

# Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

55 E. Jackson, suite 2075 · Chicago, IL 60604 · 312.332.7360 voice · 312.332.7044 fax · www.icirr.org



## FACT SHEET: Immigrants and Crime

### **Don't Immigrants Cause More Crime?**

Actually, **no**. Many opponents of immigration would have us believe that more immigrants in our country and our communities mean higher crime rates, and that immigrants commit more crimes than natives. Perceptions among the general public are particularly skewed by media reports that give a high profile to incidents involving immigrant (and especially undocumented) perpetrators.

Getting beyond such media hype and stereotypes reveals deeper truths. Studies conducted by academic researchers and government commissions have repeatedly and consistently found that immigrants are in fact *less likely* to commit crimes or be incarcerated than native-born Americans. Furthermore, crime actually tends to be negatively associated with immigration. These data refute any link between increasing immigration and increasing crime.<sup>1</sup>

### **Incarceration Rates Among Immigrants are Lower Than Those Among the Native-Born**<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Censuses, 18-40 year-old male immigrants had lower institutionalization rates than the native-born each year.

Among men age 18-39 (who comprise the vast majority of the prison population), the 3.5 percent incarceration rate of the native-born in 2000 was *5 times higher* than the 0.7 percent incarceration rate of the foreign-born.<sup>3</sup>

Across different categories of crimes, incarceration rates among the foreign-born are lower than among the US-born.

- For crimes against persons in 2005, the foreign-born were incarcerated at a rate of 161 per 100,000 people, while the US-born were incarcerated at a rate of 259 per 100,000.
- The rate of incarceration for drug crimes was 54 per 100,000 for the foreign-born and 114 per 100,000 for the U.S.-born.

In California, the state with the greatest number of both legal and undocumented immigrants, Census 2000 data revealed that native-born men age 18 to 39 had *higher* incarceration rates than the rest of the United States, while the foreign-born had *lower* rates in California compared to the rest of the country. The incarceration rate for the native-born was more than one percentage point higher in California than in the rest of the country (4.5 percent vs. 3.4 percent).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robert Sampson, "Rethinking Crime and Immigration." Contexts. v. 7, no. 1, Winter 2008 ([http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts\\_winter08\\_sampson.pdf](http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts_winter08_sampson.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> Kristin F. Butcher & Anne Morrison Piehl, "Crime, Corrections and California: What Immigration Has to do With it." Public Policy Institute of California, v.9, no. 3, February 2008. ([http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/cacounts/CC\\_208KBCC.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/cacounts/CC_208KBCC.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup> Ruben G. Rumbaut and Walter A. Ewing, "The Myth of Immigrant Criminality and the Paradox of Assimilation: Incarceration Rates Among Native and Foreign-Born Men" (Washington DC: Immigration Policy Center, Spring 2007) ([http://immigration.server263.com/images/File/specialreport/Imm%20Criminality%20\(IPC\).pdf](http://immigration.server263.com/images/File/specialreport/Imm%20Criminality%20(IPC).pdf)).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*



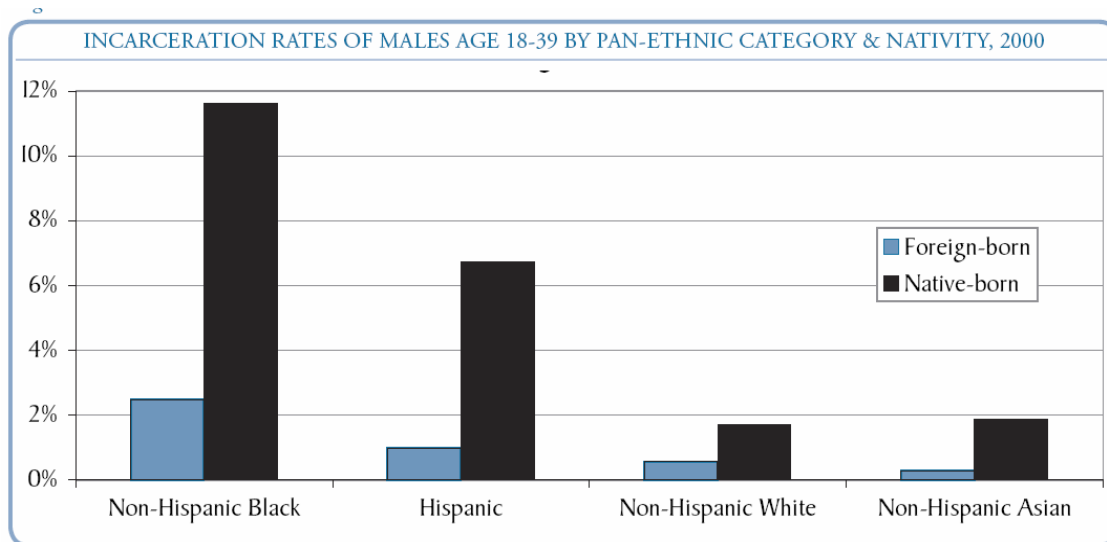
## Incarceration Rates by Ethnicity<sup>5</sup>

