IMMIGRATION REDUCES CRIME: AN EMERGING SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – *Previously we (Martinez & Lee, 2000) reviewed the empirical literature of the 20th century on the topic of immigration and crime. This chapter discusses developments in this body of scholarship that have occurred in subsequent years.*

Methodology – *This literature review covers recent empirical research associated with the emerging "immigration revitalization perspective."*

Findings – *Recent research has become substantially more sophisticated in terms of analytical methods, including multivariate modeling and statistically grounded mapping techniques. But the conclusion remains largely the same. Contrary to the predictions of classic criminological theories and popular stereotypes, immigration generally does not increase crime and often suppresses it.*

Practical implications – *Our review of the literature challenges stereotypical views about immigrants and immigration as major causes of crime in the United States. Unfortunately, these erroneous views continue to inform public policies and should be reconsidered in light of empirical data.*

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Value – *This chapter represents the first attempt to synthesize recent empirical work associated with the immigration revitalization perspective. It will be of value to immigration scholars and criminologists as well as general readers interested in the relationship between immigration and crime.*

In July 2000, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) released the first volume of its *Criminal Justice 2000* series. According to Samuels (2000, p. iii), then acting director of NIJ, the purpose of the series was to provide "one compilation comprising a comprehensive, scholarly examination and analysis of the current state of criminal justice in the United States." We contributed a chapter to this first volume that provided a look back at the scholarship of the 20th century on the relationship between immigration and crime in the United States. Although the major criminological theories would generally predict that immigration should increase crime, we concluded that "the bulk of empirical studies conducted over the past century have found that immigrants are typically underrepresented in criminal statistics" and that "native groups would profit from a better understanding of how immigrant groups faced with adverse social conditions maintain relatively low levels of crime" (Martinez & Lee, 2000, pp. 486, 516). A decade has passed since we wrote these words, so it is an appropriate time to assess the extent to which the conclusions we drew from our review of the 20th century literature continue to hold in the early part of the 21st century. In the current chapter, we argue that most of the research on the United States conducted since 2000 has found that immigration does not increase crime and may actually suppress it. There are some caveats to this general rule, which we also explore.

In our *Criminal Justice 2000* book chapter, we grouped the major theories of crime into three broad perspectives: opportunity structure, cultural approaches, and social disorganization (see Bankston, 1998). Opportunity structure theories suggest that groups of people who lack legitimate opportunities for wealth and social status will "innovate" by turning to crime (Merton, 1938). Immigrants, particularly those who entered the United States illegally, would seem to have abundant motivation to innovate in this fashion because many are in the most crime-prone social categories, which includes young, unskilled, and unattached males, residing in high-poverty neighborhoods with few opportunities for educational and economic advancement (Rumbaut, Gonzales, Komaie, Morgan, & Tafoya-Estrada,

2006). Similarly, the cultural background of immigrants may lead to "culture conflict" with the values of the "dominant interest groups" in society, thereby increasing their involvement in crime (see Sellin, 1938, p. 21). In addition, the social disorganization perspective argues that the immigration process itself – regardless of the criminal propensities of individual immigrants – weakens community social controls, which in turn increases crime. This is because the population turnover and language difficulties associated with immigration weaken the social ties among neighbors and disrupt the cohesive social networks that may have existed among a previously homogeneous group of residents (Shaw & McKay, 1969 [1942]). For all of these reasons, immigration has been assumed to be an important cause of crime among scholars and laypersons alike (see also Peterson & Krivo, 2005, p. 345).

Yet the fact that immigrants were generally underrepresented in crime statistics for 100 years suggested to us that the theories might have it wrong. We later developed the thesis that immigration might actually improve neighborhood social control mechanisms and suppress crime, particularly in the impoverished urban neighborhoods in which immigrants tend to settle. We advanced what we called the "immigration revitalization perspective" to explain why (Lee & Martinez, 2002, p. 365). We pointed out that social control would be enhanced by the strong familial and neighborhood institutions that immigrants brought with them, as well as the enhanced job opportunities associated with enclave economies. This perspective has been supported by a host of post-2000 research studies on immigration and crime. Although we would not claim that the research conducted to date is definitive, or that no new studies are needed, we are encouraged that the preponderance of evidence seems to support our perspective, rather than confirming the predictions of opportunity structure, cultural, and social disorganization theories.

