

# Debunking the Myth of Immigrants and Crime



# Introduction

The scapegoating of ethnic and religious minorities is well-tread historical ground, and immigrants have always made for an easy target in the United States. Chinese,<sup>1</sup> Irish,<sup>2</sup> Italian,<sup>3</sup> Muslim,<sup>4</sup> Mexican<sup>5</sup>—all these people and more have been falsely accused of bringing crime into the United States, particularly during times of economic or political unease. Today, some politicians are peddling the same, tired myth, this time of a “migrant crime surge” among immigrants who recently arrived in the country.

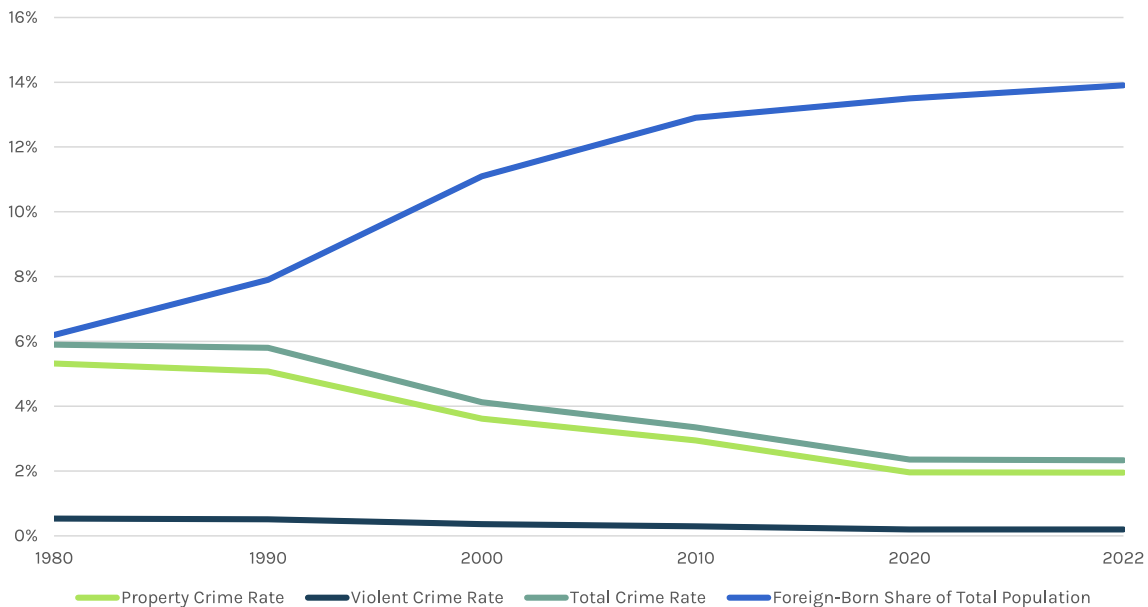
However, a robust body of research shows that welcoming immigrants into American communities not only does not increase crime, but can actually strengthen public safety. In fact, immigrants—including undocumented immigrants—are less likely to commit crimes than the U.S.-born. This is true at the national, state, county, and neighborhood levels, and for both violent and non-violent crime.

# As Immigration Has Risen, Crime Has Fallen

The American Immigration Council compared crime data to demographic data from 1980 to 2022, the most recent data available, to reveal historical trends and capture the latest patterns. The data showed that as the immigrant share of the population grew, the crime declined.

In 1980, immigrants made up 6.2 percent of the U.S. population,<sup>6</sup> and the total crime rate was 5,900 crimes per 100,000 people.<sup>7</sup> By 2022, the share of immigrants had more than doubled, to 13.9 percent, while the total crime rate had dropped by 60.4 percent, to 2,335 crimes per 100,000 people. Specifically, the violent crime rate fell by 34.5 percent and the property crime rate fell by 63.3 percent. Total crime rates are a combination of violent crimes, categorized as murder and manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault;<sup>8</sup> and property crimes, categorized as burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft.<sup>9</sup>

**FIGURE 1 - CRIME RATES AND FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION SHARE IN THE UNITED STATES, 1980 TO 2022**



The same pattern holds true for data from recent years. From 2017 to 2022, the immigrant share of the U.S. population rose from 13.7 percent to 13.8 percent, an increase of 1.7 million people. At the same time, the national total crime rate dropped from 2,758 per 100,000 people to 2,335 per 100,000 people, a 15.3 percent decrease. The violent crime rate alone dropped from 395 per 100,000 people to 381 per 100,000 people, a 3.6 percent decrease.

