

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND CRIME, LAW, AND JUSTICE

PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL ISSUES

MICHELLE JULIE SKALRUD

Spring 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for baccalaureate degrees in Crime,
Law, and Justice and Russian with honors in Crime, Law, and Justice

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Roger Finke

Thesis Supervisor

Jeffrey Ulmer

Honors Adviser

*Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

Abstract:

The consequences of immigration have been a topic of discussion and debate for centuries. The behaviors and activities of immigrants have been closely observed and thoroughly researched. A large body of research reviews how immigrants influence immigration policy, the economy, and crime. Immigrants' perceptions of societal issues, however, have not been given much attention. An individual's immigration status¹ might determine perceptions of societal problems, such as immigration, economy, crime, and others. It is important to consider how being an immigrant, or the child of an immigrant, might determine the different values and perceptions of the community in which they live. How is immigrant status related to perceptions and attitudes of the most important societal problems in the community? Using the Houston Area Survey, this research finds that an individual's immigration status holds a strong relationship with perceptions of social problems.

¹ Status of an immigrant refers to whether they were born within the United States (natives) or whether either of their parents were born within the United States (1st or 2nd generation immigrants)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	.....	iii
INTRODUCTION	.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	.....	1
METHODS	.....	7
RESULTS	.....	9
CONCLUSION	.....	13
WORKS CITED	.....	15

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my greatest gratitude to Dr. Roger Finke. He has been an amazing help during the entire thesis process. Without him, this would not be possible. I would also like to thank Dr. Graham Spanier as he has been a motivating factor and inspiration to me during my college career.

Thank You.

Introduction:

The consequences of immigration have been a topic of discussion and debate for centuries. The behaviors and activities of immigrants have been closely observed and thoroughly researched. A large body of research reviews how immigrants influence immigration policy, the economy, and crime. Immigrants' perceptions of societal issues, however, have not been given much attention.

Literature Review:

According to Espenshade (1993) "Immigration to the United States is an important and increasingly conspicuous component of overall US population growth" (Espenshade, 189). Around 900,000 immigrants, legal, illegal, or refugees are coming to the United States in an average year. Because of the large number of immigrants, it definitely causes controversy. There are many different public views and attitudes when faced with the "issue" of immigration. According to Espenshade, after World War II many Americans held a more liberal attitude toward migration into their home country. A smaller percentage of natives felt that immigration levels should be "zero or reduced from current levels" (Espenshade, 191). This ideal was brief, as by the 1980s, the desire to reduce immigration increased. The view to decrease immigration was because natives felt a fear of economic insecurities and immigrants' cultural traits.

Delving into the societal "problem" of immigration, there is a surplus of information regarding the pros and cons of immigration. For example there is an abundance of articles on the influx of undocumented immigrants over the past 20 years and how this has sharpened public attitudes and presented policy changes around the United States, especially in the state of Arizona. "Illegal immigration: 'Perceptions and Realities from the Morrison Institute for Public

Policy’,” concentrates on this aspect of immigration. Another article, “Not an out-group, not yet an in-group: immigrants in the Stereotype Content Model,” presents us with a model called the Stereotype Content Model that “predicts that perception centers on competence and warmth, and relates to targets’ perceived status and competition within society.” The model focuses primarily on nationality, race, class, ethnicity, and their applied stereotypes. Immigration, as a whole, is a topic discussed over and over with different aspects of research conducted, as well as many diverse opinions.

The vast body of research on immigration and its effect on society often focuses on the impact immigration has on the economy and crime. When looking at the influence of immigration on the economy, the research is seemingly endless. For example, in a journal article by George Borjas, “The Economics of Immigration,” many interesting points come to light about the economy of the host family of these immigrants (both legal and illegal). “The United Nations estimates that over 60 million people, or 1.2 percent of the world’s population, now reside in a country where they were not born.” Immigration has become a strong impact on the economy of many countries. This article, however, mostly concentrates on the immigrants’ performance in the country’s economy, how the immigrants impact the native’s employment opportunities, and which immigration procedures most aid the country. This article answers the question that immigration *has* affected the host country’s economy. Borjas concludes by stating that,

...it is not surprising that immigration policy is now a central ingredient in the debate over social policy in many countries. For the most part, this debate focuses on economic issues and uses the evidence provided by economic research to frame and formulate the discussion.

