

# Negative media portrayals drive perception of immigration policy, study finds

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Negative media portrayals of Latino immigrants—as much as specific policies and laws—tend to drive the perception of immigration issues in the United States, according to a recent study by a University of Kansas professor.

"We find that media have a central place in shaping the public's views of immigrants and immigration," said Cecilia Menjívar, a KU Foundation Distinguished Professor of Sociology. "Laws are critical, but [media messages](#) create conditions for policies to be created and passed and for them to be implemented. So the two work hand in hand."

Menjívar's recent article in the journal *American Behavioral Scientist* examined how [media coverage](#) and the political debate on immigration from 1999 to 2012 influenced the identities and lives of Latino immigrant workers living in Phoenix, Arizona. She conducted interviews with immigrants from Central America and Mexico and did textual analysis of newspaper articles.

"Media messages were often powerful reminders to immigrants that they do not belong and that they are unwanted—or partially belong and only wanted for the labor they contribute," Menjívar said. "News outlets are where attitudes are shaped and through which politicians' actions are conveyed to their constituencies, as well as, in turn, what politicians may react to."

She found that in response to this negative media coverage, many immigrants responded by seeking to highlight their images as hard workers and sought to distance themselves from images of immigrants as criminals, and both the political context and media coverage tended to shape how immigrants viewed themselves, other immigrants and their positions in U.S. society.

Menjívar said this relates to some of her other research recently published in the *American*

*Journal of Sociology* that examined potential collateral effects that can occur when a certain section of a society has to overemphasize characteristics it possesses to make itself seem deserving in a society.

"By highlighting characteristics that make them deserving, they can inadvertently create images of the nondeserving," she said. "But this is precisely the power of the law—it makes people act to create these conditions."

These attitudes can be detrimental to immigrants who aren't able to find a stable job because they often are seen as less deserving, Menjívar said.

Perhaps the most publicized sound bite of the U.S. presidential election was in the primary. It revolved around Donald Trump's comments on U.S. border security when he accused Mexico of "not sending their best" to the United States, and he mentioned immigrants "bringing drugs," "bringing crime," and that "they're rapists," while he said "some, I assume, are good people."

Menjívar said the significance of the comments was that they played off the stereotype of immigrants as criminals and most of the media only repeated that sound bite over and over. Trump did receive much criticism for the remark as well.

"The more a message is repeated—in this case in the news media—it becomes a 'fact' even if it is not true. And most sensationalist one-liners are not accurate," she said. "But because most people can't do the research themselves, their only source of information are these messages, told over and over again."

Examining the point of the view of Latino [immigrants](#) and how they react and possibly face effects of comments and media coverage of a similar tenor likely will be more important in coming months and years as a Trump administration likely

pursues immigration reform and the media will cover it as a major issue, Menjivar said.

Menjivar and Victor Agadjanian, also a KU Foundation Professor of Sociology, lead the KU Center for Migration Research. The center promotes and coordinates KU research on causes, types and consequences of human migration at the state, regional, national and global levels.

With a team of students, including two undergraduates, working through the center, she is researching the links between media coverage, public attitudes and policy by comparing decades of newspaper coverage in different states. The results of this study will further illuminate the links between news coverage and immigration policies, Menjivar said.

**More information:** C. Menjivar. Immigrant Criminalization in Law and the Media: Effects on Latino Immigrant Workers Identities in Arizona, *American Behavioral Scientist* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0002764216632836](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216632836)

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