

# Study of scams targeting immigrants shows local social context may help or hinder reporting

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Assistant Professor of Sociology Juan Manuel Pedroza recently published the first nationwide data analysis on immigration scams that target noncitizens. The new study compares where these scams are being reported among counties across the country. The findings reveal that social context—like whether local services and policies are designed to support or exclude immigrants—may affect the likelihood of scams being reported.

Immigration scams are a specialized type of fraud that preys upon immigrants, often by exploiting hopes of obtaining favorable legal status or fears of being deported. Fraudsters make threatening [phone calls](#) impersonating Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agents to demand payments. Phishing emails claim the recipient has won a Green Card but must provide personal information in order to receive it. Fake websites mimic U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. And scammers who often call themselves notarios or "consultants" offer immigration legal services while misrepresenting their qualifications.

The impacts of these scams can be devastating for victims, but there's still relatively little known about where they occur and how often. They're reported to the federal government about as often as hate crimes against Hispanic people, who make up the largest immigrant-origin population in the United States. Experts believe both types of crimes are substantially underreported, in part because they target people who may not know their rights to report crimes or may be afraid that doing so would reveal their [immigration status](#).

"There are probably a lot of people who suffer in silence, and the statistics just never capture it," Pedroza said.

Information he obtained from the Federal Trade Commission showed that between 400 and 700 immigration scams were reported annually from 2011 to 2014. Pedroza says these 2,314 reports probably represent

"just the tip of the iceberg," in terms of the true extent of immigration scams. But they can still offer important insights about which regions contribute an outsized portion of scam reports and why that might be the case.

In particular, Pedroza used the FTC data to compare rates of immigration scam reporting in communities across the country, and he found that the size and proportion of local noncitizen populations explained some but not all of the variation in where reports were clustered.

Scam reports were notably more common in communities with greater access to the social safety net—as measured by the local ratio of poor Hispanics to Hispanic households receiving [food stamps](#)—and in communities with experienced immigration lawyers, free or low cost legal aid, and language translation services for communicating with law enforcement. These services may support the immigration scam reporting process both directly and indirectly.

"Positive experiences with the [social safety net](#) may potentially promote the idea that there are arms of the public sector that have your best interests in mind," Pedroza explained. "And making sure that immigrants trust the public sector may be really important in helping people feel that reporting immigration scam crimes to law enforcement is a safe thing for them to do."

Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles were all examples of communities with strong support services for immigrants that the study showed had a higher-than-expected number of immigration scam reports relative to local immigrant populations. Meanwhile, reports of immigration scams were less common in communities with high deportation rates and state-level laws targeting and criminalizing immigrants. Those included some counties with relatively large immigrant populations, especially in the

Southeast and Southwest.

The study can't rule out the possibility that traditional immigrant destinations with high levels of support services may also be heavily targeted by scammers. But other research has shown that legal services scammers may actually prefer captive markets, where legitimate immigrant services are sparse. And Pedroza's analysis found that online ads for immigration services—which scammers might use to look for victims—were substantially more common in communities with more restrictive policies toward immigrants.

The study also showed that reporting of immigration scams was correlated with reporting of anti-Hispanic [hate crimes](#), but not with arrest data in a given community, which may indicate that the observed trends are more reflective of immigrants' willingness to claim their rights than of actual crime levels. If that's the case, then offering immigrant support services may ultimately be a key factor in increasing access to justice for immigrants and holding scammers accountable.

However, one major challenge is that, currently, social and legal services for immigrants are unevenly distributed. Pedroza's analysis showed that one-fifth of U.S. counties had high levels of access to food stamps for Hispanic households, and a 2007 survey found that only one-eighth of counties have multiple language interpretation options available for communicating with law enforcement. Meanwhile, 4% of counties had multiple nonprofit legal aid providers for immigrants, and 5% had multiple immigration lawyers with deportation experience, according to Pedroza's analysis.

Expanding these services to reach more immigrant communities might help to encourage more immigration scam reporting in more places, Pedroza says. His study also found that, in communities with a mix of both exclusionary policies and supportive services, one type of influence

did not reliably outweigh the other in its relationship to levels of immigration scam reporting. Pedroza believes this may indicate the value of investing in [immigrant](#) services "anywhere and everywhere."

"Even in places with policies that are exclusionary or hostile to immigrants, investing in access to legal services and social safety nets may still make a difference in immigration scam reporting," Pedroza said. "And the alternative is clear: If we don't invest in these things, [scam](#) artists have total impunity to innovate and take advantage, and we'll never even know how often it's happening unless we put in the work to make immigrants feel safe in reporting it."

**More information:** Juan Manuel Pedroza, Making noncitizens' rights real: Evidence from immigration scam complaints, *Law & Policy* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/lapo.12180](https://doi.org/10.1111/lapo.12180)

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