Borjas tries to explain that no matter how you perceive immigration, whether with a positive or negative attitude, immigration *has* an impact on the economy. This impact will be felt for decades to come, as the United States has already been affected by it through the previous decades. The immigration flow continues to be persistent and the amount of research on the topic of immigration will continue in full force. As immigration continues to persist as a growing concern, the amount of research on the economic impact will continue to increase.

The concerns on immigration impacting the economy are so extensive that several organizations have formed and specifically devote efforts to researching the economic impact of immigration. An organization called Americas Society and Council of the Americas (AS/COA) put together a compilation of data called, “The Economic Impact of Immigrant-Related Local Ordinances,” where their findings show that non-restrictive ordinances (sanctuary city) have a positive impact on the number of employees in a city. In contrast, restrictive ordinances (housing, employment, or English-only) have a negative impact on the number of employees in a city. To further explain this concept, the average number of employees in a city with a restrictive immigration-related ordinance would be .18 times lower than in a non-restrictive one. However, the number of businesses is not impacted by this finding, only the numbers of employees in a city are negatively impacted. “The Economic Impact of Immigrant-Related Local Ordinances” goes on to report that “...by encouraging these U.S.-born workers to enter industries in which they clearly have a competitive advantage, immigrant labor supports more profitable, skilled and desirable jobs for native-born workers within communities” (The Economic Effects of Local Immigration Policy, 19) These findings suggest that if immigrants were truly taking the jobs of native-born Americans, these natives would be fleeing their current locations to find other options; however, this does not hold true. Their findings further report that areas that appeal to

immigrants also appeal to natives. “In fact, many of the cities with the most rapidly-growing immigrant populations are also attracting large numbers of native-born Americans” (19).

Looking further at the economic impact of immigrants, and specifically concentrating on the foreign-born immigrants, Bean and Stevens (2003) state that there is a positive future for these individuals as they are slowly becoming assimilated into the American lifestyle. Continuing through the same article we see conflicting findings between two economists, Borjas and Chiswick, who are using data from different time periods and representing different immigrant skill sets in the American market. Chiswick (1978) gathered his information from cross-sectional census data, which distinguished immigrants who have been here for various amounts of time. He found that after a period of approximately 20 years, immigrants reached the same characteristics as native-born Americans. On the other hand, Borjas (1994) gathered his information via successive censuses that looked into different groups of immigrants and concluded that the more recently emigrated immigrants “were of lower ‘quality’ and would not catch up to the native-born or see the same kind of earnings growth that Chiswick identified” (Waters, Jimenez, 108). Additional research by Waters and Jimenez supported Borjas’ conclusions finding that “if one compares immigrants in the census data to native-born individuals of the same ethnic group, the immigrants do achieve economic parity in earnings” (108). Like most research, there are some concerns regarding these findings. The educational levels of many of the immigrants create an obstacle as they may be at a high risk of living in poverty. With the economic changes in America, education is becoming more and more of a necessity.

As there is a large amount of research on immigration and the economy, immigrations impact on crime is also a key issue. “Immigrants and Crime: Perception vs. Reality,” focuses on

the idea of whether immigrants are more likely than natives to commit crimes. Stuart Anderson (2010) delves into an unsolved murder that leads him to research and finally conclude that, “immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than the native-born.” Although statistically, immigrants may not commit crimes themselves, there seems to be a perception that immigrants impact crime and crime statistics. This research was based on a pattern confirmed by a study done in California in 2008, which focuses on all institutions and their inmates. They found that “U.S. born men have an institutionalization rate that is 10 times higher than that of foreign-born men” (1). When taking these findings and comparing these men with their age and education levels, the data found is even higher.

