

# Foreign-born status, but not acquired US citizenship, protects many immigrants from criminal victimization

June 23 2021

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Until recently, data on criminal victimization did not include information on the status—immigrant or citizen—of respondents. In a recent study, researchers used new data that include respondents' status to explore the association between citizenship status and risk of victimization. They found that for many, a person's foreign-born status, but not their acquired U.S. citizenship, protects against criminal victimization.

The study, by researchers at the University of Maryland (UMD) at College Park and the Pennsylvania State University (PSU), is forthcoming in *Criminology*.

"Understanding how patterns of victimization vary between U.S.-born citizens and different groups of immigrants is critical for informing policy and practice," says Min Xie, professor of criminology and criminal justice at UMD at College Park, who conducted the study with Eric Baumer, professor of sociology and criminology at PSU. "Our findings challenge claims that crime is more prevalent among immigrants, suggesting that using immigration control to reduce crime is likely to be impractical," says Xie.

Prior to 2017, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), the nation's largest survey on criminal victimization, did not record immigration information. In this study, researchers used new data from the 2017-2018 NCVS, looking at a nationally representative sample of

households and people ages 12 and older. In 2017-2018, nearly 482,500 people and more than 296,500 households were interviewed by the NCVS, with response rates of 83% (people) and 74% (households).

These new data are unique because of the addition of a question on [citizenship](#) status: Respondents were asked to self-identify as U.S.-born citizens, naturalized citizens, or non-U.S. citizens. Researchers labeled those who did not answer the citizenship question or said "don't know" as having ambiguous citizenship status. By incorporating nonresponse to the citizenship question in a new way, the study explored patterns of victimization among a group of noncitizens who, in many respects, parallel the undocumented immigrant population.

Respondents were asked to recall incidents of violence (rape or [sexual assault](#), robbery, aggravated and simple assault) and household property crimes (burglary, motor vehicle theft, and other types of theft) in the preceding six months. The study controlled for previously identified demographic and socioeconomic factors of criminal victimization, including respondents' race/ethnicity, age, sex, marital status, years of education, employment status, and years of residence, as well as other information about the household.

The study found that for both violent and property crime, the victimization rate of foreign-born citizens as a whole was significantly lower than that of U.S.-born citizens.

Within the foreign-born population, the victimization rate was statistically indistinguishable between naturalized citizens and noncitizens after accounting for differences between these groups in age, home ownership, and other socioeconomic factors. However, these two immigrant groups had significantly lower rates of victimization than that of the ambiguous citizenship group.

"Naturalized citizens and known noncitizens are on the one end of the continuum with a lower risk of victimization, and U.S.-born citizens and the ambiguous citizenship status respondents are on the other end with a higher risk of victimization," says Baumer. "Our findings provide important insights at a time when the U.S. immigration systems are facing major challenges amid tension surrounding immigration and growing concerns about social and racial-ethnic injustice."

One limitation of the study is that immigrants who are in marginalized and vulnerable positions may be reluctant to report certain types of crimes to NCVS interviewers, the authors note, but they suggest that the results are not unduly affected by underreporting. Another limitation, they note, is that the higher victimization risks for the ambiguous [citizenship status](#) group might reflect factors besides immigration or documentation [status](#).

**More information:** *Criminology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12278](#)

Provided by American Society of Criminology

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