



# Age at immigration and crime in Stockholm using sibling comparisons

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## ABSTRACT

Past Swedish research has shown that immigrants arriving in the receiving country at an older age are less likely to commit crime than immigrants arriving at a younger age. Segmented assimilation theory argues that the family and neighborhood may be important factors affecting how age at immigration and crime are related to one another. This study used population-based register data on foreign-background males from Stockholm to test the effect of age at immigration on crime. Potential confounding from the family and neighborhood was addressed using variables and modeling strategies. Initial results, using variables to control for confounding, showed that people who immigrated around age 4 were the most likely to be suspected of a crime. When controlling for unmeasured family characteristics, it seemed that a later age at immigration was tied to a lower likelihood of crime, which does not corroborate past research findings. The effect of age at immigration, however, was not statistically significant. The results imply that future research on entire families may be a worthwhile endeavor.

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## 1. Introduction

Children of immigrants, either the foreign- or native-born offspring of adult immigrants, are starting to represent a sizeable portion of the population in many Western countries (Statistics Canada, 2012; Statistics Sweden, 2012; The Urban Institute, 2006). Many researchers have found that children of immigrants are more likely to commit crime the earlier they arrive in the receiving country (Hagan et al., 2008; Morenoff and Astor, 2006; Sampson et al., 2005; Tonry, 1997). This is counterintuitive because earlier arriving children ought to, in theory, be protected by a greater level of acculturation to the host country. Instead, a presumably greater level of acculturation appears to be a risk factor for crime. Seeing acculturation as a potential risk factor for crime, rather than a protective factor, has been dubbed as one aspect of the “immigrant paradox.” This paradoxical relationship between acculturation and poor outcomes lies at the heart of segmented assimilation theory.

Segmented assimilation theory argues that family context plays an important role in the adaptation and outcomes of children of immigrants. The family context includes the language spoken at home, parental expectations of the children, and parental discipline style. Past criminological research supports the importance of family factors in non-immigrant criminality (Frisell, 2012; Frisell et al., 2011; McCord, 1991), and these results are likely generalizable to immigrant populations. Yet, to date, quantitative analyses have not addressed familial confounding in the age at immigration–crime relationship.

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Swedish register data can be analyzed to assess the impact of family context and come to a potentially more reliable estimate of the effect of age at immigration on crime.

In this research I will test if the “immigrant paradox” can be explained by family characteristics. I first provide a brief background on immigrants in Sweden, followed by a discussion on past Swedish age at immigration studies. I then review segmented assimilation theory and discuss how it highlights the importance of family. I follow with a description of the data and methods used to tap into family characteristics of segmented. I convey the results of the analysis. Finally, I discuss the results and conclude with remarks on the implications of these results for future research on immigrant acculturation.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Context: immigrants in Sweden

Between the 1960s and early 1970s, immigrants in Sweden came primarily from Finland and other European countries. From the early 1970s until the mid- to late 2000s, the majority of immigrants to Sweden were either refugees from conflicts around the world or family migrants. This history has resulted in a diverse immigrant population comprised of people from over 150 different countries. Many pre-2004 immigrant young males in Stockholm have come from Iran, Chile, Turkey and Finland. In Stockholm County, approximately 20% of children have a foreign background and the majority of these children live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of other children with a foreign background (Statistics Sweden, 2007). Sweden's integration policies are ranked as the best among developed countries (Huddleston et al., 2011). Sweden also has a strong social welfare state, which may help to prevent otherwise disadvantaged immigrants from becoming marginalized. There are, however, some signs of anti-immigrant public sentiment, which indicate that Sweden's top-ranked policies have not created a perfectly egalitarian society. In 2010, over 3500 xenophobic/racist hate crimes were reported (Brå, 2011). There is also evidence of labor market disparity (Bygren, 2010; Duvander, 2001; Nekby et al., 2009; OECD, 2008) and discrimination (Arai et al., 2008; Arai and Thoursie, 2009).

### 2.2. Age at immigration in Sweden

Research from Sweden stands out as the sole exception across Western countries (Tonry, 1997) by having shown that immigrating at a younger age protected against crime (Ahlberg, 1996; Hällsten et al., 2013; Martens, 1997; Martens and Holmberg, 2005). The lower rate of crime younger arrivers was presumed to result from successful Swedish immigration and integration policies. Yet, some criminological research indicates that differences in methodology may play a role in these findings (Kardell and Martens, 2013). Additionally studies on age at immigration and crime-related outcomes show that a younger age at immigration is a risk factor. Studies that considered minor delinquency (Berry et al., 2006), drug abuse (Hjern, 2004), and alcohol-related disorders (Hjern and Allebeck, 2004) found that immigrants who arrived at a younger age were more likely to have these problems. It is helpful to turn to segmented assimilation theory to understand how the age at which an immigrant arrives may increase or decrease the risk for crime.

### 2.3. Segmented assimilation theory

Portes and Zhou (1993) developed the concept of “segmented” assimilation to describe various acculturation processes among the children of immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Segmented assimilation theory (SAT) argues that the length of time spent in the receiving country is an important, but ambiguous risk factor (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). The earlier children of immigrants arrive in the receiving country, the greater are their opportunities to excel. On the other hand, earlier arrival may also increase the risk of criminality. Unencumbered by any experience abroad and influenced only by their cultural experiences in the receiving country, second generation immigrants are at the greatest risk of criminality while also having the greatest opportunity to excel.

The potential of age at immigration to either increase or decrease the likelihood of crime immediately indicates that it plays a secondary role in whether a child of an immigrant commits crime. Instead, the likelihood of crime is “largely [dependent] on the ways that family and ethnic community resources are deployed to confront the challenges faced by second-generation youths” (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006, p. 255; Haller et al., 2011; Rumbaut, 1997; Zhou, 1997).

According to SAT, the family can mobilize against negative forces, or is perhaps privileged enough to avoid them entirely, and impede criminality. Insulation from crime may occur through economic or human capital resources. Conversely, the family may be unable to combat these negative or antisocial influences. SAT also views the child's individual agency as a product of family and community support (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). Studies that fail to concurrently consider the family, neighborhood, and age at immigration are likely to produce inaccurate results.

Age at immigration and the family may be linked or confounded in a causal relationship. Age at immigration may be a mediating factor between the family and crime. As a mediator, age at immigration occurs along the causal pathway that starts in the family and ends in crime. For example, the results showing a younger age at immigration as a protective factor

<sup>1</sup> Segmented assimilation is juxtaposed with traditional, “straight line” views of immigrant assimilation which assume that greater entrenchment in the receiving country will result in more positive outcomes regardless of the context (Gordon, 1964; Warner and Srole, 1945).

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