The idea of crime and immigration continues to have a vast body of research available. It is easy to believe that immigration and crime go hand in hand and it can be assumed that immigrants are involved in crime far more than native-born Americans. However, there are many ideas that one must take into consideration when making this assumption. Immigrants are faced with different problems than native-born Americans. Immigrants are faced with cultural shock and assimilation problems that natives do not encounter. According to “On Immigration and Crime,” by Ramiro Martinez, Jr. and Matthew T. Lee, “...‘immigrant crime’ [is] an unavoidable product of immigration.” (2000, 486-490) Further looking through the article and examining the statistical data, it shows that immigrants are usually underrepresented in criminal statistics. Immigrants tend to settle in more urban, unsafe environments, causing the “stereotype” of immigrants and crime to be considered. Due to their surroundings, they may seem to be the perpetrators; however, when looking at immigrants’ cultural traditions and ethnic traits, crime is not prevalent. Also, immigrants are better at tolerating crime in enabling circumstances than native born Americans.

Understanding the social context of immigration is important when debating the impact of immigration on crime. An article written by Ousey and Kubrin takes an interesting route in exploring the connection between immigration and crime in the United States. Again, as previously mentioned, they state that it is commonly thought that immigrants are more inclined to commit crimes, when realistically, they do not. In “Exploring the Connection between Immigration and Violent Crime Rates in U.S. Cities, 1980-2000” we are shown the empirical data which connects the two parallels. Their findings ultimately suggest that immigration actually lowers crime rates by strengthening the “two-parent” household.

One of the few studies that has tried to understand differences in social perception by ethnicity takes a biological approach. Bruce Rannala and Joanna Mountain’s article, “Detecting immigration by using multilocus genotypes,” finds significant differences. This article concentrates on the identification of the individuals who are immigrants, or have immigrant ancestry. They identify “individuals whose genomes are not typical of the populations in which they currently live, or of their ethnic group.” They conclude that based on their biological evidence it is possible to distinguish immigrant origin tracking back at least two generations.

In the area of evolutionary biology, it is often important to identify immigrant individuals to study their behavior and interactions with resident individuals. It may also be important to quantify the amount of recent immigration in populations that are not at genetic equilibrium. (Rannala, Mountain, 9201)

Immigrant perceptions are biologically shown through ethnic traits. An American born citizen versus a first generation or foreign born citizen has physically, and in turn, geographically, shown various opinions on different social problems.

Thus far, social science research has focused on the influence of immigrants on the economy, crime, and immigration policy, and has given less attention to how immigrants perceive social problems and how these perceptions vary across the immigration status of the

respondents. Only the biological research has traced ethnic lineages, and tried to determine how it results in different perceptions of social issues. The social science research reviewed does not concentrate in any way on the perceptions of the immigrants themselves and their views on social policies and problems faced in their host country.

This research and data collection will draw on the immigration status of a respondent and explore how it is related to the perceived importance of societal problems. In the United States we are faced with issues of economy, crime, immigration, and many other factors that can deter us from the “American Dream.” Immigrants come to this nation to find peace and their promised pursuit of happiness, only to find issues with economy, crime, and other matters facing their communities. This thesis will test their perceptions on societal problems in the United States.

Methods:

This study will use the Houston Area Survey, where all respondents are questioned on a series of items measuring immigrant status and perceived social problems. The Houston Area Survey has measures for each of our concepts of interest and is ideal for this study because it has a high percentage of immigrants. This survey, taken in 2010, is based on a sample of approximately 700 people, 41% not being American citizens and 22.4% of respondents having one or both parents born outside of the United States. This sample will allow us to compare the perceptions of immigrants (taking into account their status) and natives on many social issues.

The Houston Area Survey was started in 1982 and has been conducted annually every February and March until 2010. These “random-digit-dialed, computer-assisted telephone surveys have systematically measured the continuities and changes in demographic patterns, life

experiences, attitudes and beliefs among successive representative samples of Harris County residents.” Using the Houston Area Survey as a starting point for all the measures and data needed, it will provide us with the necessary information for answering the overarching research question.

