Theories on Immigration and Crime

Abstract

Perspectives advancing a positive immigration-crime relationship include demographic transition, population instability, labor market structure, and illegal drug markets arguments. Demographic transition arguments focus on changes in the demographic characteristics of the population following increases or decreases in immigration. This argument maintains that immigration may elevate crime by increasing the share of the population with low educational attainment, marginal labor skills, and poor employment prospects. In sum, despite an abundance of explanations for why immigration may both cause and reduce crime in neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas, almost no research has empirically tested these explanations, leaving us relatively in the dark about the “immigration-crime nexus.” Hence, a critical next step is for researchers to test various explanatory frameworks that posit intervening mechanisms by which immigration affects crime rates at the macro level.

Keywords: “Immigration”, “crime”, “perspectives”, “theories”, “arguments”.

INTRODUCTION

Theories on the connection between immigration and crime have not, to date, been sufficiently evaluated, thus remaining “largely undeveloped and tested” (Mears 2002, p. 287). With respect to theory testing, two important issues should be highlighted. First, although many explanatory frameworks can offer plausible mechanisms by which immigration may affect crime rates across neighborhoods, civic and metropolitan areas, indicators representing those frameworks are often not collectively included in macro-level studies. Consequently, we do not know whether immigration and crime are truly associated once we control for usual covariates (poverty, inequality, racial and ethnic composition, and drug and gun markets) (Ousey and Kubrin 2009).

Second, and perhaps more important, prior aggregate studies have not assessed whether salient social factors mediate the immigration-crime relationship in the manner predicted by prominent theoretical arguments. I his is problematic because several theories, which I will discuss shortly, predict that the immigration-crime relationship is indirect, operating through demographic, economic, and family structures (Ousey and Kubrin 2009). In essence, while aggregate-level studies include ecological correlates in their models, they are often limited in number and scope and are typically added as control variables without any systematic attempt to determine whether and to what extent they mediate or help explain the immigration-crime relationship. Later in the chapter, I discuss these issues in more depth.

Individuals often speak about the “immigration-crime link,” implying that the two go hand in hand, yet it is not always clear what factors underlie this connection or just how immigration and crime may be related, his ambiguity is underscored by Mears (2002, p. 285) who notes: 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, arc more likely than non immigrants to be criminals when they enter the state? That they are more likely to become criminals alter entering the state? That immigration causes immigrants, non-immigrants, or both to engage in more crime than if there were no immigrants or no changes in immigration lows? Such questions illustrate the importance of clarifying precisely what is meant by an immigration-crime nexus.
In fact, if the literature is examined closely, it is possible to find several theoretical frameworks that attempt to account for an immigration-crime relationship. And despite the popular perception that immigration causes heightened crime, researchers offer sound reasons that immigration can impact social life in ways that either increase or decrease crime rates. Unfortunately, relatively few studies have attempted to empirically test these arguments. This is problematic precisely because, as noted earlier, these arguments are indirect, theorizing that immigration influences crime through its effects on social, demographic, and economic structures. Although I have systematically reviewed these theories elsewhere (see Ousey and Kubrin 2009, pp. 448-453), later in this chapter I briefly discuss many of them as a means of illustrating the wide-ranging variation in theoretical perspectives on the immigration-crime link.

Immigration Increases Crime

As just noted, there are sound arguments for why immigration may both increase and decrease crime rates in an area. Perspectives advancing a positive immigration-crime relationship include demographic transition, population instability, labor market structure, and illegal drug markets arguments. Demographic transition arguments focus on changes in the demographic characteristics of the population following increases or decreases in immigration. Of greatest importance, perhaps, are shifts related to the sex and age composition of residents, as such shifts may raise the share of the population with a “crime prone” demographic profile. In particular, when immigration is associated with greater numbers of young males, as is the case with the current immigration wave, crime rates should be higher in areas with more immigrants or in areas that have witnessed increased immigration due to the fact that crime is disproportionately committed by young males. The idea here is that an increase in crime rates is essentially confined to the foreign born.

Another argument makes the case that increased immigration will lead to higher crime rates among all population groups, not just the foreign born. Along these lines, Reid et al. (2005, p. 761) note that “immigration might reshape urban demographic and economic structures in ways that increase the criminality of native-born persons.” One way immigration may do this is by altering neighborhood dynamics. Drawing heavily from social disorganization theory, it is argued that immigration may be positively associated with increased crime rates across neighborhoods primarily because it leads to population instability, or residential turnover. Residential turnover, in turn, causes crime because it weakens social ties and decreases informal social control—key factors in the fight against crime. In this sense, it is not immigration per se but its effect on neighborhood processes that leads to heightened crime rates (Lee, Martinez., and Rosenfeld 2001, p. 562; Mears 2002, p. 284; Reid et al. 2005, p. 760).

A third perspective highlights the role of economic opportunities, particularly with respect to labor market structure. This argument maintains that immigration can elevate crime by increasing the share of the population with low educational attainment, marginal labor skills, and poor employment prospects; indeed, today’s migrants are less skilled than both earlier immigrants and natives (Butcher and Piehl 1998a, p. 461; see, for example, Borjas 1990), creating a lack of human capital. This, in turn, narrows job prospects and may also restrict residential opportunities for immigrants who are channeled into neighborhoods located in and around disadvantaged areas. In such contexts, immigrants are more likely to be exposed to unemployment, poverty, and other social ills associated with contexts of severe economic deprivation. Immigrants also face language barriers and can experience discrimination. As a result, and in line with opportunity structure theory, they may turn to illegitimate means for obtaining wealth, including joining gangs and selling drugs (Lee, Martinez., and Rosenfeld 2001, p. 561; Mears 2002, p. 284; Reid et al. 2005, p. 759).

