Immigrants less likely to commit major crimes, study says

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(Phys.org) —The perception that immigrants are linked to crime in the United States is something that has existed for decades or longer. However, UT Dallas criminologist Alex Piquero says, that view is not supported by data.

New research shows first-generation immigrants, or individuals born outside the U.S., are less likely to commit serious crimes and less likely to be chronic offenders.

The study, which appeared in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, uses a large sample of high-risk, adjudicated youth containing first- and second-generation immigrants to examine longitudinal paths of official and self-reported offending. An adjudicated youth is one who has been found guilty of committing a delinquent act by a court of law. The study also examined how assimilation and residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods impacted the criminal behavior of first- and second-generation immigrants.

"There's a perception about a relationship between immigrants and crime problems that has been absent from empirical data," said Piquero, Ashbel Smith Professor of Criminology and co-author of the paper. "We were fortunate to have data to study those questions. There is nothing worse than misperception, whether it's about race, gender or any other demographic."

The article uses data from the Pathways to Desistance Study, which

Piquero helped create. He said the project was designed to track serious youth offenders and what happens to them over time.

For seven years, the project followed 1,354 youth, ages 14 to 17, who were found guilty of serious offenses in the juvenile or adult court systems. In this study, Piquero and his co-authors assessed six measures: official reports of arrest, self-reported offending, immigration status, ethnic identity, assimilation and disadvantage.

The researchers found no evidence that first-generation immigrants were characterized by high-rate, persistent offending styles. The study shows more than 80 percent of first-generation immigrants were low-rate offenders.

Between adjudication and the researchers' 84-month follow-up, first-generation immigrants revealed the most sizable decrease in the average rate of offending when compared to their second-generation and native-born counterparts.

Results showed second-generation immigrants – individuals born in the U.S. who have at least one foreign-born parent – offend at similar rates to their native-born counterparts. The research shows a large intergenerational disparity in immigrant offending, with involvement in crime increasing rapidly among successive generations of immigrants.

"It could be that the family unit is very insular, very protective," Piquero said. "It doesn't allow the child to experience 'the bad' in the community. Their family says, 'It is a privilege to live here. Abide by the law.' That might be what protects against crime initially.

"On the other hand, we find that contextual influences are important in understanding persistent involvement in crime among second-generation immigrants," Piquero said.

The authors believe this study contributes sorely needed information on longitudinal immigrant offending patterns.

Piquero said America has changed, and data mechanisms need to change along with it. Current immigrant flows have reached historic levels, with the foreign-born population exceeding 12 percent of the total U.S. population and projected to increase significantly in the next 30 years, according to the article.

"There's a perception that immigrants are the crime problem, and data does not support that. Most offenses are by Americans," he said. "Immigration is not a bad thing. The crime problem in America is not an immigrant problem. It's an American problem."

Piquero said the study could impact other research areas, such as health sociology and the study of obesity and life expectancy among Hispanics who have immigrated to the U.S.

More information: link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10964-013-0045-z

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