

Views on guns and death penalty are linked to harsh treatment of immigrants

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An online study that pulled equally from people who identify as Democrats or Republicans has found subtle new clues that underlie views about immigrants.

The words people use and their beliefs about social harms, such as the death penalty and gun rights, can predict attitudes favoring harsh treatment and the [dehumanization](#) of illegal immigrants, report University of Oregon researchers in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The study, conducted by UO communication professor David M. Markowitz and UO psychologist Paul Slovic, appeared online April 16 ahead of print. In the study, the pair dug deeper into the characteristics of those who dehumanize immigrants—beyond often-discussed factors such as hatred toward outside groups and extreme racism.

Dehumanization—depriving a person or group of fundamental human qualities—is a complex process but identifiable by taking a holistic view of individuals, said Markowitz, who uses computational approaches to analyze how social and psychological phenomena are reflected in language.

"This study investigates how treating immigrants as less than human is associated with a range of characteristics largely unexplored by prior research," said Markowitz, an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Communication. "We demonstrate that dehumanization manifests in a range of new characteristics, such as policy beliefs and how people talk."

The newly identified factors emerged as Markowitz and Slovic, an expert on decision-making and risk perception, took 468 participants through a complex series of questions aimed at understanding how people dehumanize immigrants.

Initially participants were randomly assigned to scenarios that either involved a lone [immigrant](#) or an immigrant with a child being caught entering the country illegally. Participants in each scenario were then

asked how much jail time, from none to life in jail, should be assessed. Subsequently, participants were asked to write about their judgments.

Moving forward, the participants answered a myriad of subsequent questions designed to probe additional layers of dehumanization related to social, psychological and demographic issues.

First, Markowitz and Slovic evaluated the written responses for rates of impersonal pronouns, the use of words associated with power, and emotion. Words that people use, the researchers noted, provide important clues about psychological dynamics and how people think and feel about a specific group.

Words, they wrote, "are crucial because they provide an opportunity to evaluate potentially large-scale and pervasive dehumanization that exists online through verbal behavior, such as alt-right chatrooms, instead of relying on self-report measures alone." Indeed, the researchers found, dehumanizers wrote about immigrants in more impersonal terms, from a position of power and with more negative emotion.

The researchers next focused on how dehumanization connected to social harms. Those who endorsed social harms related to protecting American rights to own guns, the death penalty and harsh raids on immigrants tended to dehumanize more and identified as conservative. Such individuals were also more likely to endorse lengthy jail time for illegal immigrants.

Markowitz and Slovic concluded, however, that "a substantial number of Americans can be classified as dehumanizers."

"The support for social harms, particularly about guns and the [death penalty](#), are seemingly unrelated to how one should treat an immigrant, but they matter in a large way," Markowitz said. "We can move forward

by acknowledging our blind spots as individuals."

The study, which was supported by grants from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and National Science Foundation, is part of an ongoing effort by the researchers to identify how and why people dehumanize illegal immigrants.

"We hope that interdisciplinary social science research can inform how vulnerable populations are treated, with the goal of mitigating cruelty around the world," Slovic said.

More information: David M. Markowitz et al, Social, psychological, and demographic characteristics of dehumanization toward immigrants, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1921790117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1921790117)

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