Using Uniform Crime Reporting data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)<sup>10</sup> and population data from the U. S. Census Bureau,<sup>11</sup> the Council also explored the relationship between total crime rates and immigrant shares of the population between 2017 and 2022 at the state level.

Using beta regression analyses and data from all 50 states, the result shows no statistically significant correlation between the immigrant share of the population and the total crime rate in any state.<sup>12</sup> This means higher immigrant population shares are not associated with higher crime rates, which aligns with a wealth of prior research on this topic.

## Past Studies Show No Connection Between Immigration and Crime

Nineteen research reports examining the relationship between immigrants and crime have been published in peer-reviewed journals between 2017 and 2024, analyzing data through 2020. All came to one of just two conclusions: that the proportion of immigrants in an area appeared to have no effect on either the violent or property crime rate in that area; or that increased shares of immigrants were actually associated with lower violent and property crime rates. In other words, when immigration goes up, crime stays the same or goes down.

For example, a 2022 study published in *Criminology* looked at homicides by county between 2000 and 2015 and found that higher shares of immigrants were unrelated to homicide rates.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, upon examining new-destination counties—counties that had a smaller share of immigrants than the national average in 2000 but a higher share than the national average in 2010—the authors found that each percentage increase in the share of immigrant residents was associated with a 0.3 percent reduction in the homicide rate.<sup>14</sup>

Additional research exploring county-level crime rates and specific subgroups of immigrants, refugees<sup>15</sup> and Latino immigrants<sup>16</sup> specifically, have reinforced these findings.

Furthermore, using a sample of 1,052 (or 9 percent of) U.S. Census-designated places across the country, criminologists from the University of Arkansas found that each percentage increase in the foreign-born population was associated with, on average, a 2.5 percent reduction in the number of homicides, a 2 percent reduction in the number of assaults, a 1.2 percent reduction in the number of burglaries, and a 0.7 percent reduction in the number of larcenies.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, each percentage point increase in the share of Latino immigrants was associated with decreases in the number of homicides, assaults, and burglaries, and no changes to the number of larcenies.<sup>18</sup>

This study also found that places with more diverse immigrant populations (defined as more countries of origin) experienced larger drops in assault and burglary rates.<sup>19</sup>

At the neighborhood level, one 2022 study by University of Louisiana criminologists analyzed neighborhoods in Dallas between 2015 and 2017 and found no correlation between the size of a neighborhood's immigrant population and the neighborhood's violent crime rate.<sup>20</sup> It also found that an increase in a neighborhood's concentration of immigrants was associated with a lower rate of property crime.<sup>21</sup>

## Undocumented Immigrants Do Not Raise Crime Rates

The same phenomenon holds true when research looks at undocumented immigrants alone.

Purdue sociologists analyzing data for all 50 states and Washington, D.C., found that increased state-level concentrations of undocumented immigrants between 1990 and 2014 were associated with lower rates of drunken driving arrests, drug arrests, drug fatalities,<sup>22</sup> and reports of rape.<sup>23</sup> And no association existed between state-level undocumented immigrant concentrations and homicide, robbery, or assault.<sup>24</sup>

In another study, an economist from the University of California, Riverside examined the effects of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program on crime from 2006 through 2015. Looking at all 50 states and Washington, D.C., the author found that, on average, each approved DACA request per 1,000 people was associated with a 1.6 percent reduction in property crime at the state level.<sup>25</sup>

When the same author expanded his analysis to include all undocumented immigrants, he was unable to identify any significant relationship between state-level property crime rates or violent crime rates and the proportion of residents in the state who were undocumented immigrants.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the share of undocumented immigrants in a state's population appeared to have no effect on a state's incidence of property crimes or violent crimes.