That "immigration reduces crime" has become the new conventional wisdom in less than a decade is astonishing given the long-standing agreement (in theory at least) among scholars that the opposite was true. As evidence of the emerging consensus, it is worth noting that McDonald's (2006, pp. 1–2) testimony before the US Senate highlighted the "remarkable degree of agreement" among scholars that "public fears about immigrant criminality have usually not been born out by research." Consider also that by August 2007 more than 130 leading scholars had signed an open letter supporting this consensus addressed to federal and state political leaders, including President George W. Bush – who had recently claimed that

"illegal immigration ... brings crime to our communities" (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007, p. 3). According to the open letter:

> One of the most pervasive misperceptions about immigrants is that they are more likely to commit predatory crimes than are the native-born .... But this widespread belief is simply wrong (American Immigration Law Foundation, 2007, p. 1).

This letter argued that immigrants are less likely to be involved in crime than are natives and that since the 1990s "crime rates have fallen in the United States, at the same time immigration has increased" (American Immigration Law Foundation, 2007, p. 1). Sampson's (2006) arguments in the *New York Times* go beyond this correlational association to actually suggest a causal relationship: increased immigration deserves an important share of the credit for the dramatic crime drop in the United States. Elsewhere, he argues that immigration reduces crime for non-immigrant groups as well (Sampson, 2008).

Fortunately, the signatories to the open letter could draw on a strong foundation of empirical evidence to dispute the misguided notion that immigration causes crime. But as noted by Rumbaut and Ewing (2007, p. 3), authors of a comprehensive and authoritative report on the topic released by the Immigration Policy Center, the "misperception that the foreign-born, especially illegal, immigrants are responsible for higher crime rates is deeply rooted in American public opinion and is sustained by media anecdote and popular myth." So these scholars have faced an uphill battle in reshaping the public discourse away from inflammatory stereotypes and towards a more constructive dialogue grounded in the available facts. The next section of this chapter reviews the post-2000 research on which the scholarly consensus that immigration reduces crime has been built. Then we conclude by identifying several challenges to this consensus.

THE IMMIGRATION REVITALIZATION PERSPECTIVE: A REVIEW OF THE 21ST CENTURY RESEARCH

When we began writing our *Criminal Justice 2000* book chapter in the final years of the 20th century, there were virtually no book-length treatments of the contemporary immigration/crime relationship – at least in the post-1965 era when immigration rates began to increase dramatically in the wake of federal legal changes – and relatively few scholarly articles. This is no longer the case. A book on crime and immigrant youths (Waters, 1999) appeared shortly after our chapter went to press, and several other books with

a broader focus than just the young have now appeared (Martinez, 2002; Lee, 2003; Martinez & Valenzuela, 2006; Freilich & Newman, 2007; Stowell, 2007). The number of articles and book chapters has grown to the point that they are simply too numerous to review (see also Kubrin and Ousey, this volume). In the discussion that follows, we have attempted to cover some of the major types of research studies produced in recent years, while directing attention to specific books and articles that illustrate what we consider to be especially important points.

Some of the most persuasive evidence that immigration generally does not increase crime and often inhibits it has been provided by multivariate analyses of neighborhoods within large cities that serve as the major destination points for many immigrant groups. Census tracts are often used as proxies for neighborhoods, a practice which is not beyond criticism, and researchers frequently rely on police data for information about crime [but see Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush (2005) for an example of self-reported offending]. Perhaps the earliest example of this kind of research is provided by Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld (2001) in their examination of the relationship between immigration and levels of homicide at the tract level in three heavily immigrant cities: El Paso, Miami, and San Diego. Contrary to popular stereotypes and the predictions of sociological theories, the arrival of immigrants to these cities between 1980 and 1990 generally did not increase race-specific homicide levels for the years 1985–1995 when other structural covariates of homicide were controlled, such as poverty, residential instability, and male joblessness. In fact, in two out of six regression models (Latinos in El Paso and blacks in Miami) this "recent immigration" variable was a *negative* and statistically significant predictor of homicide; it was non-significant in three other models. Only in the case of blacks in San Diego immigration was a positive and significant influence on homicide. This paper was one of the first to offer a "counterclaim" that immigration might reduce crime rather than increase it, although the data could not directly determine why. It is important to note that "immigration" can be measured in a variety of ways and that the authors of the study chose to focus on recent immigration rather than constructing a measure of all the foreign-born residents in the city. In the case of Miami, the latter strategy would be problematic because so many of the residents are foreign-born. But there are good theoretical reasons for focusing on recent immigrants, as this is the group that social disorganization predicts will have the "strongest" effect on raising levels of crime (Stowell, 2007, p. 37).

