

Correcting misperceptions about, and increasing empathy for, migrants

June 7 2021

Many mainstream depictions of immigration at the southern border of the United States paint a dark picture, eliciting imagery of violent gang members and child trafficking. But how many undocumented immigrants are really involved in this kind of activity? Many people may be surprised to learn the answer is far fewer than they think.

A new study from the Peace and Conflict Neuroscience Lab (PCNL) at the Annenberg School for Communication found that Americans dramatically overestimate the [number of migrants](#) affiliated with gangs and children being trafficked, and that this overestimation contributes to dehumanization of migrants, lack of [empathy](#) for their suffering, and individuals' views on immigration [policy](#). In addition, the researchers developed and tested interventions to address this misinformation and increase empathy for undocumented immigrants.

"We noticed that false narratives about [undocumented immigrants](#) as criminals or as having criminal intentions are commonly circulated in the public," says Samantha Moore-Berg, a PCNL postdoctoral fellow and lead author of the study. "We were curious about the impact of these narratives on attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy support, and whether by correcting these narratives, we are able to foster more positive attitudes toward immigrants."

The study aimed to compile data on Americans' (mis)perceptions of immigrants' motivations for crossing the southern border, determine whether those (mis)perceptions affected Americans' policy positions,

and develop successful interventions for addressing (mis)perceptions and increasing empathy.

Study participants, on average, estimated that 15% of migrants at the southern border are affiliated with gangs and 25 to 35% of children at the [southern border](#) are being used as props by adults who are not their parents for immigration purposes. In reality, the Department of Homeland Security suspects approximately 1% of immigrants have gang connections and fewer than 0.1% of children are being trafficked.

The researchers found that participants' erroneous beliefs about immigrants affected their views on immigration policy and caused them to view immigrants with less empathy and to dehumanize them more. However, after a successful intervention, which included viewing the correct statistics on immigrant behavior and watching [an emotional video of an immigrant parent and child being reunited](#) after the U.S. separated them at the border, participants' levels of empathy for immigrants increased, their dehumanization of immigrants decreased, and their support of less punitive [immigration policy](#) increased.

"By both correcting these false narratives about immigrants and unlocking empathy toward them, we were able to foster more [positive attitudes](#) toward immigrants and encourage greater support for more humane immigration policies" Moore-Berg says. "This gives us hope that by shifting narratives about immigrants to be both more accurate and empathetic, we can ultimately foster greater acceptance of [immigrants](#)."

"Empathy, Dehumanization, and Misperceptions: A Media Intervention Humanizes Migrants and Increases Empathy for Their Plight, but Only If Misinformation about Migrants Is Also Corrected," was published today in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. In addition to Moore-Berg, authors include Boaz Hameiri (Tel Aviv University) and the late Emile Bruneau.

More information: Samantha L. Moore-Berg et al, Empathy, Dehumanization, and Misperceptions: A Media Intervention Humanizes Migrants and Increases Empathy for Their Plight but Only if Misinformation About Migrants Is Also Corrected, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506211012793](https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506211012793)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: Correcting misperceptions about, and increasing empathy for, migrants (2021, June 7) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-06-misperceptions-empathy-migrants.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.