Using the Houston Area Survey from 2010, this research has the measures and data needed to test the primary thesis. Respondents are asked a multitude of questions. For example, the main question at hand is whether the respondent, his/her parents, or both were born outside the United States. This question is important for our study, as it is the independent variable. Our analysis will allow us to see if immigrant status is related to perceptions of societal problems.

Measuring the independent variable, immigrant status, is a simple task. When discussing the status of immigration, it refers to the generation in which the respondent arrived in the United States. First generation immigrants are immigrants that traveled to the United States and have found a life here. Second generation immigrants are those who have either or both parents who came to the United States but were born in the United States. Respondents are asked whether they are an American citizen, and whether “both of your parents born in the United States?” The respondents have the chance to answer “no, neither of them,” “only one of them,” and “yes, both of them.” The Survey also asks whether the respondent was born in the United States, which differs from the previous question of whether they are a citizen or not.

The Houston Area Survey provides multiple measures for our dependent variables: perceptions and attitudes on societal issues. To select the societal issues of greatest concern, I look at: “What would you say is the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today?” Respondents have the choice of answering that question with a series of possible responses: economy, crime, immigration, and others.

We will focus our analysis on the perceptions of economy, crime, and immigration. Focusing on the economy of the Houston Area, respondents are asked, “Do immigrants to the U.S. generally take more from the American economy than they contribute, or do they contribute more than they take?” To directly focus on crime, the respondents are asked, “How worried are you personally that you or a member of your family will become the victim of a crime? Would you say you are: very worried, somewhat worried, not very worried, or not worried at all.” Finally, the Survey asks questions in regards to perceptions of immigration. Respondents are asked, “Agree/Disagree: We should take action to reduce the number of new immigrants coming to America.” Also, respondents are asked, “Large numbers of undocumented immigrants have been coming to Houston in recent years. How much of a problem do you think this is for the city? Would you say: very serious, somewhat serious, or not much of a problem?” These four measures will be used to answer our initial question, “How is immigrant status related to perceptions and attitudes of the most important societal problems in the community?”

Results:

The first measure examined, immigrant status, is the independent variable. For immigrant status, respondents are identified as a first generation immigrant, second generation immigrant, or a native. A first generation immigrant is described as: 1) were not born in the United States and 2) one or zero of their parents were born in the United States. Second generation immigrants is described as: 1) were born in the United States, and 2) one or zero of their parents were born outside the United States. Finally, a native is described as: 1) were born in the United States, and 2) both of their parents were born in the United States. Using data found in the Houston Area Survey, we were able to distinguish how many of the respondents fit into which category. There were approximately 12% of first generation immigrants, 10% of second

generation immigrants, and about 77% natives. In total, there was a pool of 739 people responding to various measures.

After identifying the independent variable, and the number of immigrants and natives in the Houston Area Survey, I then turned to the dependent variables. The first dependent variable measure was about the issue regarding economy. The Survey asked: “Do immigrants to the U.S. generally take more from the American economy than they contribute, or do they contribute more than they take?” Table #1 shows that 79% of first generation immigrants believe that immigrants contribute more to the American economy than taking away. On the other hand, we see that 59% of natives believe that immigrants take more from the American economy than they contribute. It is interesting to note that as immigrant status goes down the spectrum from first generation to native, the percentages increase with the idea that immigrants take more, and percentages decrease with the idea that immigrants contribute more.

TABLE #1 – IMMIGRANT STATUS BY CONTRIBUTING TO ECONOMY			
Do immigrants to the U.S. generally take more from the American economy than they contribute, or do they contribute more than they take?	Immigrant Status		
	1 st Generation	2 nd Generation	Native
Take more	21%	40%	59%
Contribute more	79%	60%	41%
Total	100%	100%	100%
(number of cases)	83	70	518

The perceptions of crime also hold an interesting relationship with immigrant status. The Survey asks: “How worried are you personally that you or a member of your family will become the victim of a crime? Would you say you are: very worried, somewhat worried, not very worried, or not worried at all?” Again, we look at how this varies by immigration status. We see

that 26% of first generation immigrants are very worried about their family member or themselves being a victim of crime, while 22% of natives feel the same way with the second generation holding being less worried about crime. Surprisingly, immigrants and natives perceptions are similar on the issue of crime.

