

## Tough immigration enforcement likely hinders public cooperation with the police, and may undermine crime reporting.

*The 2016 presidential election campaign has brought the role of immigrants in US society into sharp focus, with some Republican candidates claiming that they fuel crime. **Carmen Gutierrez** and **David Kirk** write that this anti-immigration rhetoric may actually be undermining public safety by eroding trust in the law. Examining the relationship between a city's immigrant population and victimizations reported to police, they find that increased immigration is associated with lower reporting of violent crimes. They argue that these results may be due to concerns about detection and deportation experienced by undocumented immigrants who wish to avoid contact with the police.*



Over a century of social science research has documented the fact that, on average, first-generation immigrants to the United States are less likely to engage in criminal acts than native-born individuals. Still, the idea that immigrants disproportionately fuel crime is pervasive. A [recent national survey](#) found that one-half of US adults say immigrants are making crime worse, and these erroneous claims are echoed by conservative political leaders and candidates. Donald Trump's ascendance in the summer of 2015 to the front of the Republican nomination race came on the heels of his claims that migrants from Mexico are typically drug dealers and rapists as well as his plan to deport 11 million undocumented immigrants. Ironically, anti-immigration rhetoric and the strict enforcement of immigration laws aimed at controlling crime may actually *undermine* public safety. Restrictive immigration policies create potential mistrust of legal authorities who have the power to exercise immigration enforcement, such as deportation. As a result, immigrants may avoid the police—even to report crime and victimization—due to their fears of arrest and expulsion.



Despite the evolution of policing to incorporate more proactive strategies to prevent crime—such as hot spots policing—much of policing in practice is still very reactive, relying upon the reporting of crime by the public in order to make an arrest and punish offenders. Incapacitating offenders prevents them from committing further crimes during the duration of punishment, thus—in theory—producing some amount of crime prevention. If, however, the police are unaware of many crimes that are committed, then they cannot bring justice to many victims and cannot achieve the crime prevention benefits of offender incapacitation.

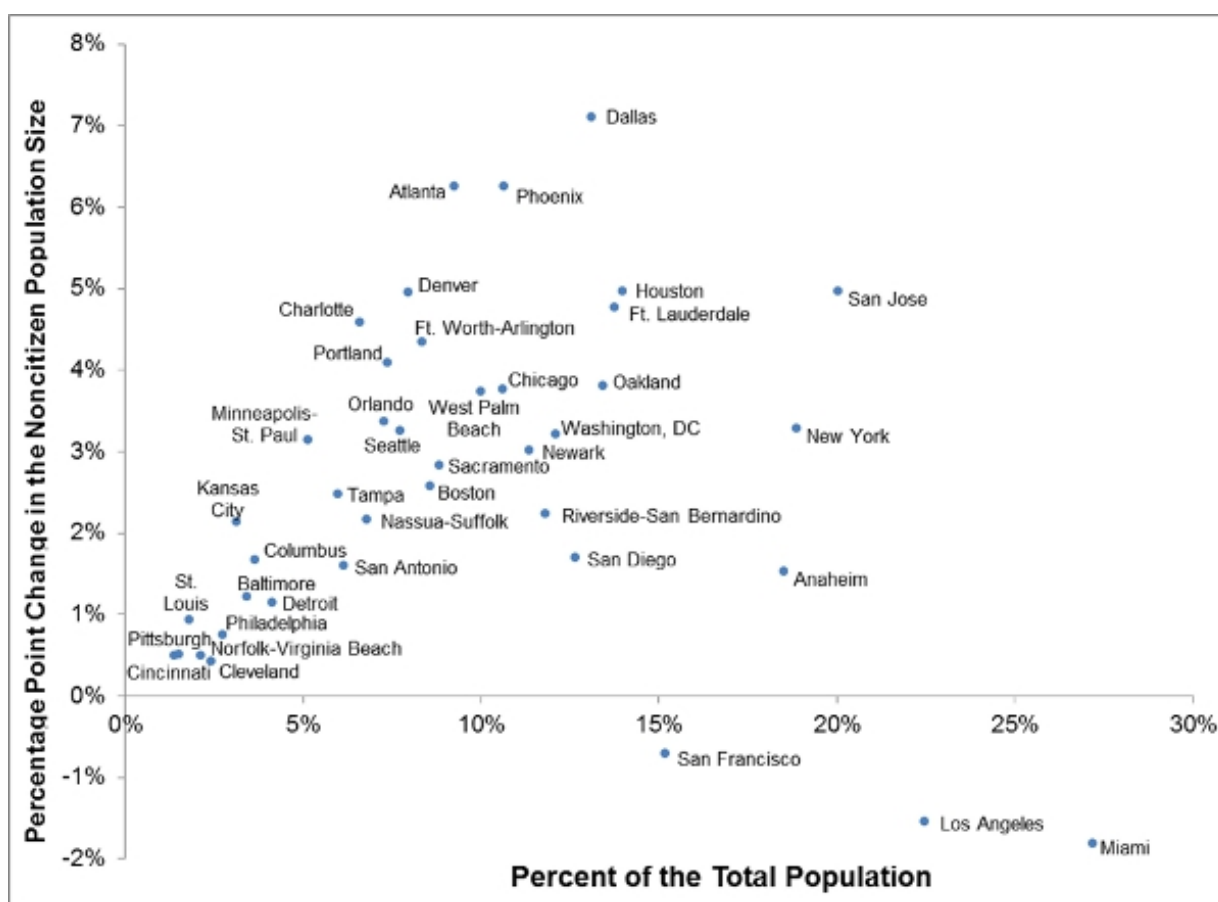
The fact is that the police do not know about most crimes. Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, a nationally representative survey of victimization conducted since 1973, reveals that fewer than 40 percent of all victimizations are reported to the police. Criminologists have long focused on discovering the true volume of crime in society despite the limitations of police data, and have relied on anonymous self-report surveys to develop a clearer picture of the volume and distribution of crime in society. However, little research has been done on understanding whether, and why, there is geographic variation in the likelihood that a crime is reported to the police. Yet there are good reasons to believe that the percentage of crimes reported to the police varies across neighborhoods and cities. One factor influencing this variation may be the extent of immigration to a geographic area.

