The 'criminal' immigrant

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Politicians often use rhetoric about "crime-prone" immigrants to support tough-on-immigration legislation.

But recent research suggests immigrants do not increase crime and may actually help reduce it, according to University of Dayton sociologist Jamie Longazel.

So why does the crime stereotype persist?

"I call it a subordinating myth," Longazel said. "It's an effort to put immigrants in a lower social status. When the dominant population perceives a threat, they will do things to minimize that threat."

In a new article in *Sociology Compass* released Feb. 4, Longazel writes that casting Latino immigrants as criminals is a method of racial hoarding—excluding this group from access to material, cultural and political resources.

He identifies four ways the criminalization of immigrants, specifically Latino immigrants, contributes to their exclusion and subordination:

- Profiting from immigration detention
- Political scapegoating
- Degrading immigration enforcement efforts
- Literal control of exploitable populations through fear of deportation

Currently, just under 400,000 immigrants are detained each year in the U.S., an all-time high. Almost half, most of whom are Latino, are housed in private facilities. In fact, the private prison industry was pulled out of financial peril in the late 1990s by a surge in immigrant detention, Longazel said.

"Immigrants have thus quite literally become the 'raw materials' of a now booming for-profit prison industry," he said.

Politicians use immigrants as a scapegoat for working class whites to blame for failed economic policies. Longazel's hometown of Hazleton, Pa., passed the Illegal Immigration Relief Act after officials induced a panic prompted by unproven allegations that two undocumented Latino men murdered a white resident. The local media coverage of that murder was far more hysterical than it had been following the murder of a Latino man seven months prior.

The mayor was able to rally support to pass an anti-immigrant law, depicting all of Hazleton's problems as caused by undocumented immigrants. Yet crime rates in Hazleton actually declined in the period between immigrant arrival and the passage of the law, Longazel said.

Meanwhile, officials had offered massive tax incentives to attract a meatpacking plant to Hazleton in 2001 that Longazel said exploited immigrant labor, hiring 1,300 workers—90 percent of whom were Latino—for low-paying, non-union jobs.

"Politically positioning oneself as 'tough on immigration,' in other words, has proved beneficial to politicians across the nation and quelled dissent on economic policies that negatively affect native-born workers and exploited immigrant laborers alike," he said.

The subordinating myth of criminalization also degrades immigrants,

who often feel targeted simply for looking or sounding a certain way, which can take an emotional and physical toll on a person's health. Longazel cites research that found "appearing Mexican"—even for American citizens—emerged as the best predictor of being mistreated by immigration authorities.

As a result of this profiling and suspicion, immigrant populations are often afraid to expand their social circles and do not feel free. Many will not report crimes to the police, leading to a great irony: falsely labeling immigrants as criminals ultimately leads to their increased vulnerability as crime victims.

In Longazel's assessment, immigration policies and enforcement agencies are neither equipped nor intended to actually keep the undocumented out. On the contrary, he says, their purpose is to facilitate the creation of vulnerability, which enables exploitation.

"From this perspective, there exists no contradiction: the criminalization of immigrants is clearly and explicitly a racial project."

Provided by University of Dayton

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