TABLE #2 – IMMIGRATION STATUS BY FEAR OF CRIME			
How worried are you personally that you or a member of your family will become the victim of a crime? Would you say you are: very worried, somewhat worried, not very worried, or not worried at all?	Immigrant Status		
	1 st Generation	2nd Generation	Native
Not worried at all	7%	15%	11%
Not very worried	23%	22%	23%
Somewhat worried	45%	45%	45%
Very worried	26%	18%	22%
Total	101%	100%	101%
(number of cases)	92	76	567

Unlike crime, perceptions on immigration hold a strong relationship with immigrant status. The Survey asks: “Large numbers of undocumented immigrants have been coming to Houston in recent years. How much of a problem do you think this is for the city? Would you say: very serious, somewhat serious, or not much of a problem?” Looking at first generation immigrants, it is interesting to note that 30% perceives it as not much of a problem, as well as 30% perceives it as a very serious problem. However, looking at natives there is a wider gap in perception. Twelve percent of natives believe that it is not much of a problem. On the other hand, 59% of natives perceive it to be a very big issue. When looking from first generation to natives, the percentages decrease with the idea of immigration not being a problem. The percentages increase when looking at the spectrum of immigrants and the idea that immigration is a very serious problem.

TABLE #3 – IMMIGRATION STATUS BY PROBLEM OF IMMIGRATION			
Large numbers of undocumented immigrants have been coming to Houston in recent years. How much of a problem do you think this is for the city? Would you say: very serious, somewhat serious, or not much of a problem?	Immigrant Status		
	1 st Generation	2nd Generation	Native
Not much of a problem	30%	27%	12%
Somewhat serious	40%	40%	29%
Very serious	30%	33%	59%
Total (number of cases)	100% 90	100% 75	100% 568

Finally, the Survey asks another question regarding the issue of immigration. It asks: “Agree/Disagree: We should take action to reduce the number of new immigrants coming to America.” Fifty seven percent of first generation immigrants agree that something should be done to reduce the number of immigrants. This is interesting to note because of the earlier measure asking whether they think it is a problem. However, the natives support for taking action was even stronger with 70% agreeing that a reduction is needed to the number of new immigrants coming to America.

TABLE #4 – IMMIGRATION STATUS BY TAKING ACTION ON IMMIGRATION			
Agree/Disagree: We should take action to reduce the number of new immigrants coming to America	Immigrant Status		
	1 st Generation	2 nd Generation	Native
Disagree	43%	44%	30%
Agree	57%	56%	70%
Total (number of cases)	100% 89	100% 72	100% 546

Conclusion:

Immigration, legal and/or illegal, has often been a major societal issue. Although immigrants are often seen as uninvited guests that harm the United States, the United States is also considered the Land of the Free: full of opportunities, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What about the dreams of the people who come to this “free” nation? Citizens of this country may feel as though immigration is a social problem, but what issues do the immigrants consider social problems in the United States? How is immigrant status related to perceptions and attitudes of the most important societal problems?

There is a vast amount of research available that analyzes and provides data on how immigration affects the United States. The effects immigration has on the economy, the crime rate, and many other societal issues have an extraordinary amount of research available. There is even research available for tracing immigrants using biological markers. The differences by immigrant groups also showed a difference in perceptions.

This research has taken an initial step in trying to understand the relationship between respondents’ immigrant status and their perceptions of major social issues. The analysis shows that there is a strong relationship between immigration status and perceptions of social issues. Looking at the issue of economy, natives seem to believe that immigrants take more from the economy than they contribute, while both 1st generation and 2nd generation immigrants believe that immigrants contribute more to the American economy than they take away. For the issue of crime, there does not seem to be much variation between natives and 1st or 2nd generation immigrants. Most of the respondents are “somewhat worried” about their family members or themselves being a victim of a crime. And finally, immigration itself seems to concern natives

more than immigrants; however, 1st and 2nd generation immigrants see immigration as a “somewhat serious” problem and all of the respondents believe that action should be taken to reduce the number of immigrants coming to America.