# Immigrants Are Arrested and Jailed Less Often than the U.S.-Born

Further supporting the research that immigrants do not raise crime rates is the data showing that immigrants have lower felony arrest rates<sup>27</sup> and lower incarceration rates than the U.S.-born.<sup>28</sup>

Immigrants have had lower incarceration rates than the U.S.-born for each of the last 150 years. And today, immigrants are 60 percent less likely to be incarcerated than those who were born in the United States.<sup>29</sup>

False claims may succeed in stoking fear of undocumented immigrants, but research has consistently shown that undocumented immigrants are far less likely to be arrested for felony and violent offenses, including homicide, than are U.S.-born residents. A CATO Institute analysis of crime rates in Texas between 2013 and 2022, for example, found that undocumented immigrants were 26 percent less likely than the U.S.-born to be convicted of homicide.<sup>30</sup>

According to a multi-year study of crime statistics published by the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, undocumented immigrants are half as likely to be arrested for violent crimes as the U.S.-born.<sup>31</sup>

Things like employment and social support are typically correlated with lower crime rates, and immigrants in the United States may benefit from these factors. For instance, among those Americans with lower levels of education, immigrants are more likely to be employed than the U.S.-born. Immigrants are also more likely to be married and have children.<sup>32</sup> These factors could help explain why immigrants are less likely to commit crimes.

Compared to the U.S.-born population, undocumented immigrants are:

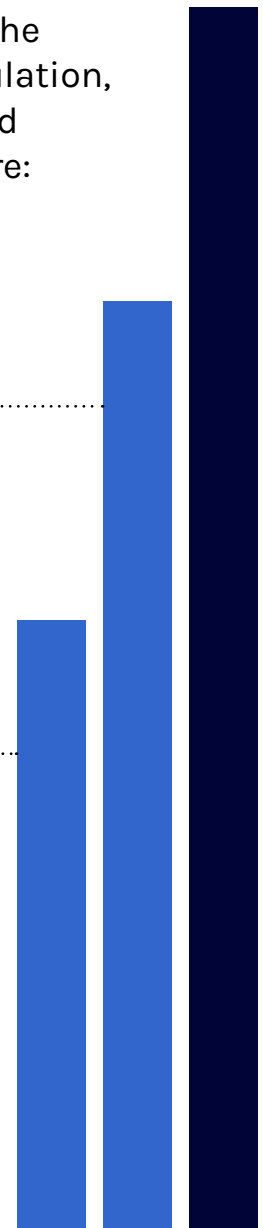
**26%**

less likely to be convicted of homicide

Roughly

**50%**

less likely to be arrested for violent crimes



# Stricter Immigration Enforcement Does Not Reduce Crime

Despite the evidence, some politicians have used the immigrant-as-criminal myth to promote harsh enforcement policies.<sup>33</sup> However, there's no evidence to suggest that more aggressive immigration enforcement policies lead to less crime.

When economists from the University of California, Davis examined data from 2000 through 2015 for 47 states (Utah, Idaho, Montana, and Nevada were excluded because of insufficient data), they found no significant relationship between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) apprehensions and the rates of violent crime, property crime, or murder.<sup>34</sup> In other words, cracking down on immigration did not lower crime.

At the same time, policies that strive to protect immigrants, such as those in so-called sanctuary cities that aim to limit local law enforcement's collaboration with ICE, have not been shown to increase crime rates at the state, county, or city level. Instead, these sanctuary policies have been associated with lower property and violent crime rates<sup>35</sup> as well as reductions in specific crimes like domestic homicide,<sup>36</sup> assault,<sup>37</sup> and robbery.<sup>38</sup>

In one study of city-level crime and immigrant population data from 107 U.S. cities between 1990 and 2010, sociologists from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill failed to identify a significant relationship between either the share of immigrant residents generally, or the share of Mexican undocumented immigrant residents specifically, with homicide and robbery rates.<sup>39</sup> When they examined this relationship in the context of sanctuary cities alone, the authors found that each percentage increase in a city's Mexican undocumented population was associated with a 5 percent decrease in the homicide rate.<sup>40</sup>

