

Migrants don't cause crime rates to increase, but false perceptions endure anyway

January 30 2023, by Nicolas Ajzenman



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Immigration is a critical topic in contemporary political and academic debates. [Politicians](#) and [the general population alike](#) in countries around the world have often shown hostility towards immigrants.

A typical argument made by those who oppose immigration is that [it increases crime](#). If people believe immigrants cause crime rates to climb, it's not hard to understand a backlash. But what if immigration doesn't actually increase crime, but affects perceptions about crime anyway?

Although most [research shows immigration has either no impact or a minimal impact on crime](#), many people seem to believe the connection exists. It seems hostility against immigrants isn't crime itself but false perceptions about crime.

The scene in Chile

My fellow researchers and I have explored this hypothesis in the case of Chile, a country recently exposed to a massive influx of immigrants. [From 2002 to 2012, the proportion of migrants grew from 1% to 2% of the population.](#)

In 2017, the same indicator represented close to 5% and surpassed [6.5% the following year.](#)

Not only did the magnitude change, but also the composition of immigrants changed strongly in recent years, with the [arrival of people from Venezuela and Haiti](#), similar to what happened in other Latin American countries.

A change of this magnitude raises a series of concerns, both regarding its impact on Chilean society as well as the country's ability to accommodate diverse groups.

For example, a [nationally representative survey](#) on urban perceptions found that the main concern of Chileans about migration was citizen security (59%), with [economic concerns](#) ranking third (46%).

Unsurprisingly, politicians often refer to the effect of migrants on specific aspects of the lives of Chileans.

Not likely to be crime victims

In recent work with Chilean academics Patricio Dominguez and Raimundo Undurraga to be published soon in the [*American Economic Journal*](#), we evaluate the impact of this wave of migration on the main concern of Chileans: crime.

We first document an interesting disparity: immigration has significantly impacted people's perceptions of crime but has no effect on actual crime.

People more exposed to immigration inflows are more likely to rank crime as their first or second biggest concern. They're more likely to believe that crime is affecting their quality of life, and more likely to believe that they will be a victim of a crime soon.

However, those citizens weren't any more likely to have been victims of any type of crime in the previous months. Nor did the number of homicides grow disproportionately in the municipalities where they live.

In other words, misconceptions about crime increase when immigrants arrive in large numbers in a city. We also show that not only do people become scared, but they also take action, such as installing more alarms or paying for private security.

We then explore potential mechanisms underlying these main effects, testing different hypotheses.

A plausible explanation could be plain discrimination against certain types of immigrants. Specifically, we assess the role of ethnic-related

inter-group threats. Those belonging to marginalized "out-groups" (people viewed as different) could be perceived as threatening to the extent that interactions with them foster anxiety and concerns for physical safety.

The role of the origin region

Using a measure of bilateral ethnic distance [widely used in economics](#), we demonstrate that our results don't vary based on the immigrants' level of ethnic distance to Chile.

In other words, immigrants coming from ethnically similar or different countries than Chile elicit, on average, the same fear. Interestingly, we find that the effects on crime-related concerns are mainly driven by immigrants that do not have ethnically European origins. This result suggests that immigrants with European origins enjoy different status compared to other [immigrant](#) groups.

Additionally, we investigate the extent to which certain specific characteristics of the immigrant group may influence our results.

We show that the arrival of immigrants with lower levels of educational attainment may drive false perceptions of crime, even though the null effect on [crime rates](#) is the same for educated and lesser educated groups. Nonetheless, the impact on citizens in terms of behavioral reactions, such as installing alarms, appear to be more pronounced when immigrants are less educated.

Finally, we explore whether local media influences crime perceptions by measuring local radio stations per capita in municipalities.

Independent of whether they have a high or low number of local radio stations per capita, our findings suggest the effect of immigration on

crime is minimal in all municipalities. But the effects on both crime-related fears and behavioral reactions are only significant in municipalities with a relatively large number of local radio stations.

Fears unfounded

Our findings hold significant implications for policy.

As Latin America is currently grappling with a [severe migration crisis](#), our research demonstrates that the concerns of citizens and governments over the potential relationship between immigration and crime in Chile appear to be unfounded.

This is a noteworthy conclusion, particularly as crime is frequently cited in anti-immigration narratives [by politicians](#) and [extremist groups](#).

Our results provide formal documentation for what has already been suggested by anecdotal and survey evidence—increasing fears about [crime](#) in the region can be attributed to the recent influx of immigrants, but those fears aren't based in reality.

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Citation: Migrants don't cause crime rates to increase, but false perceptions endure anyway (2023, January 30) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-01-migrants-dont-crime-false-perceptions.html>

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