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IDEA LAB

## Do Immigrants Make Us Safer?

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By EYAL PRESS

Although the midterm election failed to render a clear verdict on illegal immigration, the new Democratic Congress may enact sweeping legislation tightening border controls and allowing more guest workers next year. If that happens, the rancorous debate about how undocumented workers affect jobs and wages in the United States will be rejoined. So, too, will an equally rancorous, if less prominent, debate: Do immigrants make the U.S. more crime-ridden and dangerous?

In an age of Latino gangs and Chinese criminal networks, the notion that communities with growing immigrant populations tend to be unsafe is fairly well established, at least in the popular imagination. In a national survey conducted in 2000, 73 percent of Americans said they believe that immigrants are either “somewhat” or “very” likely to increase crime, higher than the 60 percent who fear they are “likely to cause Americans to lose jobs.” Cities like Avon Park, Fla., have considered ordinances recently to dissuade businesses from hiring illegal immigrants, whose presence “destroys our neighborhoods.” Even President Bush, whose perceived generosity to undocumented workers has earned him vilification on the right, commented in a speech this May that illegal immigration “strains state and local budgets and brings crime to our communities.”

So goes the conventional wisdom. But is it true? In fact, according to evidence cropping up in various places, the opposite may be the case. Ramiro Martinez Jr., a professor of criminal justice at Florida International University, has sifted through homicide records in border cities like San Diego and El Paso, both heavily populated by Mexican immigrants, both places where violent crime has fallen significantly in recent years. “Almost without exception,” he told me, “I’ve discovered that the homicide rate for Hispanics was lower than for other groups, even though their poverty rate was very high, if not the highest, in these metropolitan areas.” He found the same thing in the Haitian neighborhoods of Miami. In his book “New York Murder Mystery,” the criminologist Andrew Karmen examined the trend in New York City and likewise found that the “disproportionately youthful, male and poor immigrants” who arrived during the 1980s and 1990s “were surprisingly law-abiding” and that their settlement into once-decaying neighborhoods helped “put a brake on spiraling crime rates.”

The most prominent advocate of the “more immigrants, less crime” theory is Robert J. Sampson, chairman of the sociology department at Harvard. A year ago, Sampson was an author of an article in *The American Journal of Public Health* that reported the findings of a detailed study of crime in Chicago. Based on information gathered on the perpetrators of more than 3,000 violent acts committed between 1995 and 2002, supplemented by police records and community surveys, it found that the rate of violence among Mexican-Americans was significantly lower than among both non-Hispanic whites and blacks.



In June, Sampson and I drove out to a neighborhood in Little Village, Chicago's largest Hispanic community. The area we visited is decidedly poor: in terms of per capita income, 84 percent of Chicago neighborhoods are better off and 99 percent have a greater proportion of residents with a high-school education. As we made our way down a side street, Sampson noted that many of the residents make their living as domestic workers and in other low-wage occupations, often paid off the books because they are undocumented. In places of such concentrated disadvantage, a certain level of violence and social disorder is assumed to be inevitable. As we strolled around, Sampson paused on occasion to make a mental note of potential trouble signs: an alley strewn with garbage nobody had bothered to pick up; a sign in Spanish in several windows, complaining about the lack of a park in the vicinity where children can play. Yet for all of this, the neighborhood was strikingly quiet. And, according to the data Sampson has collected, it is surprisingly safe. The burglary rate in the neighborhood is in the bottom fifth of the city. The overall crime rate is nearly in the bottom third.

The safety of neighborhoods like these has received little attention in the debate about immigration — or, for that matter, the debate about crime. Ever since cities like New York began cracking down on panhandling and loitering in the mid-1990s, a move that coincided with a precipitous drop in violence, policy makers have embraced the so-called broken-windows theory, which emphasizes the deterrent effects of punishing such minor offenses. Lately, though, scholars have begun to question whether “broken windows” deserves all the credit for diminishing crime after all. Some researchers have linked progress to the cessation of the crack epidemic. Others point to an improved economy, community-policing initiatives or even the legalization of [abortion](#), which reduced the number of poor, unwanted children growing up in high-risk neighborhoods.

Sampson's theory may be the most provocative yet. Could America's cities be safer today not because fewer unwanted children live in them but because a lot more immigrants do? Could illegal immigration be making the nation a more law-abiding place?

