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The views are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its board of trustees, or its sponsors.

Throughout the past century, American citizens and policymakers have expressed concern about immigration and crime, and especially the nexus of the two. The concerns appear to be driven by sudden increases in immigration and crime or by political or economic events. Whatever the proximate cause, immigration and crime are viewed as inextricably linked.

We should anticipate, therefore, a firmly developed set of supporting facts. Immigrants presumably are more likely to commit crimes than non-immigrants, cities with greater proportions of immigrants must have higher crime rates, and nationally, when immigration increases, crime increases as well. Presumably, too, research refutes the notion that immigrants commit less crime than non-immigrants or that immigrant crime is attributable to the social conditions immigrants face in U.S. society.

Such firmly established research would suggest relatively obvious policy implications for controlling crime in the U.S. For example, policymakers might want to restrict immigration, legal or illegal, or increase law enforcement efforts aimed at incarcerating immigrant offenders.

Quite the contrary is true, however: Research to date has been plagued by considerable methodological problems, including reliance on the least useful and least accurate sources of data. Ironically, this research suggests that immigrants are less, not more, criminal than non-immigrants, and that immigration rates are largely unassociated with crime rates.

This article discusses research on the immigration-crime nexus and then identifies key issues relevant to understanding both the limitations of existing data and studies and the directions future research should explore. It concludes by outlining several policy implications.

I. Research on the Immigration-Crime Nexus

Despite almost a century of research on the immigration and crime nexus, well-developed theoretical and empirical studies remain rare.¹ The few available theories indicate that immigrants should be more prone to engage in criminal behavior than non-immigrants.² For example, social disorganization theory suggests that in highly disorganized areas, with high rates of residential mobility, residents do not develop a sense of shared values and thus become more likely to engage in crime. Social strain and opportunity theories suggest that

when individuals face few prospects to achieve social goals legitimately, they will turn to illegitimate means, such as criminal behavior, to do so. Finally, cultural theories suggest that certain groups develop criminal behaviors as adaptations to adverse conditions and that these behaviors eventually become normative.

These theories all point to higher crime rates among immigrants or areas with higher concentrations of immigrants. Why? Immigrants typically move into areas thought to be more highly disorganized; they face many cultural and social barriers in their attempts to assimilate into U.S. society, especially economic markets; and they bring with them values that may differ greatly from the prevailing values of U.S. citizens.

Tests of these theories typically find little support for hypotheses about immigrant crime, or the findings at best are mixed.³ For example, some immigrant groups have been found to engage in high rates of certain types of criminal behavior, while others consistently evidence extremely low rates of criminal behavior.⁴ Although some immigrant youths join youth gangs, they do not necessarily engage in criminal behavior. And, ironically, assimilated versus marginalized immigrants may have higher, not lower, rates of criminal involvement.⁵ On the whole, however, empirical tests of these different theories fail to assess adequately the role of key variables, such as "social disorganization," "strain," "cultural values", and they generally rely on unreliable and inaccurate data sources.

The body of empirical research to date, including the results of several U.S. commissions, suggests a more paradoxical finding, paradoxical because it runs counter to conventional wisdom: Immigrants are less likely to engage in crime. This conclusion emerges from the 1901 Industrial Commission, the 1911 Immigration Commission, the 1931 Wickersham Report, and the 1994 U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform. It also emerges from many contemporary studies, including those that show little to no relationship between rates of immigration and crime across U.S. cities.⁶

This "fact," however, obscures more than it reveals. For example, most research reveals considerable variation in crime among different immigrant groups.⁷ Additional variation exists across immigrant cohorts, age groups, generations, and areas of the country. This variation does not mean that immigration should not be a concern. Even if rates of immigrant crime were decreasing throughout the 1990s, for example, the

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Tests of these theories typically find little support for hypotheses about immigrant crime, or the findings at best are mixed.³ For example, some immigrant groups have been found to engage in high rates of certain types of criminal behavior, while others consistently evidence extremely low rates of criminal behavior.⁴ Although some immigrant youths join youth gangs, they do not necessarily engage in criminal behavior. And, ironically, assimilated versus marginalized immigrants may have higher, not lower, rates of criminal involvement.⁵ On the whole, however, empirical tests of these different theories fail to assess adequately the role of key variables, such as "social disorganization," "strain," "cultural values", and they generally rely on unreliable and inaccurate data sources.