Compared to the 0.7 percent incarceration rate among the foreign-born in 2000, the rate among native-born non-Hispanic white men was nearly two-and-a-half times higher (1.7 percent), and the rate among native-born black men was seventeen times higher (11.6 percent).

Native-born Hispanic men were nearly seven times more likely to be in prison than foreign-born Hispanic men in 2000, while the incarceration rate of native-born non-Hispanic white men was almost three times higher than that of foreign-born white men. Foreign-born Mexicans had an incarceration rate of only 0.7 percent in 2000—less than one-eighth of the 5.9 percent rate of native-born males of Mexican descent.

Foreign-born Chinese/Taiwanese men had an extremely low incarceration rate of 0.2 percent in 2000, compared to the 0.7 percent incarceration rate of native-born men of Chinese/Taiwanese descent.

The incarceration rate of foreign-born Laotian and Cambodian men (0.9 percent) was the highest among Asian immigrant groups in 2000, but was less than one-eighth of that of native-born men of Laotian and Cambodian descent (7.3 percent).



Source: 2000 Census, 5% PUMS.

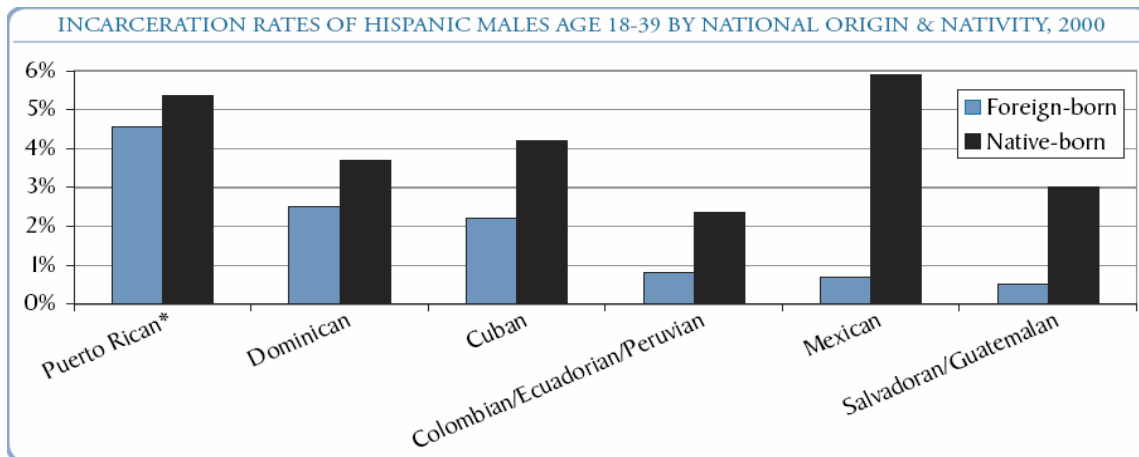
Table 1<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to the popular belief that young, male Latino immigrants come to the U.S. to participate in illegal activities, particularly drugs, foreign-born Latino males of all ethnicities are less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Latino males.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*



Source: Source: 2000 Census, 5% PUMS.

\*Although Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, not immigrants, for the purposes of this table those born on the island are classified as "foreign-born" and those born on the mainland as "native-born."