A follow-up study has focused on Miami and San Diego and disaggregated homicides that occurred between 1985 and 1995 into the following

motives: arguments that escalated into lethal violence, intimate partner killings, robbery-murders, and drug-related homicides (Nielsen, Lee, & Martinez, 2005). Results revealed important differences in the effects of social disorganization variables and other predictors by motive-specific outcomes, as well as for outcomes across ethnic groups within cities and within ethnic groups across cities. Importantly, recent immigration (again measured by arrival between 1980 and 1990) is negative or not associated with most outcomes. Specifically, immigration suppressed all four types of black homicide in Miami, was not statistically significant in 10 models, and was positively associated with two types of homicide: drug-related homicide for blacks in San Diego and intimate partner homicide for Latinos in Miami. In other words, contrary to theoretical expectations that immigration increases crime, this result occurred only in 2 out of 16 multivariate models.

A more recent study that employed dozens of multivariate models using several types of violence data for the 1999–2001 period replicated the crime-suppressing effects of immigration in Miami and found no direct effects in Houston and Alexandria, Virginia, net of controls (Stowell, 2007). The author concludes that "with few exceptions, immigration is found to have a negative direct effect on both (expressive and instrumental) forms of violent crime" (Stowell, 2007, p. 137). Interestingly, this study also found that immigration from both Ethiopia and Ghana was associated with reduced violence in Alexandria, which highlights the value of disaggregating by nationality (contrary to the uniform effects of immigration predicted by social disorganization theory).

Sampson and colleagues (2005) extended this line of work by collecting self-reports of violent offending (rather than homicide) between 1995 and 2003 at the neighborhood level in Chicago. They found that Mexican Americans were involved in violence at a significantly lower rate compared to both blacks and whites. This finding was especially pronounced for first-generation immigrants (i.e., those born abroad). Moving beyond the individual data, they found that concentrated immigration at the neighborhood level was also associated with lower levels of violence after controlling for a host of other structural covariates (e.g., poverty). Their analysis also compared neighborhoods according to their level of risk for crime and discovered that the "average" male living in a "high risk" neighborhood without immigrants was 25 percent more likely to engage in violence than one in a "high risk" immigrant neighborhood. Regardless of how one looked at the data, the conclusion was clear: immigration was a protective factor against crime. Unfortunately, this study also paradoxically found that the neighborhood concentration of Latinos "strongly predicted perceptions of

disorder no matter the actual amount of disorder or rate of reported crimes" (Sampson, 2008, p. 30). It seems that old stereotypes die hard, especially in an era of increased public rhetoric that claims immigration causes crime.

Beyond these neighborhood level studies, an examination of crime trends at the city level have led Sampson (2008, p. 30) to argue that "cities of concentrated immigration are some of the safest places around." For example, border cities with large immigrant populations such as El Paso and San Diego have consistently ranked among the lowest crime cities, while places like New York City and Los Angeles have experienced dramatic crime drops as their immigrant populations boomed. Conversely, cities with small immigrant populations tend to have some of the highest crime rates. In fact, in the words of one reporter, Sampson attributes the recent homicide surge in cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia, Newark, and Boston to a problem that many criminologists would not expect: these places are characterized by "not enough new immigrants" (Dale, 2007, p. 1). One recent study conducted a multivariate test of the idea that cities have benefited from lower crime rates associated with immigration. Reid, Weiss, Adelman, and Jaret (2005, p. 775) examined violent and property crime in roughly 140 metropolitan areas and conclude that:

> For neither the case of violent crime nor property crime, in our analyses, does recent immigration inflate crime across metropolitan areas. In fact, recent immigration and Asian immigration actually exhibit a crime-reducing effect on homicides and thefts, respectively.