The body of empirical research to date, including the results of several U.S. commissions, suggests a more paradoxical finding, paradoxical because it runs counter to conventional wisdom: Immigrants are less likely to engage in crime. This conclusion emerges from the 1901 Industrial Commission, the 1911 Immigration Commission, the 1931 Wickersham Report, and the 1994 U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform. It also emerges from many contemporary studies, including those that show little to no relationship between rates of immigration and crime across U.S. cities.⁶

This "fact," however, obscures more than it reveals. For example, most research reveals considerable variation in crime among different immigrant groups.⁷ Additional variation exists across immigrant cohorts, age groups, generations, and areas of the country. This variation does not mean that immigration should not be a concern. Even if rates of immigrant crime were decreasing throughout the 1990s, for example, the

contribution of immigrants to overall crime might well have been increasing due to the increasing volume of immigrants to the U.S. during the past decade. One might reasonably conclude, therefore, that in the aggregate increased immigration contributed to increased crime in the U.S. during the past decade. But this conclusion does not illuminate the precise groups responsible for the contribution and the reasons for their criminal behavior.

The fundamental problem in trying to reconcile the divergent sets of facts, and to understand the precise contours of any putative immigration-crime link, lies in the fact that we have too few appropriate data sources or well-developed theories and empirical studies from which to draw reasonable and accurate inferences.

II. Key Issues in Understanding Possible Links Between Immigration and Crime

Many people assume that an "immigration-crime" nexus exists. But what exactly is this nexus? For example, does it mean that immigrants, as a whole, are more likely than non-immigrants to be criminals when they enter the U.S.? That they are more likely to become criminals after entering the U.S.? That immigration causes immigrants, non-immigrants, or both to engage in more crime than if there were no immigrants or no changes in immigration flows?

Such questions illustrate the importance of clarifying precisely what is meant by an immigration-crime nexus. To understand just how little is known about this nexus, it is helpful to review a range of dimensions along which studies would have to be conducted if they were to establish a causal link between immigration and crime.

Table 1 outlines several of the more basic, but nonetheless critical dimensions necessary for such a task. The problem, which cannot be overstated, lies in the fact that few extant data sources provide information along these dimensions.

The first dimension involves distinguishing between immigrants—sometimes referred to as "aliens" or "non-citizens"—versus non-immigrants.⁸ This dimension is closely related to the second, which distinguishes between legal versus illegal immigrants.

A precursor to any defensible causal analysis of immigration and crime would require accurate estimates about the numbers of immigrants legally entering and staying in the U.S. versus those who do so illegally. It is, for example, quite possible that crime rates differ among legal versus illegal immigrants. At present, however, we lack reliable and accurate data about inflows and outflows of immigrants as a whole,⁹ much less along "legal" and "illegal" dimensions.¹⁰ What estimates do exist can vary dramatically (on a scale of millions), depending on the source and quality of data.

The third dimension distinguishes between immigrants and immigration. The immigration and crime literatures have established that factors associated with specific persons immigrating or engaging in crime may differ from those associated with aggregate-level immigration flows or crime patterns or trends. For example, the factors that may drive a specific individual to commit homicide, such as low self control, stress or poverty, generally differ from those that contribute to variation in crime rates across race/ethnic groups, age, sex, and cities, regions, or countries.

This distinction, perhaps more than any other, suggests the caution needed in generalizing from one unit of analysis (e.g., individual immigrants) to another (e.g., groups of immigrants). It is, for example, entirely conceivable that immigrants are far less criminal than non-immigrants, but that higher rates of immigration could cause increased crime by disrupting social conditions in particular areas. Such disruptions in turn could increase crime among immigrants and non-immigrants. It also is possible that immigrant groups vary considerably in their levels of criminal involvement—for example, legal versus illegal immigrants, immigrants in different age groups, immigrants from different countries-of-origin, including Mexico, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. These examples suggest that we might be better served by distinguishing, at a minimum, between an immigrant-crime and an immigration-crime nexus, where the latter suggests the need to examine variation across groups and areas.

A fourth dimension centers on crime itself. When speaking of crime, we generally refer to overall crime, categories of crime, including violent, property or drug, or specific crimes, such as homicide, assault or burglary. These in turn can be distinguished from illegal immigration, which consists of a range of specific offenses.¹¹ In each case, the question relevant to any causal analysis is whether immigrants, specific immigrant groups, or immigration rates are linked to overall crime, specific types of crime, or specific crimes. To date, however, few studies have systematically explored links between immigration and types of crime.