An alternative but related explanation focuses more on how immigration and changes in labor market structure may affect the behavior of native-born residents. Current research suggests that increased immigration can displace other, native born, minorities (Beck 1996; Waldinger 1997) and lead to increases in the criminality of the displaced groups (Wilson 1996). Immigrants may thus have an adverse effect on crime by crowding natives out of the legal sector. If immigrants reverse!) affect natives’ legal alternatives by taking jobs or overburdening the welfare system, low-skilled natives may increase their involvement in criminal activity (Butcher and Piehl 1998a, p. 459).

Finally, arguments related to illegal drug markets advance the notion of a positive association between immigration and crime. For starters, given that immigrants disproportionately settle in disadvantaged areas, it is likely that they face greater exposure to the promises and pitfalls of open-air drug markets, particularly the violence associated with such markets. Also, because immigrants, especially the recent foreign born, are disproportionately young and male, they fit the demographic profile of individuals recruited to participate in crack-cocaine markets. Finally, service in the drug trade is increasingly one way that illegal immigrants pay off debts to the gangs that helped arrange their transit to the United States. In all cases,
then, increases in immigration to neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas will lead to heightened crime rates in those areas.

**Immigration Reduces Crime**

Perspectives advancing a negative immigration-crime relationship include arguments regarding immigrant selection effects, formal social control, immigration revitalization, and family structure. With respect to selection effects, scholars have noted that immigrants are not a cross-section of the sending population but are a self-selected group with low criminal propensities (Butcher and Piehl 1998b). Tonry (1997, P-29) claims, “Many immigrants come to the U.S. to pursue economic and educational opportunities not available in their home countries and to build better lives for themselves and their families. Most are hard-working, ready to defer gratification in the interest of longer-term advancement, and therefore likely to be conformist and to behave.” Concerning the latter part of Tonry claim, it has also been argued that the deterrent effect of the threat of deportation can make immigrants less likely to commit crime (Butcher and Piehl 1998b, p. 672). Finally, “Since not all immigrants face severe economic disadvantages in the countries it is possible that increased immigration to an area, especially an urban area, may actually lessen crime rates” (Reid et al. 2005, p. 762).

Formal social control arguments focus on the response to immigration and the effect that this response may have on crime in the community. More specifically, these arguments maintain that immigration to an area increases fear and concern about a worsening crime problem (recall the myth of the “immigrant criminal” described earlier), prompting a response by public officials to “do something” about the crime problem. Very often this response involves cracking down on crime and hiring more police officers to catch criminals. According to deterrence theory, this should result in less crime as individuals—both immigrants and nonimmigrants alike—adjust to the perception that they are more likely to get caught and punished for committing a crime. Indeed, some longitudinal research suggests that increasing the size of the police force contributes to lower crime rates (Levitt 2004).

Recall the social disorganization thesis that immigration leads to heightened crime because it encourages residential turnover, weakening social ties and decreasing informal social control in communities. Scholars have recently begun to challenge these claims, arguing instead that immigration can revitalize an area and actually strengthen social control:

Contemporary immigration may encourage new forms of social organization that mediate potentially crime producing effects of the deleterious social and economic conditions found in urban neighborhoods. These new forms of social organization may include ethnically situated informal mechanisms of social control and enclave economies that provide stable jobs to Co ethnics. (Lee and Martinez 2002, p. 376)

Reflected to us the immigration revitalization thesis, the argument is that far front being a disorganizing and criminogenic force, immigration is an essential ingredient to the continued viability of urban areas, especially those that have experienced population decline and community decay in previous decades (Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld 2001, p. 564). This revitalization is due to strong familial and neighborhood mechanisms of social control institutions and enhanced job opportunities associated with ethnic enclave economies (Reid et al. 2005, p. 762).

A final perspective that posits a negative immigration-crime relationship state-guests that immigration alters aggregate family and household structures in ways that strengthen informal social control and impede crime. This is because immigrants, on the whole, are more likely to have traditional intact (i.e., two-parent) family structures. Lower divorce rates and greater two-parent households reduce family disruption — a key correlate of crime (Sampson 1987). To the extent that immigrants have greater intact family structures and corresponding pro-family cultural orientations, it is likely that areas with more immigrants and those that have experienced increases in immigration will have less crime. In essence, immigration results in lower crime rates across neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas in part by reducing family disruption.

In sum, despite an abundance of explanations for why immigration may both cause and reduce crime in neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas, almost no research has empirically tested these explanations, leaving us relatively in the dark about the “immigration-crime nexus.” Hence, a critical next step is for researchers to test various explanatory frameworks that posit intervening mechanisms by which immigration affects crime rates at the macro level.

**Conclusion**

Researchers have pointed out that the urban crime problem is not generated by immigrants, legal or undocumented, and that immigrants are not increasing crime rates. Socially disadvantaged neighborhoods may, however, make immigrant groups more susceptible to crime victimization when social support networks do not exist or are lacking. Despite the research findings on crime and immigration, the public mistakenly believes foreign-born immigrants to be dangerous criminals. To respond to undocumented immigration and the public fear of crime, anti-immigration laws enacted in the early 21st century have
attempted to hasten the deportation processes for undocumented immigrants. Such laws have increased the workload in many courts, and consequently deportation is likely when the undocumented immigrant has committed a serious violent crime or agrees to removal. Immigration laws and policies should consider the unintended consequences of crime victimization on undocumented immigrants and the global conditions that cause mass migrations of people across dangerous borders.

REFERENCES