This is consistent with Sampson's (2008, p. 32) explanation that there is a "growing consensus" that immigration has revitalized American cities by adding to their previously stagnating populations and fostering economic growth. The proliferation of such arguments is one reason why we originally coined the phrase "immigration revitalization perspective" (Lee & Martinez, 2002, p. 365) to highlight the distinction between this line of reasoning and other competing theories such as social disorganization.

Although multivariate statistical modeling techniques used in the studies that we have reviewed so far have made important contributions to our understanding of the relationship between immigration and crime, even when these models control statistically for "spatial dependencies" (geographically situated associations between variables), there are important shortcomings with this method. Specifically, it tends to obscure the geographic location of the impact of immigration in specific neighborhoods. So, although it is clearly important to establish the fact that immigration generally does not increase levels of crime in urban neighborhoods, it is also

vital to move beyond this initial question to precisely identify the specific neighborhoods in which immigration affects crime rates either positively or negatively. As Lee, Martinez, and Stowell (2008) argue, most people are more interested in the relationship between immigration and crime in their own local neighborhood than citywide trends. As a result, scholars have used a variety of mapping techniques in order to provide more detailed information on individual neighborhoods. The work of the early social disorganization theorists such as Shaw and McKay (1969 [1942]) used such maps to great effect.

Building on the extensive crime mapping tradition, Lee and Martinez (2002) used crime maps to examine the relationship between Haitian immigration and homicide (for the 1985–1995 period) in two predominantly "black" Miami neighborhoods. In contrast to the quantitative analyses reviewed so far, their "critical case study" qualitatively tested social disorganization theory with visual data. Consistent with the quantitative research, they found that recent immigration has not "disorganized" the communities in northern Miami. The visual evidence they present demonstrates quite clearly that homicide levels decrease as one moves west to east from the predominantly native-born African American neighborhood of Liberty City to the heavily immigrant Little Haiti community. The relationship of these two variables with poverty is less clear, as there are areas of both Liberty City and Little Haiti that exhibit high poverty and areas of both neighborhoods that are less impoverished. Although previous research had established the relationship between immigration and crime in this predominantly Latino city, the extent to which this relationship held in specific black neighborhoods was unknown.

Another map-based study extended this work by using more recent homicide data (1998–2002) for all census tracts in Miami-Dade County (Lee et al., 2008). Noting that recent scholarship in the social disorganization tradition tends to neglect the spatial arguments made by the theory, the authors moved beyond statistical models and rudimentary maps to uncover the multivariate statistical effects of immigration and other social structural covariates (residential instability and household income) on crime in a map-based context. Using exploratory spatial data analysis (ESDA) to examine the spatial association of these variables, they found that (once again) contrary to the expectations of social disorganization theory immigration is not increasing homicide in neighborhoods in which immigrants settle. This research represents an improvement over the simple spot maps or shaded maps of Shaw and McKay and others working within the ecological tradition (e.g., Lee & Martinez, 2002) because maps not grounded in

statistics are often "noisy" and display trends that can fool the eye (see also Murray, McGuffog, Western, & Mullins, 2001). But statistically based ESDA maps display reliable patterns based on precise analytical techniques, rather than the guesswork of visual identification. In other words, this study removed potential noise from the visual presentation and retained only the statistically important relationships. Importantly, this study identified specific high immigration and low homicide census tracts that are described as "revitalized" (Lee et al., 2008). These areas of the county are strategic locations for follow-up studies that might help us begin to understand how the revitalization process unfolds over time, a key element in the story about immigration and crime that is missing from the mostly cross-sectional work that has been done.