The fifth and sixth dimensions focus on distinguishing between offenders and victims and prevalence and incidence, respectively. These dimensions illustrate further levels of detail along which crime facts should be provided, in conjunction with the other dimensions, in assessing any putative immigration-crime nexus.

The distinction between offenders and victims allows us to determine whether rates of offending and victimization are different among immigrants and non-immigrants. For example, assume that immigration flows increase crime rates. At least two explanations are possible: Immigration results in greater rates of *offending* by immigrants or greater rates of *victimization* among immigrants. Each explanation suggests

Table 1
Key Dimensions Along Which to Develop Facts about an Immigration-Crime Link

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Definition</i>
1. Immigrants vs. Non-Immigrants	Immigrants (frequently referred to as "aliens" or "non-citizens") vs. non-immigrants (native citizens of the U.S.).
2. Illegal vs. Legal Immigrants	Illegal immigrants (immigrants who enter illegally, overstay their visas, etc.) vs. legal immigrants (immigrants who enter legally, do not overstay their visas, etc.).
3. Immigrants vs. Immigration	Immigrants (i.e., individuals) vs. immigration (i.e., aggregate-level groups, broken down by country of origin, cohort, age or sex, etc.).
4. Type of Crime	Categories of crime (e.g., violent, property, drug) or specific crimes (e.g., homicide, assault, burglary), as distinct from illegal immigration.
5. Offenders vs. Victims	Offenders vs. victims of crime.
6. Prevalence vs. Incidence	Number of offenders or victims in a population vs. number of offenses or victimizations in a population.
7. Cross-sectional vs. Temporal Data	Data about individuals or places at one point in time (cross-sectional) vs. data about individuals or places over time (temporal, or time series).
8. Official vs. Survey Data	Official data, such as arrests or prosecutions, reflect not only immigration and crime patterns, but also law enforcement and justice system processing. Survey data, such as surveys administered to random samples of entering or current immigrants or to the U.S. population, reflect more directly true immigration and crime patterns.
9. Theories of Immigration-Crime Causation	Theoretical accounts identifying the mechanisms through which immigrants, or immigration processes, lead to greater amounts of criminal behavior or higher crime rates among immigrants/and/or non-immigrants.

quite different policy implications. In the first scenario, policies might address the intervening factors that lead to greater immigrant offending, such as large proportions of criminals among immigrants or greater exposure among immigrants to social and economic conditions that contribute to crime. In the second scenario, policies might address the possibility that increased immigrant victimization results from crime committed by other immigrants or, equally plausible, by non-immigrants.¹²

Distinguishing between the prevalence and incidence of offending provides additional assistance in identifying an immigration and crime link. Prevalence refers to the number of offenders among a given population, whereas incidence refers to the number of offenses within a given population. Ideally, we want to identify the prevalence and incidence of crime among legal and illegal immigrants, as contrasted with non-immigrants. Although precise estimates are not easily obtained and do not currently exist, a variety of methodologies allow researchers to provide a rough comparison of the prevalence and incidence of crime among these different populations.¹³ Such information is essential for determining the extent to which immigrants as a whole, or specific immigrant populations, are disproportionately responsible for current or changing levels of crime in particular areas. For example, if immigrant group X has a high prevalence or incidence of violent offending, law enforcement and policymakers might want to target

this group. Conversely, if this group is relatively uninvolved in crime, resources might be better served elsewhere.

The seventh dimension focuses on the fact that to determine whether immigration causes crime, one needs both cross-sectional and temporal (over time) data. The latter is especially important if one wants to demonstrate that increased immigration flows cause higher crime rates. It also is important if one wants to establish that immigrants, or their children, become more or less criminal during their residency in the U.S. Perhaps, for example, immigrants on the whole are far less criminal than non-immigrants, but become increasingly criminal during their stay in the U.S.

Clearly, reliable and accurate data are needed to establish accurate facts. Survey data frequently can provide some of the most accurate information, especially regarding criminal behavior. Unfortunately, the vast majority of studies to date have relied on the least useful and least accurate data, and many data sources simply do not readily allow creation of the types of facts that are needed. Official data, for example, such as arrest or court processing records, typically reflect the practices of law enforcement agencies as much as they do criminal behavior.

Two of the most common examples involve the use of stories about immigrant gang crime and the prevalence of immigrants (legal or illegal) in federal or state prisons. The problem with such data is that their utility

is highly limited for drawing inferences about an immigration-crime link. Assume, for example, that a real increase in immigrant gangs is established. Perhaps such an increase could be defensibly linked to increases in specific crimes, but it would be difficult to link it to increases in overall crime rates. More importantly, it would not serve as an accurate, or even relevant, measure of such dimensions as the prevalence of crime among specific immigrant groups or the proclivity of immigrants as a whole to engage in crime.