Our recent study examines the relationship between increases in the relative size of the immigrant population in a metropolitan area and the percentage of victimizations subsequently reported to the police. We focused on change in the immigrant population from 1990 to 2000 because the United States experienced its most rapid influx of immigrants in the past half century during the 1990s, and we expected that such changes in the population would be consequential. In addition to passing laws targeting immigrants, areas that became immigrant

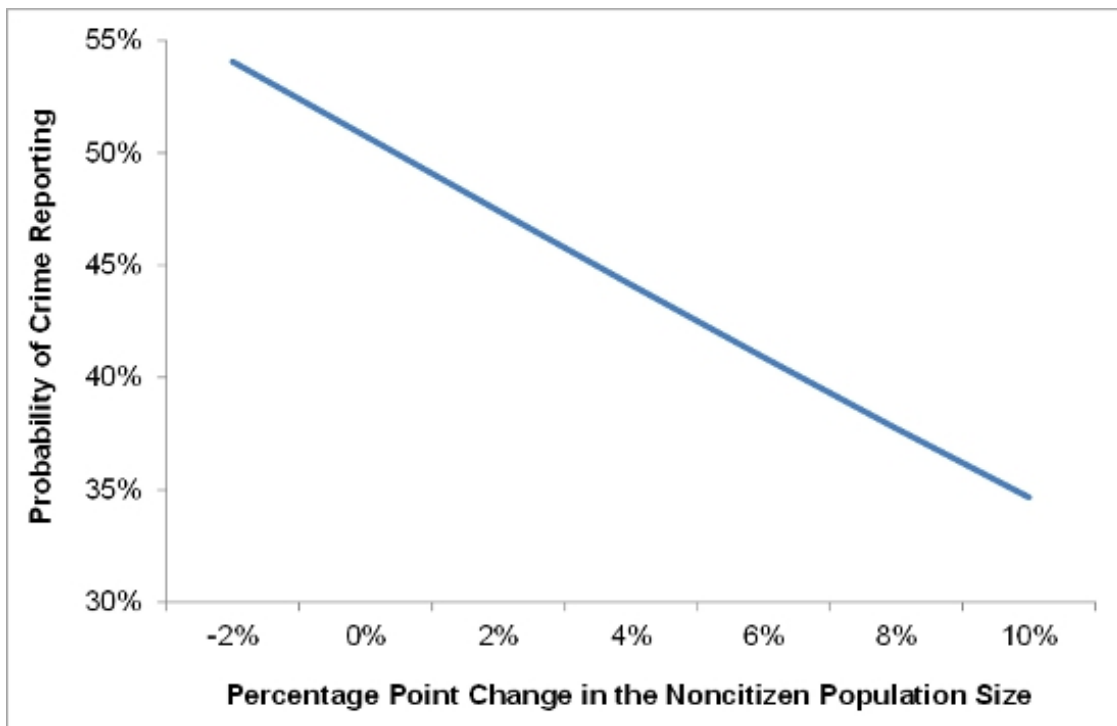
destinations during this time may have also lacked the infrastructure and resources to facilitate the integration of immigrants, leaving them isolated from institutions such as the police. The results from our study point to three general conclusions about the relationship between immigration and the reporting of crime:

