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CHAPTER 23

IMMIGRATION AND CRIME

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HISTORICALLY, immigrants have disproportionately taken the blame for many of society's problems. It is claimed that they steal jobs from hard-working native-born Americans, they drain America's health care and educational resources, and perhaps most problematically, they cause higher crime rates. This blame is often based on false assumptions and stereotypes. Concerning perceptions of immigrant criminality, for example, Martinez and Lee (2000, p. 487) note, "Historically, public opinion about immigration, and the immigrant-crime link especially, has been formed by stereotypes more often than reliable empirical data. Similarly, early 20th century immigration-policy was guided more by questionable research and prejudicial beliefs than a solid foundation of knowledge based on the existing scientific literature." Today, well into the 21st century, these perceptions remain firmly rooted in the American psyche. In the most recent General Social Survey, respondents were asked, "Do more immigrants cause higher crime rates?" Twenty-five percent said this was "very likely" and another 48 percent said this was "somewhat likely," resulting in nearly three-quarters of respondents believing that immigration and crime go hand in hand.

Yet, as many scholars already know, a substantial literature consistently finds that immigrants are less, not more, crime prone than their native-born counterparts. Study after study documents that immigrants are less likely to be involved in, or to be institutionalized for, criminal involvement compared with the native born (Ousey and Kubrin 2009, p. 447; Stowell et al. 2009, p. 893). One review concluded: "The major finding of a century of research on immigration and crime is that . . . immigrants nearly always exhibit lower crime rates than native groups" (Martinez and Lee 2000, p. 496). Hence, in spite of public opinion, scholars are essentially on same page regarding the extent of criminality among immigrants relative to the native born.

Despite this general agreement, as I have argued elsewhere (Ousey and Kubrin 2009; see also Reid et al. 2005, p. 758) the immigration-crime research picture remains incomplete. Unlike an abundance of research on the individual-level association between immigrant status and criminal offending, there is a comparative shortage of research on the macro-level relationship between immigration and crime rates, including studies conducted at the neighborhood, city, and metropolitan levels. Critical questions—focusing more directly on aggregate issues such as, Do areas with more immigrants have higher crime rates? Does immigration increase crime?—have yet to be fully addressed. This is problematic because immigration is an aggregate-level phenomenon whose effects may extend far beyond the argument that immigrants are more crime prone than nonimmigrants. In fact, there are good reasons to suspect that immigration affects demographic, economic, and social structures in ways that will impact overall crime rates, aside from any differences in the individual-level offending of immigrants and natives (Ousey and Kubrin 2009, p. 448).

These points underscore the necessity of distinguishing between an immigrant-crime and an immigration-crime nexus. As Mears (2002, p. 285) asserts, "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. 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)." Likewise, Reid et al. (2005, p. 758) warn, "Research on the relationship between immigration and crime must take into account the ecological impacts of immigrants that may influence rates of criminal offending. Thus, while individual-level studies of immigrant criminality tend to show that immigrants typically engage in less crime than their native-born counterparts, the effect of macro-level aspects of immigration on rates of criminal offending is unclear."

Only very recently has the field witnessed a proliferation of aggregate studies on the immigration and crime relationship at the neighborhood level (Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld 2001; Lee and Martinez 2002; Martinez, Lee, and Nielsen 2004; Nielsen, Lee, and Martinez 2005; Sampson, Morenoff, and Raudenbush 2005; Stowell and Martinez 2007; Martinez, Stowell, and Cancino 2008; Desmond and Kubrin 2009; Martinez, Stowell, and Lee 2010), city level (Butcher and Piehl 1998a; Martinez 2000; Ousey and Kubrin 2009; Wadsworth 2010), and metropolitan-area level (Reid et al. 2005; Stowell et al. 2009). Different from studies on the individual-level association between immigrant status and criminal offending, the findings are more inconsistent (for a discussion, see Ousey and Kubrin 2009, p. 453). Still, the basic conclusion to emerge from this literature is that immigration is not associated with higher crime rates and that increases in immigration do not cause heightened crime, once again challenging the myths and stereotypes that pervade public opinion.¹

Despite significant advances in the aggregate literature, critical questions and unresolved issues remain. The goals of this chapter are first, to raise some questions and unresolved issues in existing macro-level research on immigration and crime, and second, to chart some promising new directions for research in this area. In this

chapter, I focus on what I consider the three most critical issues. Section I examines the importance of testing theories on the connection between immigration and crime. Section II underscores the need for more longitudinal research. And section III describes data impediments that must be overcome if we are to truly advance our knowledge on immigration and crime. The chapter concludes in section IV with my final thoughts on future research.