Much the same can be said of federal and state prison data. For example, different sources have identified increases in the numbers of immigrants in the federal prison system.¹⁴ Other sources show that immigrants are disproportionately represented among those sentenced in the federal criminal justice system. The *Compendium of Federal Justice Statistics* shows, for example, that of federally sentenced offenders in 1999, 14%—9,357 of 66,055—were sentenced for immigration offenses.¹⁵ Since many immigrants are sentenced for non-immigration offenses, this estimate undercounts the true prevalence of immigrants in the federal system. According to these same data, 34%—19,267—of federally sentenced offenders were non-citizens.¹⁶ But do these figures, or the increase in sentencing of immigrants in the federal system, say anything about the current or changing prevalence of immigrant offenders in the U.S.? Perhaps. However, we know that official data frequently reflect more about the practices and priorities of law enforcement agencies than actual crime rates.¹⁷ We also know, according to current estimates, that there are tens of millions of immigrants in the U.S. and that millions of legal and illegal immigrants enter the U.S. each year. Such facts, juxtaposed against the sentencing of 10–20,000 immigrants in federal courts, suggests warrant for skepticism about the validity of drawing inferences about an immigration-crime link from court or prison data.

The last dimension focuses on the need for well-developed and tested theories of the causal link between immigration and crime. Although several criminological theories suggest certain hypotheses about criminal behavior among immigrants, these remain largely undeveloped and untested. They also fail to address a wide range of factors that may bear on immigrant criminal behavior or on immigration-related crime, which includes crimes not committed by immigrants but nonetheless resulting from immigration. Few theories have addressed, for example, immigration-specific issues and experiences. These include factors such as how immigrant-related crime is affected by community-level conditions in the U.S., assimilation and acculturation processes, initial and changing trajectories of offending and victimization among immigrants, and changing rates of immigration increases and declines.

In short, even if we assume a link between immigration and crime, there is still a need to understand why this link exists. Theoretical accounts are essential because they can provide a foothold for organizing existing information about immigration and crime, and for anticipating which of a diverse range of potential explanations for a link between the two are most likely. Empirical research then can be used to test these explanations. For example, theories may suggest, and research may confirm, that immigration is associated with increased crime only among young adults who reside in areas marked by high levels of unemployment and residential mobility. Such information in turn could be used to develop more targeted and cost-effective policies aimed at reducing immigration-related crime.

III. Policy Implications

The current state of research on the immigration-crime nexus suggests several policy implications. First, given the relatively poor quality of the data bearing on any putative immigration-crime link, strong assertions of fact should be avoided or expressed with all due caution. Discussions about immigration and crime, much less the two combined, tend to be highly politicized. One result is the misuse of facts to reflect one's personal position. For example, official data may considerably overestimate the extent of immigrant involvement in criminal behavior. However, it is just as possible that these data underestimate immigrant criminal behavior.

Second, considerably more and better research is needed that measures and evaluates the relationship between immigration and crime. This research should focus on both individual- and aggregate-level patterns and trends in immigration and crime, and it should identify specific mechanisms through which immigration contributes, if it does at all, to increased or decreased crime.

Third, it is not necessary for data along all of the dimensions specified above to be collected before informed policy can be created. But some advances in these areas are critical, for without them there is little reasonable empirical basis for developing broad-based policies, such as restricting immigration, aimed at reducing immigration-related crime. To be clear, immigration reductions may be warranted for any number of reasons, and they might well reduce crime by some unspecified amount. But there may not be sufficient justification for such a highly costly endeavor. This does not mean that targeting immigrants necessarily constitutes an ineffective crime control effort. Indeed, it is possible that a more targeted policy—prosecuting immigrant youth gangs, or facilitating more effective transitions of immigrants—might reduce crime and be highly cost-effective.

The last point raises a related policy implication: To reduce overall crime rates, there may be more effective

strategies than reducing immigration or targeting immigrant-related crime. Presumably, an effective crime reduction policy would be founded on the best available evidence regarding both the sources of and solutions to crime. While numerous criminological studies to date provide evidence-based strategies to reduce crime, none of them suggest targeting immigrants or sub-populations of immigrants.¹⁸

Of course, there may be moral arguments for targeting immigrant criminals. For example, policymakers may believe that no amount of criminal activity among immigrants is acceptable. By the same token, there also may be moral arguments *against* targeting immigrants for crime prevention or control efforts, especially if immigrants as a whole are less likely than non-immigrants to be involved in crime.