Table 2<sup>8</sup>

### **Crime Rates Have Declined as Immigration Has Increased**

Immigration to the United States rose sharply in the 1990s, especially from Mexico and especially to immigrant enclaves in large cities. Overall, the foreign-born population increased by more than 50 percent in 10 years, to 31 million in 2000.

Immigration grew most significantly in the mid-1990s and hit its peak at the end of the decade, when the national homicide rate plunged to levels not seen since the 1960s. Immigrant flows have receded since 2001 but remain high, while the national homicide rate leveled off and seems now to be creeping up<sup>9</sup>.

Even as the undocumented population has doubled to 12 million since 1994, the violent crime rate in the United States has declined 34.2 percent and the property crime rate has fallen 26.4 percent.<sup>10</sup>

New York today is a leading magnet for immigration, yet it has for a decade ranked as one of America's safest cities. Crime in Los Angeles dropped considerably in the late 1990s (45 percent overall), as it did in other heavily Latino cities such as San Jose, Dallas, and Phoenix. The same can be said for cities on the border like El Paso and San Diego, which have long ranked as low-crime areas. Cities of concentrated immigration are some of the safest places around.<sup>11</sup>

Immigrant children are less likely than peers of similar socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in everything from gang fights to arson to purse snatchings. Even native kids who

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Robert Sampson, "Rethinking Crime and Immigration." *Contexts*. v. 7, no. 1, Winter 2008 ([http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts\\_winter08\\_sampson.pdf](http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts_winter08_sampson.pdf)).

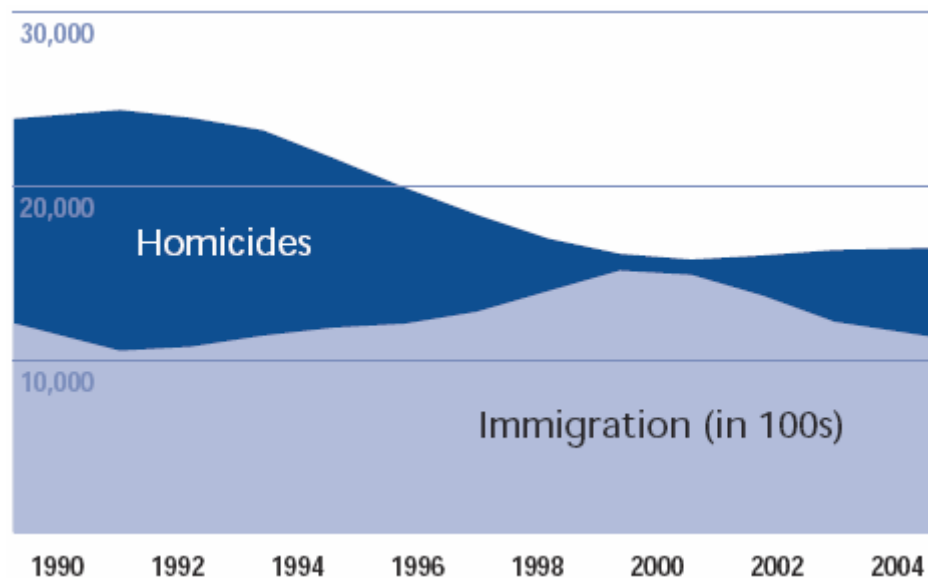
<sup>10</sup> Immigration Policy Center, "Immigrants and Crime: Are They Connected?" (2007) (<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/images/File/factcheck/Crime%20Fact%20Check%2012-12-07.pdf>).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Sampson, "Rethinking Crime and Immigration." *Contexts*. v. 7, no. 1, Winter 2008 ([http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts\\_winter08\\_sampson.pdf](http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts_winter08_sampson.pdf)).

happened to live in immigrant neighborhoods were less likely than otherwise to be involved in violence.<sup>12</sup>

Some researchers even suggest that the crime rates in the U.S. have decreased *because* of the increase in immigration over the past three decades.<sup>13</sup>