There are, to be sure, scholars who take issue with this rosy picture. Wesley Skogan, a political scientist at [Northwestern University](#), has spent the past 13 years tracking violence and social disorder in the white, black and Latino communities in Chicago. In a new book, “Police and Community in Chicago: A Tale of Three Cities,” just out from Oxford University Press, Skogan concludes that the big success story took place not in immigrant areas but in African-American ones, where participation in community-policing programs was highest and violence fell the most. “About two-thirds of the crime decline in Chicago since 1991 took place in black neighborhoods,” Skogan says. In Hispanic communities, by contrast, Skogan found that the fear of crime, as measured in surveys of residents, and real social disorder — gang activity, loitering — actually became worse as the foreign-born population increased. Skogan acknowledges that Hispanic immigrants don't show up much in arrest records, but he says he believes part of the explanation for this rests in the fact that those who are undocumented go to enormous lengths to “stay off the radar.” Many also come from a country, Mexico, where distrust of law enforcement is endemic, which is why he suspects they underreport crime and participate less in community-policing programs, as his study found.

Sampson doesn't deny that crime may be underreported in immigrant neighborhoods. Nonetheless, he is quick to note that as the ranks of foreigners in the United States boomed during the 1990s — increasing by more than 50 percent to 31 million — America's cities became markedly less dangerous. That these two trends might be related has been overlooked, he says, in part because immigrants, like African-Americans,

often trigger negative associations regardless of how they actually behave. Not long ago, Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush, a sociologist who teaches at the [University of Chicago](#), conducted an experiment to test this idea. The experiment drew on interviews with more than 3,500 Chicago residents, each of whom was asked how serious problems like loitering and public drinking were where they lived. The responses were compared with the actual level of chaos in the neighborhood, culled from police data and by having researchers drive along hundreds of blocks to document every sign of decay and disorder they could spot.

The social and ethnic composition of a neighborhood turned out to have a profound bearing on how residents of Chicago perceived it, irrespective of the actual conditions on the streets. “In particular,” Sampson and Raudenbush found, “the proportion of blacks and the proportion of Latinos in a neighborhood were related positively and significantly to perceived disorder.” Once you adjusted for the ethnic, racial and class composition of a community, “much of the variation in levels of disorder that appeared to be explained by what residents saw was spurious.”

In other words, the fact that people think neighborhoods with large concentrations of brown-skinned immigrants are unsafe makes sense in light of popular stereotypes and subliminal associations. But that doesn't mean there is any rational basis for their fears. Such a message hasn't sat well with everyone. As the debate about immigration has grown more heated and polarized, Sampson has found himself barraged with hate mail. “Vicious stuff,” he told me, “you know, thinly veiled threats, people saying, ‘You should just come and look at the Mexican gangs here.’” But Sampson has also won some far-flung admirers. In Mexico, one of the nation's leading dailies, *La Reforma*, published a story hailing his findings, under the triumphal heading, “Son barrios de paisanos menos violentos que los blancos” (“Neighborhoods of our countrymen are less violent than white ones”).

If immigrants really are making America safer, why is this so? “That,” Sampson says, “is the \$64,000 question.” In discussing the persistence of poverty and the causes of crime, sociologists on the left often emphasize the importance of “structural” factors like unemployment and racism, while scholars on the right tend to focus on individual behavior like having an illegitimate child and using drugs. Sampson prefers to focus on the nature of the social interactions taking place in particular neighborhoods. At one point in Little Village, we strolled past a house where a couple of young girls were playing outside. It didn't seem that anybody was supervising them. Next door, however, an elderly woman was standing just inside the window. The window was open, and as Sampson and I passed by, her eyes did not leave us. “Did you notice that?” asked Sampson as we proceeded down the block. She was making sure the two strangers who had appeared weren't dangerous. It was an example of the kind of informal social control that Sampson says can prevent even the poorest neighborhoods from spiraling into chaos and that he suspects may distinguish many tightknit immigrant communities.

But Sampson also notes the importance of another factor, one often stressed by conservatives: Mexicans in Chicago, his study found, are more likely to be married than either blacks or whites. “The family dynamic is very noticeable here,” Sampson remarked as we passed a girl with long braided hair clutching her mother's hand. Her father followed a few steps behind. Sampson does not believe family structure explains everything: the data showed that in immigrant neighborhoods, even individuals who are not in married households are 15 percent less likely to engage in crime. Yet neither did he discount its significance.

To the extent a strong family structure does play a role, it has left Sampson understandably mystified why the most strident opponents of immigration so often come from the right. Shouldn't conservatives concerned about the breakdown of traditional values be celebrating these family-oriented newcomers? This is indeed what David Brooks argued not long ago in a column in *The New York Times*, gently chiding his fellow conservatives for reflexively assuming foreigners have had a corrosive impact on the nation's moral fiber. "As immigration has surged, violent crime has fallen 57 percent," Brooks noted in the column, which was titled "Immigrants to Be Proud Of."