In line with a focus on these issues, several conclusions can be offered:

- Despite an abundance of explanations for why immigration may both increase *and* reduce crime in neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas, almost no research has empirically tested these explanations, leaving us essentially in the dark about the nature of 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.
- Despite a rapidly expanding cross-sectional literature on the aggregate relationship between immigration and crime, there has been insufficient research examining the longitudinal immigration-crime relationship across neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas. A critical next step, then, is for scholars to employ longitudinal frameworks in their examinations of the immigration-crime nexus.
- To truly advance research on immigration and crime, critical data limitations must be overcome, including incorporating information about nationality and ethnicity in official data collection efforts, further distinguishing between legal and illegal immigrant status in the data, and addressing the problem of underreporting, especially with respect to immigrant victims.

I. THEORY TESTING

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, cities, and metropolitan areas, indicators representing those frameworks are often not collectively included in macro-level studies. Consequently, we do not know whether or to what extent immigration and crime are truly associated once we control for the 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. This 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. This 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, 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.

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.

A. Why 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 immigrants 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 adversely 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.

B. Why 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. 21) 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's 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 U.S., 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)

Referred to as the immigration revitalization thesis, the argument is that far from 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 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 suggests 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.

II. THE NEED FOR LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

A second critical shortcoming in the aggregate literature on immigration and crime is the near absence of longitudinal research. Much less attention has been directed toward determining the dynamic relationship between immigration and crime, yet immigration is inherently a dynamic process that unfolds over time (Ousey and Kubrin 2009, p. 448). As far back as the 1930s, researchers called for a proper assessment of this dynamic relationship, with scholars such as Taft (1933) noting, “The criminogenic effects of immigration—if they are real—are temporary” (p. 77). Yet, with few exceptions, which I will describe, research in this area has been overwhelmingly cross-sectional.

There are critical questions that can be answered *only* by using a longitudinal framework. The basic question is: How do changes in immigration affect changes in crime rates over time? Other, more complex questions remain, such as this: Does the longitudinal relationship between immigration and crime depend on the historical context under consideration? One relevant issue has to do with historically changing immigration patterns. According to several scholars (Butcher and Piehl 1998b, p. 655; Martinez 2006, p. 9), the contemporary immigrant influx is vastly different, in terms of national origins, from the influx at the turn of the last century:

After a period of mass immigration from Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States experienced a relative lull in immigration from the 1920s to the 1960s. But the past few decades have ushered in a new era of large-scale immigration which has accelerated since the 1980s. This time the flows have come largely from Latin America and Asia, not from Europe. Over the past 15 years, the number of immigrants—both legal and illegal—coming to the United States has been the largest in its history in absolute terms. (Rumbaut and Ewing 2007, p. 3)

Of interest is how immigration and crime may (or may not) be related under these varying historical contexts, particularly given new immigration waves. Of course, it is important to point out that changing migration patterns are not confined to the United States. In the Netherlands, for example, new types of immigrants are emerging in addition to the traditional labor migrants and migrants from former colonies. There are now asylum seekers, whose numbers have increased dramatically since the mid-1980s. There is also an increasing flow of temporary immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe who travel back and forth between the countries of the European Union. And there is the relatively new type of immigrant—undocumented or illegal immigrants (Engbersen and van der Leun 2001, p. 52). In the United States and abroad, we know next to nothing about how the immigration-crime relationship may be dependent upon, or conditioned by, historical context, and in this case, new waves of immigration that create drastic changes in the demographic composition of the population.

Beyond national origins, other significant differences exist in a new era of mass immigration. For example, unlike those of previous decades, immigrants in the United States are now heavily concentrated in metropolitan areas; are predominantly nonwhite; speak languages other than English; reflect a wide range of class, religious, and cultural backgrounds; and arrive with a mix of legal statuses. Rumbaut et al. (2006, p. 66) note that the incorporation of these newcomers has coincided with a period of economic restructuring and rising inequality, during which the returns to education have sharply increased. In this context, Lee and Martinez (2006, p. 94) argue, "While previous waves of immigrants provided the cheap labor force essential to industrialization and expansion in America, the most recent wave . . . has encountered an increasingly post-industrial, service-oriented society." This contemporary immigrant influx, according to Rumbaut et al. (2006), also has coincided with an era of mass imprisonment in the United States, which has further

transformed paths to adulthood among young men with low levels of education. Such observations raise important questions: How have the restructuring of the U.S. economy, the decentralization of cities, and the growth of suburbs as major employment centers affected the nature of the longitudinal immigration-crime relationship? These questions cannot be answered using a cross-sectional framework.

