

Sanctuary practices lower counties' crime rates, study finds

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Denver, Colorado, a "sanctuary city." Credit: Acton Crawford on Unsplash

Counties that don't cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—also known as "sanctuary counties"—have seen their crime rates decrease after implementing sanctuary policies,

according to a new study from a researcher at The University of Texas at Austin.

Sanctuary policies, which are in place in more than 200 local jurisdictions in the U.S., typically prevent local law enforcement from inquiring about the citizenship status of people arrested, from notifying ICE of non-citizens who are arrested, and from detaining people for further questioning related to their citizenship status.

In a study published in *Social Science Research*, researcher Marta Ascherio shows that both property crime and violent crime decreased more in sanctuary counties than in non-sanctuary counties after 2014, when many such policies were implemented. Her findings also suggest that sanctuary practices in counties improve political integration in immigrant communities, lead to positive spillover effects, and increase overall social harmony in the areas where they are implemented. Ascherio recently finished her Ph.D. in sociology at UT Austin, and she will join Illinois State University as an assistant professor of criminal justice science and Latin American and Latino studies later this year.

Sanctuary policies became more consequential after 2009, when ICE implemented Secure Communities, a program that linked FBI databases with Department of Homeland Security databases to automatically check the [citizenship status](#) of anyone arrested anywhere in the country. By January 2013, ICE had activated such data-sharing technology in all state and local jails in the country, allowing them to track potential non-citizens and request law enforcement agencies to detain them for questioning, or be notified upon their release. Some local law enforcement agencies declined to honor these detainer and notification requests.

Jurisdictions that declined to participate, Ascherio said, cited concerns that Secure Communities would penalize immigrant victims or witnesses

of crimes and thus undermine community-police relationships.

"Sanctuary practices encourage immigrant incorporation and bring more people into mainstream networks to seek employment, housing, health care and other services," Ascherio said. "This diminishes the need for illegitimate markets and increases broad access to the protection of law enforcement. On the other hand, punitive immigration policies make communities less stable and less safe."

The paper also considers whether higher proportions of foreign-born or U.S.-born Latinos in a community affect sanctuary policies' impact on crime rates. Communities with higher proportions of immigrant Latinos have lower crime rates on average, while communities with higher proportions of U.S.-born Latinos experience slightly higher crime rates. Ascherio found that sanctuary policies positively affect both of these statistics: Sanctuary counties with high proportions of foreign-born Latinos and those with high proportions of U.S.-born Latinos have lower [crime rates](#) than comparable non-sanctuary counties.

"There is an established body of work that for the most part finds that immigrant concentration is associated with safer communities," Ascherio said. "What I find in this paper is that inclusive immigration policies strengthen this association and have positive spillover effects in counties with higher concentrations of U.S.-born Latinos."

Ascherio's research worked off an original data set of over 3,100 counties, representing 98% of [counties](#) and county-equivalents in the continental United States, with data from 2013 through 2016. Additional data from 2000 to 2012 was also included to allow Ascherio to estimate pre-policy differences in crime trends.

"Marta's research on sanctuary policies for [immigrants](#) provides empirical, scientific support against the argument that there is a direct

relationship between sanctuary policies and crime," said Néstor Rodríguez, a professor of sociology at UT Austin who was not affiliated with the study. "The debates about immigration and social policies need to be settled with empirical research, and this is what Marta's research is about."

More information: Marta Ascherio, Do sanctuary policies increase crime? Contrary evidence from a county-level investigation in the United States, *Social Science Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2022.102743](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2022.102743)

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