

How the size of a city's immigrant population influences feelings of trust and safety in urban Europe

Does immigration affect the way that residents of a city perceive their social environment? Drawing on new research, **Kevin T. Smiley** and **Yulin Yang** explain that the size of the immigrant population in a city has an impact on feelings of trust and safety among residents, but this effect depends crucially on the population size of the city.

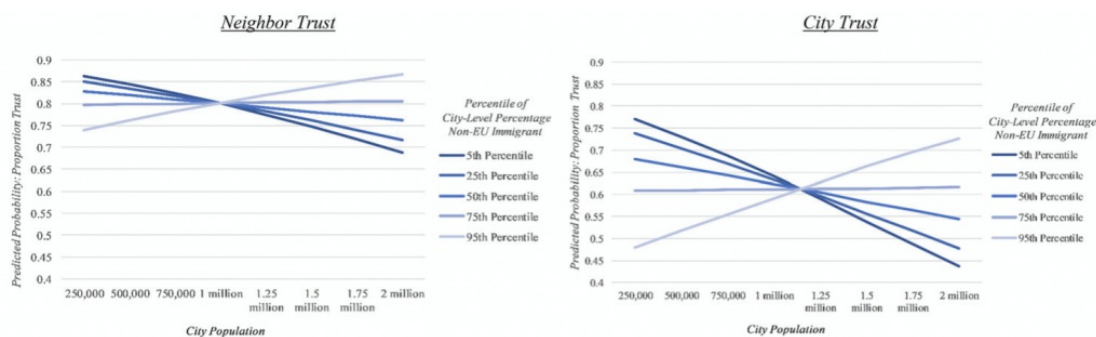
Close your eyes and picture taking a walk in your city or town: what do you see? Or, more precisely, *who* do you see? Our social environments provide a lens into how we see the world. In two [new studies](#), we have used survey data of approximately 28,000 urban Europeans from 63 cities in 25 countries to analyse how much they trust others, and how fearful they are of crime.

Our research also focuses on what we see and who we see. Specifically, we asked about two layers. First, does living in a city with a larger immigrant population condition how we trust one another and think of safety? Second, does living in a more populous city (or bigger city) or a less populous city (or smaller city) shape these perceptions? It turns out that these two layers intertwine.

A million reasons

The core finding from our analysis is that the size of the immigrant population in a city is linked to how we trust others and perceive our safety, but this effect depends crucially on the population size of the city. In smaller cities, the greater the size of the local immigrant population, the more likely residents will be to say that they don't trust one another and that they feel unsafe. In bigger cities, the greater the size of the local immigrant population, the more likely it is that residents will report the opposite: they say they trust each other, and they feel safe.

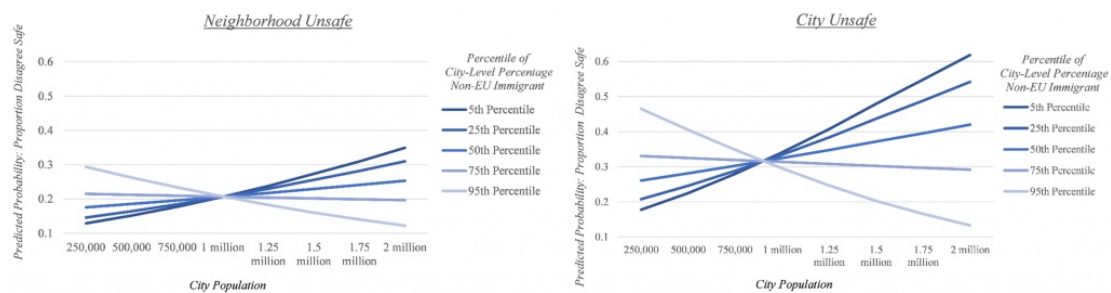
Figure 1: Link between city population, the size of a city's immigrant population, and trust toward neighbours and the city



Note: Each chart shows how levels of trust (toward 'neighbours' or the 'city') change depending on the size of the city's population and the percentage of non-EU immigrants that make up the population. For more information, see the authors' accompanying article in the *International Journal of Sociology*.

What differentiates 'big' and 'small' cities? As shown in Figure 1 above, the pattern appears to change in cities that have more or fewer than a million residents. Cities with fewer than a million residents and a larger local immigrant population size exhibit less trust and more safety concerns. Cities with more than a million residents and a larger immigrant population size are linked to more trust and fewer safety concerns. As Figure 2 below shows, a similar effect exists for perceptions of safety.

Figure 2: Link between city population, the size of a city's immigrant population, and feelings of safety



Note: Each chart shows how feelings of safety (within a neighbourhood or a city) change depending on the size of the city's population and the percentage of non-EU immigrants that make up the population. For more information, see the authors' accompanying article in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

By extension, the more trusting, more safe-feeling small cities tend to be ones that have fewer immigrants and that are more ethnically homogenous. However, the least trusting big cities where safety is perceived to be lower are those that have fewer immigrants. We should mention that these findings hold even when considering a host of other attributes: individual characteristics like economic constraints and gender, national characteristics like immigrant group size, population, and unemployment, and even homicide rates for a subset of cities for the perceptions of safety.

Explaining the effect

We have some theories for why these findings differ so dramatically between small cities and big cities. Bigger cities are often more dense than small cities, allowing for greater contact and visibility between diverse groups. Smaller cities often have less diversified economies, meaning that residents of these cities may perceive immigrants as a greater economic threat to local jobs.

Another reason is what social scientists call a 'selection effect', namely that Europeans who choose to live in large cities do so knowing that they are diverse places with more immigrants. They are happy to live in this environment. [Research](#) substantiates that this cosmopolitan worldview is linked to greater acceptance of immigrants.

Why it matters

Zoom back to the beginning of this article: what – and who – did you see when you closed your eyes and took your walk? Was it a busy street in a large, populous city with immigrant-owned businesses? Or was it a quiet lane whose residents were ethnically homogenous? The places in which we live shape how we think. Even comparatively indirect effects like the one we've identified here – where it's the size of the immigrant population, not specific interactions – can have powerful effects.

An important fulcrum for these effects is *racialisation*, namely how groups are ascribed certain attributes across time based on how they look, their practices, and beyond. Everyone is racialised, but of particular importance to us is the racialisation of immigrants, especially from outside of the EU. These racialisation processes can be unfair to the point of being prejudicial and discriminatory. Restrictive immigration policies, ugly acts of bigotry, and even violence are both a product of racialisation and may further contribute to it.

In our research, we find that racialisation can work in two different ways. On one hand, in the smaller cities, it seems to bring about a link between more immigrants and a racialisation process that yields less trust and feeling less safe. This is despite the fact that research shows [no link](#) between more immigrants and more crime. On the other hand, in the bigger cities, increased contact and visibility with immigrants increases trust and makes one feel safer.

Challenges ahead

Our findings suggest greater challenges for smaller cities. Inclusive integration – one that builds baseline social cohesion with perceptions of safety and trusting others – remains elusive. Our findings also imply that efforts to build greater trust and perceptions of safety could be founded on deeper policy commitments to supporting the inclusion of immigrants economically, culturally, and socially.

At the same time, we would not suggest that big cities are exemplars for inclusivity. European cities are characterised by profound residential segregation by immigration status, and economic inequalities in constrained labour markets for immigrants have real impacts. Work remains undone. Increases in immigration will continue in almost every single city we studied. The next chapter in how these city dwellers and their leaders construct more just, cohesive societies remains to be written.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying papers in the [International Journal of Sociology](#) and the [International Journal of Intercultural Relations](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Jacek Dylag](#) on [Unsplash](#)