There are many other variables that should be explored more fully in future research. Education, religions, and different types of cultures influence how people act, their priorities, and the way they live their lives. A person with a poor education and less income may, in turn, live in a neighborhood where crime is more prevalent. Also, someone who is more religious may turn a blind eye to crime and believe in nonviolent resistance, making the fear of crime lower. All of these scenarios may be explanations for the numbers found in this thesis and must be taken into account in future research.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Stuart. "Immigrants and Crime: Perception vs. Reality." *Cato Institute* (2010): 1-3. *cato.org*. June 2010. Web. 10 Dec. 2011. <http://www.cato.org/pubs/irb/irb_june2010.pdf>.
- Bermingham, John. "Immigration: Not a Solution to Problems of Population Decline and Aging." *Population and Environment* 22.4 (2001): 355-363. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.
- Borjas, George. "The Economics of Immigration." *Journal of Economic Literature* 32.4 (1994): 1667-717. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/2728791.pdf?acceptTC=true>>.
- Espenshade, Thomas, and Charles Calhoun. "An Analysis of Public Opinion toward Undocumented Immigration." *Population Research and Policy Review* 12.3 (1993): 189-224. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.
- Houston Area Survey. The Association of Religion Data Archives - U.S. and World Religion Statistics and Data - ARDA*. Web. 2011. <<http://www.thearda.com>>.
- Lee, Tiane, and Susan Fiske. "Not an Outgroup, Not Yet an Ingroup: Immigrants in the Stereotype Content Model." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 30.6 (2006): 751-68.
- Martinez Jr., Ramiro, and Matthew T. Lee. "On Immigration and Crime." *THE NATURE OF CRIME: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE* (2000): 485-524. *Criminal Justice 2000*. Web. 16 Feb. 2012.
- Ousey, Graham C., and Charis E. Kubrin . "Exploring the Connection between Immigration and Violent Crime Rates in U.S. Cities, 1980–2000." *Society for the Study of Social Problems* 56.3 (2009): 447-473. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Feb. 2012.
- Rannala, Bruce, and Joanna Mountain. "Detecting Immigration by Using Multilocus Genotypes." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 94 (1997): 9197-201. Print.

"The Economic Effects of Local Immigration Policy." *AS/COA Online*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2012.
<http://www.as-coa.org/articles/3742/The_Economic_Effects_of_Local_Immigration_Policy/>.

Waters, Mary, and Tomas Jimenez. "Assessing Immigrant Assimilation: New Empirical and Theoretical Challenges." *Annual Review of Sociolog* 31 (2005): 105-125. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Jan. 2012.

Spring, 2012

Academic Vita

Michelle Julie Skalrud

Department of Sociology and Crime, Law, and Justice
Penn State University
University Park, PA 16802

141 S. Garner Street
Apt. 409
State College, PA 16801
Office Phone: 973-349-7977
E-mail address: mskalrud@gmail.com

Education

B.A., Crime, Law, and Justice, May 2012, Penn State University, University Park, PA
B.A., Russian, May 2012, Penn State University, University Park, PA
Education Abroad, Monash University, Spring 2011, Melbourne, Australia

Honors and Awards

- Presidential Leadership Academy
 - *Member of Inaugural Class, Chair for THON (Largest student-run philanthropy in the U.S.)*
 - Fall '09 – Spring '10 classes taught by the President of The Pennsylvania State University and Dean of Schreyer Honors College of The Pennsylvania State University, exclusive to 30 students and focused on developing effective leadership skills through critical thinking
 - Took initiative to make the Presidential Leadership Academy a sponsoring organization for Penn State's Dance Marathon (THON)

Association Memberships

- Phi Alpha Delta Pre-Law Fraternity
- Phi Eta Sigma Honors Society

Professional Experience

- Union County Courthouse, Intern
 - Worked in Self-Help department, helping citizens with personal issues
 - Overlooked criminal, civil, and family court and learned the trial processes