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Charis E. Kubrin · Graham C. Ousey

Immigration and Crime
Taking Stock

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Chapter 1
Introduction

It has long been said that immigration is the foundation of America, and that immigrants represent what is best about the country (Brookings 2022). In this spirit, former President Bill Clinton remarked: "We are a Nation of immigrants that strives to live up to an idea of openness and receptivity. Immigration involves more than welcoming newcomers from faraway places. It involves reuniting our own families, helping our economy, fulfilling our religious and humanitarian values, and standing up to persecution that far too many Americans remember" (United States President's Report).

No other nation has as large an immigrant population as the United States. Even so, the number of immigrants coming to the U.S. from far away shores waxes and wanes across the decades. Numbers rose rapidly from the mid-nineteenth century through the early part of the twentieth century—popularly known as the Age of Mass Migration. With the cessation of large-scale immigration after 1924, absolute numbers of foreign-born declined to below ten million by 1970 (Hirschman 2014). With the renewal of immigration in recent decades, the number of foreign-born persons has risen dramatically and the U.S. is, once again, in the midst of an immigration wave. Today there are more than 44 million immigrants in America, constituting just over 13% of the U.S. population, a figure not far below the record high of 14.8% in 1890 (Esterline and Batalova 2022). And, approximately 17.8 million U.S. children under age 18 lived with at least one immigrant parent in 2019, accounting for 26% of the 68.9 million children under age 18 in the U.S. (Esterline and Batalova 2022).

Immigrant populations change over time, and today's immigrants look quite different from the past. Most who arrived during the Age of Mass Migration were from Southern and Eastern Europe, including Italy, Germany, Poland, and Russia. Many of these new arrivals were considered distinctly different from the older stock of white Americans in terms of language, religion, and in their potential for assimilation into society (Hirschman 2014). There were much smaller waves of immigration

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Table 1.1 Immigrant place of origin, 2019

	Foreign born	
Place of birth	Number	%
Region of birth (excluding born at sea)	4,49,32,799	100
Born in Africa	24,75,118	5.5
Born in Asia	1,40,99,479	31.4
Born in Europe	46,65,173	10.4
Born in Latin America (South America, Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean)	2,25,88,239	50.3
Born in North America (Canada, Bermuda, Greenland, St. Pierre, and Miquelon)	8,04,602	1.8
Born in Oceania	3,00,188	0.7

Source: Migration Policy Institute (https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/US#top)

from China and Japan, but strong opposition ended Asian immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hirschman 2014).

When the doors to immigration reopened after 1965, few Europeans arrived. The major regions of origin in the Post-1965 wave are Latin America and Asia—a trend that continues today (see Table 1.1). Currently, immigrants from Mexico constitute the largest group of immigrants in the U.S., comprising 24% of the total immigrant population. China (including Hong Kong and Macao but not Taiwan) and India are the origins of the next two largest immigrant groups, each accounting for roughly 6% of the overall foreign-born population. Other top countries of origin include the Philippines, El Salvador, Vietnam, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Korea. Together, these countries accounted for 57% of all immigrants in the U.S. in 2019 (Esterline and Batalova 2022).

Such figures and trends raise critical questions about whether immigrants and their children are successfully integrating into American society, and whether or not current policies and practices facilitate their integration. Questions, too, arise about how the millions of immigrants arriving in recent decades are transforming America. These questions underscore the fact that while the U.S. is a nation comprised largely of immigrants and their descendants, immigration remains one of the most fraught social and political issues of modern times.

Stereotypes, Fears, and Moral Panics

Existing alongside the pride of residing in a "nation of immigrants," many Americans fear that the U.S. has more immigrants than it can absorb and assimilate. Accompanying these fears are widespread beliefs that immigrants take jobs that would otherwise go to native-born Americans and that wages of native-born workers are depressed by the presence of immigrant workers (Hirschman 2014). Beyond economic concerns, many Americans also believe that immigrants, especially those

from "third world" countries, threaten American values, culture, and institutions (Hirschman 2014; see also Bouvier 1992; Brimelow 1995; Huntington 2004). Yet the most stubborn and damaging stereotype is that immigrants bring crime onto American shores.

Criminologist Edwin Sutherland (1934) long ago highlighted immigration and crime as a topic marred by popular misconception and policy distortion. Today, little has changed as public opinions are still shaped more by fears and stereotype than empirical fact (Martinez and Lee 2000; Ousey and Kubrin 2009). For starters, the constant juxtaposition of the words "immigration" and "crime" in news story after news story has helped forge the perception of a causal link between the two (Butcher and Piehl 1998: 457). Indeed, "The misperception that the foreign born, especially illegal immigrants, are responsible for higher crime rates is deeply rooted in American public opinion and is sustained by media anecdote and popular myth" (Rumbaut and Ewing 2007: 3; see also Hagan et al. 2008: 96).

Implications

The consequences of a perceived immigration-crime link are nontrivial and wide-ranging. These sentiments have given rise to an anti-immigrant lobby including political leaders, TV and radio talk-show pundits, public interest organizations that publish reports and policy briefs, and unauthorized militia groups that patrol the U.S.–Mexico border, such as the Minutemen (Hirschman 2014).

The anti-immigrant lobby occupies a significant role in political life, including most recently in the 2016 presidential election. Immigration was a unifying concern among Trump supporters. According to a Pew Survey, voters who supported Donald Trump viewed illegal immigration as a serious problem in the U.S., and strongly favored his proposal to build a wall along the southern border with Mexico. And, half of Trump supporters in the survey said undocumented immigrants are more likely than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes, compared to just 27% of all registered voters (Pew Research Center 2016).

Beyond securing votes and propelling conservative politicians into power, the assumed link between immigration and crime has consequences for immigration policy. Research documents a direct connection between peoples' perceptions and beliefs about immigration and their policy preferences (Grigorieff et al. 2020). By manipulating the public's fear of "crime prone" immigrants, for example, politicians are able to secure support for harsh, restrictive, and exclusionary immigration policies (Sniderman et al. 2004; Stumpf 2006).

Fear of the "criminal immigrant" also directly impacts the everyday lives of minority group members. Studies show that immigrants face discrimination in both the workplace (Dietz 2010) and the housing market (Rosenbaum and Friedman 2007). Negative stereotypes also motivate racial and ethnic profiling practices where physical appearance and socially constructed notions of race and ethnicity subject immigrants to special scrutiny, stops, and searches (Provine and Sanchez 2011: 470).