



Sanctuary and Public Safety: Busting the Myth that Immigrants Bring Crime

Greg Prieto, University of San Diego

The Trump Administration has breathed new life into the myth of the immigrant criminal. President Trump infamously inaugurated his presidential campaign by claiming that immigrants “are bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”

These sentiments were echoed in the Winter 2017 decision of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, led by District 3 Supervisor Kristin Gaspar, to join a Trump Administration lawsuit aiming to invalidate the [California Values Act](#) (SB 54). The Act prohibits local law enforcement from using their resources to aid federal immigration enforcement except in cases where an immigrant has committed a serious or violent felony.

Gaspar and her colleagues argued that SB 54 ties law enforcement’s hands in a post-9/11 era when immigrants are criminals and terrorists, not workers. Proponents respond that, without SB 54, genuine public safety is endangered because most immigrants, who are not criminals, will be less likely to report crime, cooperate with police investigations, and report domestic abuse. Is immigrant criminality a serious public safety threat or is it a myth that politicians repeat to burnish their tough on immigration persona?

What’s True?

The scholarly consensus has been and remains that immigrants commit crime at [lower rates](#) than the U.S.-born. Whether measured with prison statistics, crime rates (locally and nationally), or individual level survey data that asks representative samples of immigrant and non-immigrant respondents to self-report any criminal activity, the answer is the same: immigrants commit crime less often than the U.S.-born.

In a major 2014 study, [Ousey and Kubrin](#) used FBI crime data from 156 large U.S. cities between 1980 and 2010 and found that increased immigration *reduced* homicide overall and drug-related homicide, in particular. The effect was strongest in those cities that already had large immigrant populations. [Light](#) and his co-authors found the same pattern for undocumented immigrants, whose growing numbers not only reduce violent crime, but [drug and DUI arrests and overdoses](#), too.

In 2014, [Bersani](#) and co-authors used longitudinal survey data of incarcerated juveniles and arrived at a similar conclusion: immigrants commit crime at lower rates than the U.S.-born, while those immigrants that do offend are less likely to be involved in serious offending and they turn away from crime quicker than their U.S.-born or second-generation counterparts.

Immigrant Revitalization

What explains these counterintuitive findings? The theory of **immigrant revitalization**. Latina/o immigrants, who typically arrive with lower levels of education than the U.S.-born and settle in low-income neighborhoods with poor health conditions, gangs, and fewer educational and occupational opportunities, turn to crime at lower rates than similarly situated U.S.-born citizens. Immigrant revitalization occurs because immigrants are a self-selected group of dogged, goal-oriented individuals seeking opportunities for success; they establish and maintain neighborhood institutions that facilitate community cohesion (e.g., churches, sports leagues, and schools); intact families ensure supervision and correction of youth; and consistent employment (even if in informal and low-paid jobs) buffers criminal involvement.

Cities and states play a role by creating receptive neighborhood contexts that facilitate immigrants' entry to local schools and the job market, while insulating them from detention and deportation that unravels the protective effects of immigrant neighborhoods and families. Sanctuary policies are one key way to improve the neighborhood context for immigrants, promote the immigrant revitalization effect, and enhance public safety for all San Diegans.

Gaspar and critics malign these policies for making communities less safe; however, social science illustrates just the opposite. According to **Martínez-Schuldt and Martínez** in a comparison of 107 U.S. cities across three decades (1990-2010), the adoption of sanctuary policies is associated with a reduction in robberies. They also found a growing undocumented Mexican population is associated with a decline in homicide, but only in sanctuary cities. **Collingwood and Gonzalez O'Brien** find that pro-sanctuary cities have no effect on crime, but anti-sanctuary policies reduce crime reporting, like 911 calls, endangering public safety. They also offer evidence that sanctuary promotes immigrants' civic engagement, like voting.

Immigrants don't "bring crime," instead their presence revitalizes communities by replenishing their numbers and introduces to our cities and states those qualities that promote public safety for all: family cohesion, community solidarity, and consistent employment. We can do our part by turning away from punitive policies of detention and deportation and by committing to immigrant integration.

How Do We Do It?

The first step should be mitigating the criminalization of (undocumented) immigrants with sanctuary policies like SB 54 in California, statute 181.850 in Oregon, and HB 1124 in Colorado. To extend the positive effects of sanctuary policies, state and local governments should offer driver licenses for undocumented drivers and robust support for immigrant survivors of violence, trafficking, or gender-based crime (U, T, and VAWA visas, respectively).

Next, immigrant integration policies can go a long way to ensure that we continue to benefit from the crime reduction effects of immigration. The City of San Diego, for instance, recently hired its first ever immigrant integration coordinator, **Rita Fernandez**, as part of a multi-sector strategic plan called **Welcoming San Diego**. This region-wide coalition made a range of recommendations, including:

- Facilitate economic advancement through job placement, re-credentialing, upskilling, inclusive recruitment, and rights protections;
- Reduce barriers to homeownership and ensuring housing stability;

- Improve educational access, including classroom support for newly arrived students and multicultural curricula;
- Increase naturalizations and promote civic engagement; and
- Foster trust between law enforcement and aspiring Americans by recruiting multilingual officers and facilitating crime reporting.