

## Stanford economist: Immigration reform initiative could reduce crime

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Students wait in line for assistance with paperwork for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program in Los Angeles on Aug. 15, 2012. The program allows some illegal immigrants to remain in the U.S. Photo: Jonathan Alcorn/Reuters

(Phys.org)—President Obama's immigration policies, which allow some young illegal immigrants to remain in the country, may have the effect of lowering the national crime rate, according to research at Stanford

University.

When the Obama administration announced its new [immigration policy](#) in June, opponents immediately labeled it a form of "backdoor amnesty." Comparisons were drawn between it and the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA – an immigration reform law that effectively resulted in a blanket amnesty for nearly 3 million undocumented workers.

The new Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals initiative, which took effect Aug. 15, is not, in fact, an amnesty. But like the IRCA, the initiative does offer undocumented youth opportunities in the legal workforce. And, also like the 1986 Act, according to Stanford economics doctoral candidate Scott R. Baker, the initiative could lead to a nationwide drop in crime – as many as 50,000 fewer crimes per year. Baker is also a Shultz Graduate Student Fellow in Economic Policy at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR).

## **An unintended benefit**

The IRCA was originally meant to legalize the hiring of undocumented workers – the amnesties offered to longtime American residents and certain kinds of agricultural workers were an afterthought. But without oversight, Baker explained, the 1986 Act led to the legalization of more than 2.5 million of the estimated 3.1 million illegal immigrants in the country at that time.

"More immigrants applied for legalizations in California than there were total [agricultural workers](#) in the state," said Baker.

This unintended wave of legalizations may, however, have been a blessing in disguise.

Baker compared IRCA applications with FBI crime statistics on a county-by-county basis, and found that more legalizations meant less crime. Legalizing 1 percent of the population in a county corresponded to a 2 percent decrease in crime per capita – around 200,000 fewer crimes every year on a national level.

Baker's evidence suggests that this decline is, in fact, directly tied to IRCA-enabled legalizations. The results aren't explained by other factors, like long-term crime trends or an increase in police numbers.

There are a number of possible reasons for why legalization might have this effect. Legal immigrants are more likely to cooperate with the police during investigations. The immigrants, primarily men, were also less likely to live alone once they were legalized – an important detail, since family men are less prone to criminal behavior.

But, Baker says, the most important change was likely the most direct.

"Once these men are legalized, they're essentially granted access to a formal, legal labor market," said Baker.

This means more jobs, higher salaries and better opportunities for advancement.

## **Reform redux**

Deferred Action is more limited – and tightly regulated – than the IRCA was. Similar in some ways to the Democrat-proposed DREAM Act, it allows [illegal immigrants](#) who are younger than 30, came to the country before they were 16, and have been in the country for a minimum of five continuous years to remain in the United States and apply for work permits.

The path to the formal labor market offered by the new initiative is also less certain. Under the initiative young people will only be able to apply for renewable two-year work permits, instead of having "an explicit path to citizenship," Baker said. And, as an executive order, there is always the possibility that the offer could be rescinded if the White House changes hands.

Nevertheless, "it has a tremendous amount of similarity," said Baker. If the effects of the Obama administration policy are similar to those of the 1986 Act, we could expect a national decrease of tens of thousands of crimes per year.

However, with several states, including Arizona and Georgia, now attempting to counter the executive order, the number of eligible immigrants may decrease further.

The research will appear in an upcoming SIEPR [policy brief](#).

Provided by Stanford University

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