### Immigration Flows and Homicide Trends: U.S. Total 1990-2004 (Three year averages)<sup>14</sup>



### Explanations

The vast majority of immigrants come to the United States to pursue economic and educational opportunities not available in their home countries and to build better lives for themselves and their families. As a result they are less likely to engage in illegal activities and threaten their status once here.<sup>15</sup> This especially applies to undocumented immigrants, who must be very careful to avoid authorities so as not to risk disrupting their already precarious status.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Sampson, Jeffrey Morenoff & Stephen Raudenbush, "Social Anatomy of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Violence," *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 95, no. 2, Feb 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Sampson, "Rethinking Crime and Immigration." *Contexts*. v. 7, no. 1, Winter 2008 ([http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts\\_winter08\\_sampson.pdf](http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts_winter08_sampson.pdf)); Ruben G. Rumbaut and Walter A. Ewing, "The Myth of Immigrant Criminality and the Paradox of Assimilation: Incarceration Rates Among Native and Foreign-Born Men" (Washington DC: Immigration Policy Center, Spring 2007) ([http://immigration.server263.com/images/File/specialreport/Imm%20Criminality%20\(IPC\).pdf](http://immigration.server263.com/images/File/specialreport/Imm%20Criminality%20(IPC).pdf)); see also Eyal Press, "Do Immigrants Make Us Safer," *New York Times*, December 3, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Sampson, "Rethinking Crime and Immigration." *Contexts*. v. 7, no. 1, Winter 2008 ([http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts\\_winter08\\_sampson.pdf](http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts_winter08_sampson.pdf)).

<sup>15</sup> Kristin F. Butcher and Anne Morrison Piehl, "Why Are Immigrants' Incarceration Rates So Low? Evidence on Selective Immigration, Deterrence, and Deportation" (Working Paper 2005-19) (Chicago: Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, November 2005) ([http://www.chicagofed.org/publications/workingpapers/wp2005\\_19.pdf](http://www.chicagofed.org/publications/workingpapers/wp2005_19.pdf)); Ruben G. Rumbaut and Walter A. Ewing, "The Myth of Immigrant Criminality and the Paradox of Assimilation:

The process of migration selects individuals who are more responsive to deterrent effects than the average native. Immigrants--Mexicans in particular--selectively migrate to the United States on characteristics that predispose them to low crime, such as motivation to work, ambition, and a desire not to be deported.<sup>16</sup>

Legislation passed in the 1980s and 1990s raised penalties for criminal activity. Laws enacted in the 1990s increased penalties for criminal non-citizens in particular. It is possible that these policy changes may lead individuals to immigrate to the United States who are positively selected along dimensions of "skill" associated with good social outcomes, even if they have poor labor market outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to what many believe, it has been found that deportation does not decrease crime.<sup>18</sup>

Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson writes about a "Latino Paradox": Hispanic Americans ultimately do better on a wide range of social indicators—including propensity to violence—than one would expect given their socioeconomic disadvantages, making it less likely they will ever face incarceration.<sup>19</sup>

*Research and writing: Tiffany Davis, PhD*

*Editing: Fred Tsao, ICIRR policy director*

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<sup>16</sup> Kristin F. Butcher and Anne Morrison Piehl, "Why Are Immigrants' Incarceration Rates So Low? Evidence on Selective Immigration, Deterrence, and Deportation" (Working Paper 2005-19) (Chicago: Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, November 2005) ([http://www.chicagofed.org/publications/workingpapers/wp2005\\_19.pdf](http://www.chicagofed.org/publications/workingpapers/wp2005_19.pdf)); Robert Sampson, "Rethinking Crime and Immigration." *Contexts*. v. 7, no. 1, Winter 2008 ([http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts\\_winter08\\_sampson.pdf](http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts_winter08_sampson.pdf)).

<sup>17</sup> Kristin F. Butcher and Anne Morrison Piehl, "Why Are Immigrants' Incarceration Rates So Low? Evidence on Selective Immigration, Deterrence, and Deportation" (Working Paper 2005-19) (Chicago: Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, November 2005) ([http://www.chicagofed.org/publications/workingpapers/wp2005\\_19.pdf](http://www.chicagofed.org/publications/workingpapers/wp2005_19.pdf)).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> Robert Sampson, "Rethinking Crime and Immigration." *Contexts*. v. 7, no. 1, Winter 2008 ([http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts\\_winter08\\_sampson.pdf](http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts_winter08_sampson.pdf)).