Another critical set of questions has to do with the larger context within which immigrant communities are situated. While dozens of studies have documented that immigrant concentration is negatively associated with neighborhood crime rates as noted earlier in the chapter, none has considered how the city-level context may alter that relationship, prompting questions such as these: Is the relationship between changes in immigration and changes in crime conditioned by area context? How might area context impact over time changes in this relationship?

Although several aspects of cities or metropolitan areas are likely influential, scholars have become increasingly interested in metropolitan immigrant gateways, differentiating between established gateways and new destinations (Singer 2004). Prior to the 1990s, immigrant settlement had a fairly predictable pattern and was limited primarily to southwestern and coastal states and metropolitan New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and Chicago. Yet by the end of the 20th century, shifts in labor markets and other factors had led immigrants to settle increasingly outside well-established immigrant gateways in a new group of cities and suburbs (Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008). Many of the newest, largest destinations—including Atlanta, Las Vegas, and Charlotte—are places with little to no history of immigration, while others—such as Sacramento, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Seattle, once important gateways in the early part of the 20th century—have reemerged as new destinations. Variation across metropolitan areas is quite significant, with some scholars documenting six types of immigrant gateways, determined largely by historical settlement patterns (Singer 2004). Of interest, then, is how the longitudinal immigration-crime relationship might vary across different types of metropolitan immigrant gateways. A related question is this: How do changes in crime rates *within* cities co-occur with changes in immigrant settlement over time—for example, as an area emerges or reemerges as a gateway city?

A final question that is perhaps of greatest interest to criminologists is related to the decline in crime rates across America's cities during the 1990s: Are changes in immigration a key factor contributing to the drop in crime that occurred in the 1990s? The majority of research on this drop, in fact, has not highlighted the role of immigration, focusing instead on more conventional contributors such as changing police practices, increased incarceration, shifting drug markets, gun control efforts, and economic opportunity, among others. However, in 2006, criminologist Robert Sampson published an op-ed in the *New York Times* raising the possibility that in attempting to understand why crime rates declined, "we have been overlooking something obvious—something that our implicit biases caused us not to notice." His "unusual suspect" is foreigners (March 11, 1996, p. A-27). Drawing on his Chicago research, Sampson claims that evidence points to increased immigration as a

major factor associated with lower crime rates of the 1990s. Sampson (2008) further developed this argument in a piece he wrote for *Contexts* titled "Rethinking Crime and Immigration." He argued:

In today's society, then, I would hypothesize that immigration and the increasing cultural diversity that accompanies it generate the sort of conflicts of culture that lead not to increased crime but nearly the opposite. In other words, selective migration in the current era may be leading to the greater visibility of competing non-violent mores that affect not just immigrant communities but diffuse and concatenate through social interactions to tamp down violent conflict in general. (p. 33)

Although Sampson's claims are certainly plausible, they have not been empirically tested—until very recently. As noted at the outset of this section, only a handful of scholars have examined the idea that changes in immigration patterns may be associated with changes in crime rates (Ousey and Kubrin 2009; Stowell et al. 2009; Martinez, Stowell, and Lee 2010; Wadsworth 2010). And of these studies, only two explicitly set out to test whether increases in immigration were responsible for declines in crime rates across U.S. cities during the 1990s. Interestingly, both studies document support for Sampson's thesis. Using time-series techniques and annual data for metropolitan areas over the 1994–2004 period, Stowell et al. (2009) assessed the impact of changes in immigration on changes in violent crime rates. They found that violence tended to decrease as metropolitan areas experienced gains in their concentration of immigrants, in line with Sampson's argument.

Likewise, Wadsworth (2010) evaluated the influence of immigration on crime in U.S. urban areas between 1990 and 2000. First, he conducted ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to assess the cross-sectional relationship between immigration patterns and rates of homicide and robbery across cities. Second, he employed pooled cross-sectional time-series models to determine how changes in immigration influenced changes in homicide and robbery rates between 1990 and 2000. In the OLS models, Wadsworth (2010) found that immigration is associated with higher homicide and robbery levels. However, findings from the time-series models indicate that cities with the largest increases in immigration between 1990 and 2000 experienced the largest decreases in homicide and robbery during that time period. Consistent with Stowell et al. (2009), Wadsworth (2010) concluded that the growth in immigration may have been responsible for part of the 1990s drop in crime.

