

Demographics of deportation: Noncitizens fare better in communities that are 20-40 percent Hispanic

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be a priority." Credit: Randy Michaud

An exhaustive new analysis of deportation practices across the country reveals a "protective effect" for noncitizens living in communities that are 20 percent to 40 percent Hispanic.

"There's a lot of talk about what makes a place welcoming for immigrants, and this research puts a number on that," said Juan Pedroza, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, whose findings appear in the current issue of Policy Studies Journal. "A sizable concentration of Hispanics—between 20 and 40 percent—provides the momentum and agreement that immigrant rights should be a priority."

Notably, there's a limit to the welcoming effect of living in a community with a lot of Hispanic residents: Counties with more than 40 percent Hispanics were more punitive, according to Pedroza, who analyzed 2008-2013 data compiled during the Obama administration.

"On the low end and high end, one in five noncitizens is deported," he said. "The [protective effect](#) is in the middle, when the Hispanic community is visible but not too large. That's when the proportion of noncitizens who are arrested and get deported drops to one in six or one in seven."

The uneven implementation of immigration policy is not random, and it generates uneven ripple effects in communities, said Pedroza. "Food insecurity, housing instability, foreclosures, families that are being split up: Some places are dealing with it every day, all the time," he said.

The most unwelcoming communities—those that exerted the least

discretion in deportation—include Imperial County in California along the border with Mexico; El Paso, Texas; Charleston, South Carolina; and Mecklenburg, North Carolina. Among the most welcoming communities for immigrants were liberal strongholds like San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and San Jose, California, as well as Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and Newark, New Jersey.

Pedroza acknowledges that "we are in a different climate today" under the Trump administration, but he believes the "protective effect" is likely still in place.

"It's not the absolute numbers that that make the difference, it's the clout of certain segments of the Hispanic population in the community," he said. "Communities with a low concentration of Hispanics aren't able to develop the local, community-based organizations that influence elected officials like sheriffs."

Pedroza suspects that communities with more than 40 percent Hispanics, including many in Southwestern states, experience immigration quite differently, with Hispanic residents perhaps "splintering" between those who support the rights of noncitizens under arrest and those who have other priorities.

Methodology: county-by-county analysis

During the Obama administration, the federal Secure Communities initiative allowed sheriffs to use their discretion when deciding whether to turn noncitizens over to [federal authorities](#) following an arrest for a minor offense—typically a misdemeanor that carries less than a one-year sentence for conviction.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the federal agency charged with enforcing [immigration laws](#), released monthly reports,

which Pedroza monitored regularly for several years, juxtaposing immigration and deportation activity with changes in the size of each county's Hispanic population, their local deportation policies, voting patterns in presidential elections, unemployment, and crime rates.

Pedroza kept tabs on data about more than 3,100 counties nationwide; over 2,000 counties "qualified" for his study, with at least one immigrant arrest in their system. About 500 counties accounted for 95 percent of the nation's deportation activity, he said. Pedroza's results provide a broad picture of regions that supported cooperating with federal mandates and those that resisted compliance.

"Jails and sheriffs were making decisions about these immigrants without Congress looking over their shoulder, long before immigration advocates became aware of the Secure Communities program," said Pedroza. "Counties had wiggle room. We got an unvarnished peek at what counties would do left to their own devices."

Changing federal priorities

Secure Communities was retired by Obama in 2015 in favor of a Priority Enforcement Program that emphasized more serious offenses—and retooled the mandatory information-sharing component on which Pedroza relied. Secure Communities was resurrected in 2017 by the Trump administration, which has erased any mention of priority enforcement by state and local agencies in favor of a mandate to deport everyone who is eligible.

Today, counties that were generally less welcoming of noncitizens under Obama are speeding up deportation, notes Pedroza, who said local policies designed to accelerate deportation—known as 287(g) agreements, named after a 1996 change to federal law—are also on the resurgence, with the federal government training local police and sheriff

departments to investigate immigration violations.

"State context really matters, and what the federal government is encouraging really matters," he said.

Pedroza anticipates a "Trump effect," not only in deportation practice but in consequences, including crime reporting and cooperation with law enforcement. "As deportations go up, immigrants become hesitant to cooperate with police, even to report things like domestic violence reports," he said. "We are starting to see it."

"We know from recent research that the consequences of [deportation](#) are tremendous," he said. "If enforcement is uneven, where the consequences are taking hold is going to be very uneven as well."

More information: Juan Manuel Pedroza. Deportation Discretion: Tiered Influence, Minority Threat, and "Secure Communities" Deportations, *Policy Studies Journal* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/psj.12300](https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12300)

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