding of current processes of immigrant integration, racial/ethnic stratification, and criminal justice policy.

The change in immigrant settlement patterns away from established immigrant areas and towards non-traditional destinations represents one of the most significant demographic shifts in recent decades (Singer, 2004). Thus, understanding the extent to which this bifurcation of the Latino immigrant community conditions criminogenic processes is crucial for understanding contemporary processes of immigrant assimilation. This consideration is particularly significant given that sociologists have long viewed group disparities in criminal violence as important indicators of assimilation and reflections of broader patterns of stratification. Against this backdrop, whether contemporary patterns of Latino immigration have contributed to racial/ethnic disparities in homicide victimization by disproportionately increasing minority violence not only contributes to our knowledge of the etiology of serious violence but also informs our general understanding of racial/ethnic stratification in U.S. society.

In addition, this examination speaks to contentious policy debates on the efficacy of border enforcement as a crime-reduction tool. Concerns over immigrant criminality, particularly from Latin America, have been at the fore of contemporary political discussions and have motivated multiple criminal justice policies.² However, these policy discussions have occurred without the benefit of longitudinal research as to whether Latino immigration has differential criminogenic effects on certain racial/ethnic groups, depending on the destination type. Thus, understanding whether and how Latino immigration influences homicide rates, for whom Latino immigration matters most (e.g. white violence, black violence, etc.), and whether any immigration effects are context-specific is vital to evaluating the need for, and development of, increased border enforcement strategies as targeted policy responses for homicide prevention. Findings suggestive of reduced criminal

¹ The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably in this paper to reflect both popular usage and the terminology standards used by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Census.

² For example, in debates leading up to the passage of Arizona’s contentious SB 1070 “Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act,” safety from criminal violence was a major justification for the law. As State Rep. John Kavanagh – one the law’s authors – stated, “We’ll do whatever is necessary to protect ourselves” (Nowicki, 2010).

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