Sampson wrote Brooks a note complimenting him on the piece. But he is under no illusions that his views on crime and immigration will endear him to [Republicans](#) clamoring for America's borders to be sealed. On the other hand, it might not make his colleagues on the left any happier. The flip side of the impulse to demonize immigrants is, after all, the tendency to romanticize them as hard-working Horatio Alger types who valiantly lift themselves out of poverty — with the implication that if they can avoid falling victim to drugs, gangs and other inner-city scourges, those who succumb to these forces have only themselves to blame. In calling attention to the virtues of immigrant communities, there is a risk that Sampson's work will be taken by some as a commentary on the high crime rate in some poor African-American communities.

Of course, comparing the experiences of Mexican immigrants and African-Americans may seem grossly unfair, not least because studies have shown that many employers are willing to hire foreigners (on the assumption they work hard) but not blacks (on the assumption they don't). Yet the fact that it is unfair hardly means such comparisons won't be made — even though immigrants commit less crime not only than African-Americans in inner-city neighborhoods but less than American-born white people as well.

Before anyone rushes to conclude that crime would vanish from America's cities if only more foreigners moved here, it is worth considering something else Sampson's study uncovered. It is a finding as troubling as his basic thesis about immigrants is hopeful. Second-generation immigrants in Chicago were significantly more likely to commit crimes than their parents, it turns out, and those of the third generation more likely still.

Opponents of immigration frequently charge that Mexican immigrants threaten America's national identity because of their failure to assimilate. A more reasonable concern might be the opposite of this: not that foreigners in low-income neighborhoods refuse to adopt the norms of the native culture but that their children and grandchildren do.

The sociologists Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut conducted a multiyear longitudinal study of immigrant children in Miami and San Diego. The offspring of foreigners who grow up in impoverished ghettos, they have argued, particularly Mexican-Americans exposed to racial as well as economic discrimination, often lose the drive and optimism their parents had and come to share the widespread attitude among their inner-city peers that survival depends on brandishing an oppositional stance toward school authorities and, more broadly, a culture that looks down on them. "The learning of new cultural patterns and entry into American social circles does not lead in these cases to upward mobility but to exactly the opposite," Portes and Rumbaut contend, a process of "downward assimilation" that has created a new "rainbow underclass." Astoundingly, in a recent paper, Rumbaut and several doctoral students found that the incarceration rate among second-generation Mexicans was eight times higher than for the first

generation; among Vietnamese, it was more than 10 times higher. Where the first-generation immigrants in their data were less likely to wind up in prison than native-born whites, the second (with the exception of Filipinos and Chinese) were more likely.

Such findings suggest the class and race divisions that cleave America's social landscape may prove decisive after all. In Sweden, a country with markedly less inequality and more generous social welfare policies — and far less violent crime — studies have shown the rate of offending tends to be lower for the second generation of immigrants than for the first. Of course, America has historically done an admirable job of assimilating newcomers, and the theory of “downward assimilation” has not gone unchallenged. Recently, a team of researchers completed a study in New York of more than 2,200 second-generation immigrants and 1,200 native-born Americans that allowed them to compare the rate of offending among various groups, West Indians versus African-Americans, for instance, or Russians versus American-born whites. According to John Mollenkopf, a political scientist at the CUNY Graduate Center, the arrest rates among the children of immigrants were the same or lower in every case. “The second-generation immigrants are doing better, on the whole, than the native-born,” he said.

Clearly, the debate over assimilation will continue, as Sampson acknowledges. When I asked him why he thought the positive trends he and his colleagues had discovered in Chicago seemed to become diluted by the second and third generations, he paused.

“That’s another \$64,000 question,” he said, chuckling softly. Part of the explanation, he went on to speculate, may rest in the exposure subsequent generations have to the things that often lure young people in America’s cities to engage in illicit activities: drugs, cash, cars, contraband. Part of it, as well, might be the adoption of streetwise attitudes that lead people to react quickly to insults in the United States. One thing it is difficult for Americans to realize, he said, is how unusually violent their country is, particularly in light of its inordinate wealth. Recently, scholars have become increasingly interested in the historical origins of American violence. Richard Nisbett of the [University of Michigan](#) and others have traced our “culture of violence” back to the valorization of retribution and dueling among Scotch-Irish immigrants in the American South, suggesting that antique folkways have become encoded into the nation’s DNA.

It is a dark view, perhaps, but Sampson is hopeful that the good news about crime in recent years can continue, albeit under certain conditions, among them less alarmism about the supposedly dangerous foreigners in our midst. Sampson shook his head when describing some of the correspondence he has received from people absolutely certain that immigrants are sowing mayhem in our streets. In the last few years, he noted, such people have had somewhat less cause for worry, since the numbers show the flow of newcomers has subsided a bit. Meanwhile, the crime rate in some cities has begun to creep back up. Sampson, for one, does not think this is a mere coincidence. Those clamoring for America to close its borders in order to prevent violence-prone strangers from flooding our shores may well get their way, he acknowledged, but they ought to be careful what they wish for.

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