As we have seen, for some purposes it is helpful to talk about the involvement of "immigrants" in criminal activities, or "immigration" as a social process. But this approach can obscure important group differences across racial/ethnic categories, country of origin, or generational status, just to name a few (Sampson, 2008). Another fruitful research strategy involves the disaggregation of crime data into specific, theoretically meaningful subgroups. Examining the crime patterns of a focal category of immigrants is especially appropriate when this group has been the target of stereotyping in public discourse. Such was the case for Cubans who arrived in South Florida via the Mariel boatlift in the early 1980s. Marielitos were maligned as heavily involved in crime by a variety of public commentators and horror stories about the crimes of individual Mariel Cubans (or attributed to them) were used to perpetuate the myth of the criminal immigrant. In fact, the popular movie *Scarface* recasts depression-era Chicago gangster Al Capone as a machine gun-toting Marielito drug lord in Miami. But several studies dispute the mythology of the crime-prone, violent Mariel. For example, Martinez, Lee, and Nielsen (2001) offer a revisionist account based on systematically collected data from Miami, showing that Mariels were not disproportionately involved in homicides involving strangers or particularly violent homicides. These are the types most feared by the public and most often associated with stereotypes about immigrant criminality. A follow-up study provided evidence that the Mariel Cubans were not over-involved in drug-related or robbery homicides, as stereotypes had asserted (Martinez, Nielsen, & Lee, 2003). Using multivariate methods, this article revealed few significant relationships between Mariel offenders and homicide motives, suggesting that this immigrant group has more in common with native groups' experiences of criminal violence than is commonly assumed.

Another demonstration of the way in which thoughtful data disaggregation is essential to understanding the relationship between immigration and crime is provided by an examination of data on incarceration comparing natives to various foreign-born groups (e.g., Mexicans, Koreans). One recent study to do this using national and local-level data found that immigrants had lower rates of incarceration for every ethnic group comparison and that as the amount of time in the United States increased, so did incarceration rates (Rumbaut et al., 2006). In fact, nativity was a stronger predictor of incarceration than education, which is contrary to the conventional wisdom. The authors conclude that a process of "Americanization" (Rumbaut et al., 2006, p. 73) accounts for the rise in incarceration rates among immigrants as the duration of their residence in the United States increases. So, although first-generation immigrants have comparatively low rates of incarceration, with a handful of exceptions the incarceration rates of all US-born Latin American and Asian groups are greater than that of the comparison group of non-Hispanic whites. The authors conclude that disaggregation is required to overcome the "national bad habit of lumping individuals into a handful of one-size-fits-all racialized categories (black, white, Latino, Asian) that obliterate different migration and generational histories, cultures, frames of reference, and contexts of reception and incorporation ..." (Rumbaut et al., 2006, p. 85).

CAVEATS TO THE EMERGING CONSENSUS

The story that we have told so far has been relatively uniform: contrary to stereotypes and the expectations of classic criminological theories, immigration does not seem to increase crime and often seems to reduce it. However, there are complexities within this general narrative that researchers are just beginning to address. As with any research endeavor, the studies that we have reviewed can be questioned on a variety of methodological grounds [see Mears (2001) for some examples]. In this section we identify several issues that we see as especially important for future researchers to consider. It is too soon to know whether these concerns will ultimately undercut our central argument that immigration often revitalizes cities and reduces crime, and rarely increases it. Given the weight of the evidence, we doubt that the immigration revitalization perspective will be abandoned in the near future, although the exceptions to the general trend must be identified and understood. For example, Martinez et al. (2003) found that Afro-Caribbeans were over-involved in drug-related homicides in Miami compared to other ethnic

groups. There are reasons for these kinds of exceptions and they do not reside in essentialist qualities of "immigrants" or even particular immigrant groups. Rather, they often reflect the context of reception/assimilation that shapes the life chances of specific groups of immigrants. We must also point out that our discussion has been limited to the United States. Studies of immigration and crime in other countries have uncovered both positive and negative relationships (e.g., see Freilich & Newman, 2007).

Stowell (2007) offers what is perhaps the most significant challenge to the "immigration reduces crime" narrative in his thoughtful examination of violence (a composite of homicide, robbery, and aggravated assault) in Miami, Houston, and Alexandria (Virginia). Although one must be cautious about generalizing from a study of three cities at one point in time, his important work has revealed a flaw in much of the research conducted to date: it has "focused exclusively on the direct effects" of immigration on crime and ignored "the possibility that immigration may be linked to crime through its impact on social structure" (Stowell, 2007, p. 105). Briefly, he finds evidence that immigration often (but not always) increases poverty and other structural covariates of crime and that it inflates crime rates through this indirect pathway. This is especially the case for Houston, but much less so for Miami (where the negative direct effects were quite robust). If nothing else, this research reminds us that the relationship between immigration and crime is both context specific and quite complex.