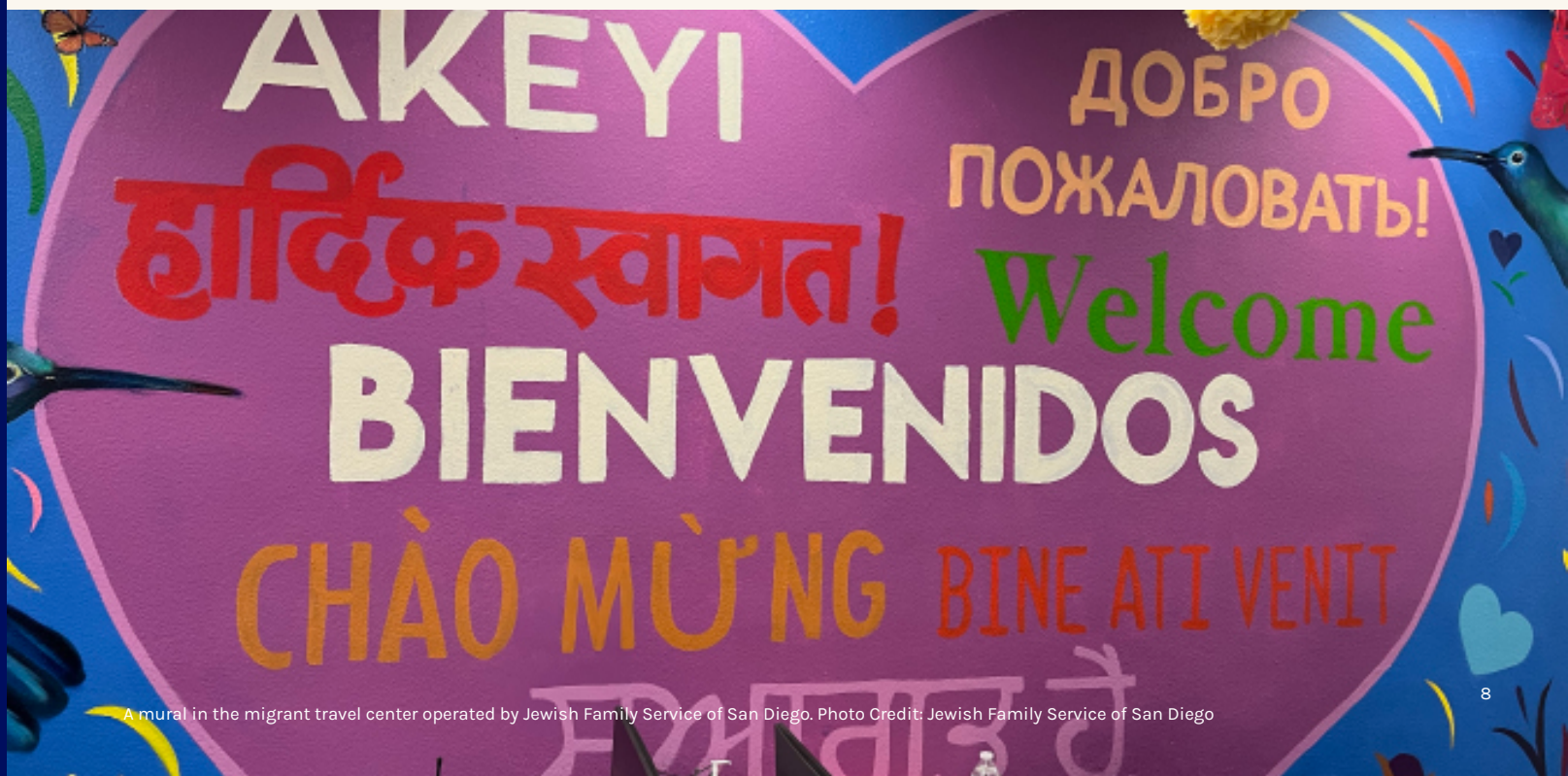


## To Fight Crime, Embrace Immigrant Communities

The research is clear: immigrants—including undocumented immigrants—do not bring crime. Yet the myth continues to be leveraged to justify harsh enforcement policies that offer no discernible reduction in crime. This does real harm to immigrants and to the communities they live in, and it detracts attention from actual sources of crime.

These enforcement practices, and the rhetoric that surround them, effectively dehumanize and criminalize immigrants, leading to social isolation,<sup>41</sup> mental and physical stress,<sup>42</sup> distrust of law enforcement, and a compromised sense of safety,<sup>43</sup> all of which threaten to undermine the kind of healthy social support that has been found to reduce crime. Repeating the myth only allows policymakers to ignore the larger structural factors that *actually* have shown to affect crime, such as unemployment, housing insecurity, economic instability, and a lack of community-based organizations and public services.<sup>44</sup>

Strong social ties, robust community programs, and healthy economies have long been known to help keep crime rates down. By welcoming immigrants, rather than fearing them, communities have already shown that they can further lower their crime rates.<sup>45</sup>



A mural in the migrant travel center operated by Jewish Family Service of San Diego. Photo Credit: Jewish Family Service of San Diego

# Endnotes

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