

Why people believe undocumented immigrants cause more crime

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ASU criminologist Xia Wang examined why people believe undocumented immigrants are responsible for more crime than they commit. Credit: Felipe Ruiz, College of Public Programs

(Phys.org) -- Xia Wang wanted to find out why so many Americans believe undocumented immigrants commit more crime.

“The weight of evidence suggests that immigration is not related to more [crime](#),” said Wang, an assistant professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. “But this body of scholarship doesn’t seem to affect the public’s perception. The public consistently perceives immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants,

as criminal.”

To better understand why that perception exists, Wang used data from a poll of more than 1,000 people in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Texas. She applied the minority threat perspective, a theory that seeks to explain why minorities are treated differently by law enforcement. The results were published last month in an article that appeared online in the journal *Criminology*.

Wang found the belief that undocumented immigrants cause crime was due in part to the perceived [population size](#) of the immigrant community overall.

“If somebody is perceiving undocumented immigrants as a larger proportion in the population, they are going to perceive undocumented immigrants at a higher level of criminal threat,” Wang said. “And what’s interesting is a lot of people have very distorted and exaggerated views of the population size of undocumented immigrants.”

The data show a large proportion of respondents estimated the undocumented population to be more than half of the overall foreign born population, far greater than recognized statistics. In 2011, the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey listed the U.S. immigrant population at 39.6 million, while the Pew Hispanic Center estimated 28%, or 11.2 million, were unauthorized immigrants.

“As for why people have very distorted, exaggerated views, what I found is that individual factors such as your level of education and your victimization experience shape your views,” said Wang. “It’s a bit surprising to me because I would think that people would form their perceptions of undocumented immigrant population size based on the conditions their neighborhood is in, such as the actual size of the immigrant population.”

Wang tested to see if the economic condition, or unemployment rate of respondents' communities played a role in believing undocumented immigrants were more involved in crime. It didn't for the general population, but it did for the native born.

“Those neighborhood conditions don't matter as much,” Wang said. “It is largely the individual characteristics that shape people's perceptions of undocumented immigrants population size and perceptions of undocumented immigrants as more criminal.”

Wang said that for criminologists her analysis shows the minority threat perspective could be applied to [undocumented immigrants](#). For members of the public, she hoped it may lead them to ask why undocumented immigrants are perceived as causing more crime.

“They actually commit less crime than the native born. But why do we consistently believe they are more criminal?” asked Wang. “We can ask ourselves and be more critical of our views. Are we being reasonable? Are we being rational?”

Provided by Arizona State University

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