Finally, although Ousey and Kubrin (2009) did not set out to test whether immigration was responsible, in part, for the crime drop, they investigated the impact of change in immigration on change in serious crime for 159 U.S. cities from 1980 to 2000. In line with Stowell et al. (2009) and Wadsworth (2010), they found that on average, cities that experienced increases in immigration from 1980 to 2000 experienced decreases in violent crime rates. They also found that immigration lowers violent crime rates by bolstering intact (two-parent) family structures. A related study by Martinez, Stowell, and Lee (2010) explored the effects of immigration on neighborhood-level homicide trends in San Diego, California, from 1980 through

2000. Consistent with the studies just reviewed, the results show that the increased size of the foreign-born population reduces lethal violence over time. Collectively, these studies reiterate what has been documented in macro-level cross-sectional studies—namely, that immigration is not associated with increased crime rates, as myths and stereotypes suggest. Still, only a handful of studies exist; much more research is needed to reach a definitive conclusion.

In sum, despite a rapidly expanding cross-sectional literature on the aggregate relationship between immigration and crime, there has been little research examining the longitudinal immigration-crime relationship across neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas. Important, yet unanswered, questions remain. A critical next step, then, is for scholars to employ longitudinal frameworks to study how immigration and crime may be associated at the macro level.

III. DATA CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing researchers interested in studying immigration and crime is data limitations. Data limitations, of course, are ubiquitous but I argue that they are especially acute for immigration and crime scholars. These limitations take three forms. First, official crime data do not capture an individual's ethnicity or immigrant status (e.g., native born versus foreign born), limiting our ability to ascertain the true distribution of immigrant criminals (and victims), at least on a national scale. Second, and related to the first limitation, official crime data do not distinguish between legal and illegal immigrants, failing to make another critical distinction. And third, for a variety of reasons, the problem of underreporting is especially great for immigrants and immigrant victims. I discuss each of these in turn.

Some countries use nationality identifiers in their crime and justice system data, but many do not. Unfortunately, the United States is one such country that does not collect national identifier data: "The vast bulk of official data collected by individual jurisdictions focuses solely on the difference between black and white offending, virtually ignoring differences across other ethnic groups or by immigrant status" (Reid et al. 2005, p. 763). According to Tonry (1997, pp. 9–10), at one point nationality data were collected but that was nearly 110 years ago: "Through the 1930s, U.S. and Canadian data often recorded nationality, but as 'crime and the foreign born' declined as a controversial political issue after large-scale immigration stopped in the mid-1920s, use of nationality identifiers stopped." The implications of this are quite serious—researchers are unable to distinguish between foreign-born and native-born offenders in state and national crime data. The result is, "At present . . . we lack reliable and accurate data about inflows and outflows of immigrants as a whole, much less along 'legal' and 'illegal' dimensions" (Mears 2002, p. 285).

With respect to macro-level research, this is particularly problematic since it renders impossible the task of identifying which group is responsible for reductions

(or gains) in crime rates across geographic areas. That is, while aggregate research can document a relationship between immigration and crime at the neighborhood, city, or metropolitan levels, this conclusion does not illuminate the precise groups responsible for the effects and the reasons for their criminal behavior (or lack thereof). More precisely, although numerous studies have found that increased immigration results in crime reductions as previously discussed, it is not clear whether such reductions are attributable to immigrants, the native born, or some combination of the two. This makes theory testing on the immigration-crime nexus challenging, especially given that some arguments propose changes in immigrants' behavior, some propose changes in natives' behavior, and some propose changes in the behavior of both groups. In essence, without distinguishing between native- and foreign-born individuals in crime statistics, researchers are unable to properly test many of the theoretical arguments described earlier.

A related problem is the inability to distinguish between legal and illegal immigrants not only in crime but in all national data sets that researchers employ. It is well established that undocumented residents do, in fact, respond to government surveys such as the decennial census and the Current Population Survey, but these surveys do not ask the foreign born if they are legal residents of the United States (Camarota 2007, p. 3). As a result, we have no clear sense of how many undocumented migrants reside in the United States. There appears to be widespread disagreement about the number of illegal immigrants, let alone their impact on our nation's crime rates. Some estimates claim nearly one in three immigrants is an illegal alien, resulting in between 11 and 11.5 million illegal aliens (Camarota 2007, p. 3). But the true number eludes us.

Underreporting is a serious concern for those who study immigration and crime. According to Horowitz (2001, p. 5), "Much of the crime committed by immigrants, very often against other immigrants of the same nationality, is going underreported." Horowitz maintains that this occurs for a greater proportion of crimes by immigrants than for crimes committed by U.S.-born residents. One study determined that domestic violence, sexual assault, and gang violence constitute the bulk of crimes that contribute to underreporting (Davis and Erez 1998, p. 2).