IV. Conclusion

U.S. history is marked by a long-standing contradictory view of immigrants: During some periods, immigration is embraced, while during others immigrants come to be viewed as criminals. We have precious few reliable or accurate sources of data to test whether immigration increases crime. To the contrary, it is the least reliable and useful sources of data that are used to support arguments about the link between immigration and crime. Not surprisingly, during periods of concern about immigration and crime, these data are cited as demonstration of a link. And, equally unsurprising, during periods when concern turns to other social problems, these data are ignored, as if their probative value were no longer self-evident.

Perhaps an immigration-crime link exists. Perhaps it is a non-trivial link at that. But for the sake of effective crime control policy, we should systematically evaluate these possibilities. At the very least, we should not assume the existence of such links based on unreliable and inaccurate data, especially during periods when these data are apt to be interpreted through a lens that presumes such a link.

Notes

This article is based on a paper the author developed while serving as a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the Center for Criminology and Criminal Justice Research, University of Texas-Austin, *The Immigration-crime nexus: Toward an analytic framework for assessing and guiding theory, research, and policy*, 44(1) *SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES* 1-19 (2001).

- ¹ Mears, *supra* note *.
- ² Ronald Akers, *CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES: INTRODUCTION AND EVALUATION* (4th ed., Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury, 1999); Ramiro Martinez, Jr. & Matthew T. Lee, *On immigration and crime*, in 1 *CRIMINAL JUSTICE: THE NATURE OF CRIME: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE* 485 (Gary LaFree, ed., Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, 2000).
- ³ Martinez & Lee, *supra* note 2.
- ⁴ Michael H. Tonry, ed., *ETHNICITY, CRIME, AND IMMIGRATION: COMPARATIVE AND CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- ⁵ Yoon Ho Lee, *Acculturation and delinquent behavior: The case of Korean American youths*, 22 *INT'L J. COMP. & APPLIED CRIM. JUSTICE* 273 (1998).
- ⁶ Kristin F. Butcher & Anne M. Piehl, *Cross-city evidence on the relationship between immigration and crime*, 17 *J. POLICY ANALYSIS & MANAGEMENT* 457 (1998); John Hagan & Alberto Palloni, *Sociological criminology and the mythology of Hispanic immigration and crime*, 46 *SOCIAL PROBLEMS* 617 (1999).
- ⁷ Tonry, *supra* note 4; Tony Waters, *CRIME AND IMMIGRANT YOUTHS* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999).
- ⁸ This distinction is a useful starting point, although it obscures categories such as tourists and business visitors, for whom a "citizen"/"non-citizen" classification may be more appropriate.
- ⁹ Barry Edmonston & Jeffrey S. Passel, *Ethnic demography: U.S. immigration and ethnic variations*, in *IMMIGRATION AND ETHNICITY: THE INTEGRATION OF AMERICA'S NEWEST ARRIVALS* 1 (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1994).
- ¹⁰ William F. McDonald, *Crime and illegal immigration: Emerging local, state, and federal partnerships*, 232 *NAT'L INST. OF JUSTICE J.* 2 (1997).
- ¹¹ Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Compendium of federal justice statistics, 1999* 116-117 (2001).
- ¹² McDonald, *supra* note 10.
- ¹³ Tonry, *supra* note 4; Waters, *supra* note 7.
- ¹⁴ John Scalia, *Noncitizens in the federal criminal justice system, 1984-1994* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1996); Rebecca L. Clark & Scott A. Anderson, *Illegal aliens in federal, state, and local criminal justice systems* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2000); Carl F. Horowitz, *An examination of U.S. immigration policy and serious crime* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Immigration Studies, 2001).
- ¹⁵ Bureau of Justice Statistics, *supra* note 11, at 67.
- ¹⁶ *Id.* at 59. The denominator for this percentage excludes 15% of all sentenced offenders—9,813 of 66,055—who were not or could not be classified as "citizens" or "non-citizens."
- ¹⁷ Alfred Blumstein & Alan J. Beck, *Population growth in U.S. prisons, 1980-1996*, in 26 *CRIMINAL JUSTICE: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH—PRISONS* 17 (Michael H. Tonry & Joan Petersilia, eds.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- ¹⁸ Lawrence W. Sherman et al., *Preventing crime: What works, what doesn't, what's promising* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, 1998).