**Increased immigration is associated with lower reporting of violent crimes:** Metropolitan areas that experienced substantial growth in the size of their immigrant population had lower levels of violent victimizations reported to the police. A 1-percentage point increase in the relative size of the noncitizen population decreased the odds of violent crime reporting by 6 percent. Change in the relative size of noncitizens, however, varied across US metropolitan areas (see Figure 1). On average, the 40 metropolitan areas sampled in our study experienced a 3-percentage point increase from 1990 to 2000 in the proportion of noncitizen residents. The probability of violent crime reporting fell between 24-35 percent in cities that had more than a 5-percentage point increase in their share of noncitizen residents (see Figure 2). Places like Atlanta, Dallas, and Phoenix, that experienced a large growth in the proportion of their noncitizen residents, may therefore endure the greatest barriers to the reporting of violent crime.

**Figure 1 – Change in the Relative Size of the Noncitizen Population across US Metropolitan Areas from 1990 to 2000**



**Figure 2 – The Probability of Reporting Violent Crime to the Police in a Metropolitan Area by Change in the Relative Size of the Noncitizen Population**



**Increased immigration has no relationship with property crime reporting:** We found that changes in the proportion of immigrants within a metropolitan area had no significant effect on the likelihood that property crimes were reported to the police. Our results are consistent with other work on crime reporting in general. Researchers consistently find fewer predictors of reporting for property than for violent crime. Victims of property crime are more likely to forego the reporting process because they often view their experience as not important enough to involve the police.

**Different measures of the immigrant population displayed unique effects on crime reporting:** We would hypothesize that legal and undocumented immigrants differ in their likelihood to notify the police of crime, yet available data prevents a precise measure of the size of the undocumented population by metropolitan area. To disentangle whether the immigration status of the foreign-born population is of consequence to the reporting of crime, we conducted parallel analyses of the foreign-born population who are noncitizens as well as the remaining foreign-born population that excluded noncitizens. The relative size of the foreign-born population as a whole had almost no relationship to the proportion of crimes reporting to the police, but the size of the noncitizen subset of this group had a significant impact on reporting—especially for violence. Our results may reflect the particular threat of detection and deportation experienced by [undocumented immigrants who make up a more than half of all noncitizens](#).

In interpreting our results, we would caution against any claims that immigrants are inherently less likely to report crime to the police than native-born residents. In fact, [research](#) reveals that immigrant communities, despite the threat of deportation and harsh immigration enforcement, are generally *more* cooperative with the police than neighborhoods populated predominantly by native-born citizens. However, this cooperation could be reversed by illegitimate and unfair policing practices. Drawing upon a large body of literature in the sociology and psychology of law, we would highlight that an individual's decision to report (or not to report) a crime and to cooperate with the police is substantially influenced by his or her perception of the legitimacy of the law and the government.

When the police and government officials are fair and treat individuals with respect, people are more likely to report crimes and cooperate with authorities to solve crimes. They are also more likely to obey the law. In turn, public cooperation is essential for police to be able to detect crimes and bring justice to victims. In this sense, the volume of immigrants in and of itself is not likely to diminish the reporting of crime to the police, rather what is of consequence is how those immigrants are treated by authority figures. By implication, unsubstantiated political rhetoric and harsh immigration enforcement policies may, in fact, undermine the likelihood that crimes are reported to the police because such sensational claims and punitive practices delegitimize the law and government authority.

This article is based on the paper '[Silence Speaks: The Relationship Between Immigration and the Underreporting of Crime](#)', in *Crime & Delinquency*.

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