The indirect effects of immigration on crime are not entirely clear in this study because a direct test (as with structural equation models) was not possible. In addition, immigration seems to promote residential stability in some multivariate models even though it increases poverty in others. But more to the point, a question could be raised about the precise impact of immigration on crime through the indirect pathway of poverty because immigrants generally have strong "attachments to the world of work" (Martinez, 2002, p. 133) even in impoverished circumstances. In other words, the effects of poverty on the propensity of immigrants to commit crime may be attenuated by the fact that they are poor but working rather than poor and jobless. Stowell's methods cannot address this question, but we suggest that even though immigration contributes to the poverty rate in the cities that he studied, we cannot know for certain that it is immigrant poverty in a particular city that is raising levels of crime, rather than the poverty of other groups. The bulk of the evidence that we have reviewed in this chapter suggests to us that the latter is more central to explaining high rates of crime. But future research is needed to answer this question definitively, and we are indebted to Stowell for moving the field in a useful direction.

One possible solution to the issue of indirect effects might be found by comparing the relative contribution of different generations of immigrants to a particular community's crime problem. As we have stated, we must be cautious about treating all immigrant groups as equivalent, especially in light of data that suggests important variations by nationality/ethnicity (Stowell, 2007). But because of the scholarly consensus that first-generation immigrants are under-involved in crime, while second- and third-generation immigrants may be overrepresented, it stands to reason that the indirect effect of immigration on crime through variables such as poverty might be found outside of the first generation. Attention to assimilation patterns of immigrants reveals that first-generation immigrants tend to be optimistic about their circumstances despite the "objective" fact that they are relatively poor (Stowell, 2007). They cope with this situation in pro-social ways because no matter how bad their situation may be in the United States, it is still often much better than the conditions they left in their country of origin. The second- and third-generation immigrants do not have this reference point and may be much more pessimistic about their future. The relevant reference group for them is more likely to be the American middle and upper classes, rather than impoverished groups in their countries of origin.

Perhaps we should be less interested in the question, "what is the effect of immigration on crime?" and focus instead on, "what is the net effect of immigration on crime across all generations?" By only focusing on the first generation, we miss the impact of the subsequent generations (Waters, 1999; Rumbaut et al., 2006; Morenoff & Astor, 2007; Stowell, 2007). Does the crime-suppressing effect of the first generation outweigh the crime-facilitating effects of subsequent generations? And if not, should the blame for increased crime be placed on immigrants and immigration, or on features of the American cultural and structural landscape? After all, many scholars suggest that it is the "Americanization" of immigrants that shapes the involvement of the second and third generations in crime, not the essential qualities of the immigrants themselves.

These are complicated issues and must await further research for resolution. As Stowell (2007) and many others have pointed out, the relationship between immigration and crime is best understood longitudinally. Unfortunately, virtually all of the analyses that we have to date have utilized cross-sectional data. The over-time studies that do exist often do not incorporate appropriate statistical controls and frequently take the form of trend graphs which provide associational rather than causal information. The results from one longitudinal study are encouraging, as a two-decade study of San Diego found that "over time more immigrants in general means fewer overall

homicides" (Martinez, Stowell, & Lee, in progress, p. 21). Interestingly, as immigration increased, the non-Latino white homicide level declined as well, a finding that is consistent with results from other cities (Sampson, 2008).

Nevertheless, the myth of the criminal immigrant persists. As we have seen, this belief is increasingly under attack, but it remains quite common among some academics, policy makers, pundits, and segments of the general population. We hope that the review we have provided in this chapter will join with the voices of others who wish to move beyond harmful stereotypes and understand the complex relationship between immigration and crime. We believe that an honest examination of the data will lead us to the conclusion that immigration is not a major cause of crime in the United States and that we can learn a great deal by understanding the many ways in which immigration prevents crime.

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