The problem of underreporting is so acute that researchers have extensively investigated its causes. Reasons for underreporting are wide and varied. In one study, which reports findings from a survey and selected site visits undertaken to provide a broad picture of the barriers recent immigrant groups encounter as consumers of criminal justice services, top reasons for underreporting include fear of becoming involved with the authorities, possible embarrassment to their families, language difficulties, cultural differences in conceptions of justice, and lack of knowledge of the criminal justice system (Davis and Erez 1998). Horowitz (2001, p. 5) identified the following contributors: (1) certain immigrant cultures view family crime as a "family matter," and hence not something that should concern the police; (2) many victims are fearful that contacting local police could result in deportation; (3) foreign-born criminals in the United States are well connected to crime rings abroad and can rely on the help of their compatriots to escape detection; and (4) criminals from Mexico, the country of origin for the

largest number of immigrants to the United States, regularly "commute" across the border. Finally, research by Menjivar and Salcido (2002) on immigrant women and domestic violence identified several immigrant-specific factors that make underreporting of domestic violence relatively common. These factors include "limited host-language skills, lack of access to dignified jobs, uncertain legal statuses, and experiences in their home countries" (pp. 901-2). Whatever the cause, one thing is known for sure: underreporting is rampant for crime data involving immigrants. We do not know how this may affect what we do know from studies on the immigration-crime nexus.

A common denominator underlying all of these limitations is an overreliance on official crime data. The vast majority of macro-level immigration and crime studies use official data, with only a handful using survey or victimization data. Beyond the problems noted earlier is the concern that official data typically reflect the practices of law enforcement agencies as much as they do criminal behavior (Mears 2002, p. 286), raising the potential issue of bias.

In sum, to truly advance research on immigration and crime, critical data limitations must be overcome. Perhaps most important, information about nationality and ethnicity should be included in official data collection efforts to distinguish native-born and foreign-born offenders on a national scale, and to capture within-group differences among immigrants themselves. Not surprisingly, "The political and ethical sensitivities that cause many countries to omit race and ethnicity data from their official records no doubt present a formidable challenge" (Tonry 1997, p. 26). Yet, returning to my first point regarding the need for more theory testing, this is critical for the proper empirical assessment of theoretical perspectives underlying the immigration-crime nexus. Of particular importance is determining whether reductions in crime rates across neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas are attributable to declines in rates for immigrants, natives, or some combination of the two. Further distinguishing between legal and illegal immigrant status is critical given varying assumptions underlying the criminality of each group. Finally, addressing the problem of underreporting, especially for immigrant victims, is of paramount importance if we are to truly get a handle on the nature of the immigration-crime nexus.

IV. CONCLUSION

Immigration and crime is one of the most contentious topics in contemporary American society. Disputes regarding the nature and extent of this link are not new, as debates on the issue date back more than 100 years. Also not new is the finding that the foreign born, in fact, commit fewer crimes than the native born, defying popular myths and stereotypes of the "criminal immigrant."

What *is* new, however, is the burgeoning aggregate literature on the macro-level relationship between immigration and crime rates across neighborhoods, cities,

and metropolitan areas. In the last decade or so, dozens of aggregate studies on the immigration-crime nexus have been published, with the great majority reinforcing the findings from individual-level studies: immigration to an area does not increase crime rates; rather, crime rates are often lower in neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan areas that have a greater concentration of immigrants.

Unfortunately, this finding is far from definitive, in large part because of limitations in existing macro-level research (even as important advances have been made). Discussing these limitations has been one goal of this chapter. Another goal has been to provide some promising new directions for macro-level research on the immigration-crime nexus. To reiterate, these include the following: (1) empirically testing the many theoretical frameworks that posit reasons that immigration may both increase and decrease crime rates across areas. These frameworks largely imply an indirect relationship, suggesting that immigration impacts crime through its effects on demographic, economic, and social structures; (2) conducting studies that employ a longitudinal framework to address important questions of interest about the immigration-crime nexus—questions that range from understanding how the relationship between immigration and crime varies depending on the historical context under consideration to determining whether increases in immigration were responsible, in part, for the crime drop of the 1990s; and (3) overcoming limitations in the data that prevent researchers from distinguishing foreign-born and native-born individuals and legal and illegal immigrants and that make assessment of the immigration-crime link complicated due to underreporting.

Still, apart from the limitations and suggested new directions, criminologists, now more than ever, are able to respond to those who continue to believe and perpetuate the myth that immigration and crime go hand in hand. Overwhelmingly, this response is “not so,” leaving the public and others to find alternative explanations for heightened crime rates.

NOTES

1. For summaries of the findings of aggregate-level studies on the immigration-crime relationship, see Ousey and Kubrin (2009) and Stowell et al. (2009).

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