

# Stanford

## Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR)

Inequality, Politics and Media, Research Highlight

### The mythical tie between immigration and crime

Research by Stanford's Ran Abramitzky and co-authors uncovers the most extensive evidence to date that immigrants are less likely to be imprisoned than U.S.-born individuals.

July 21, 2023 | Krysten Crawford [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#) [🖨](#)

Opponents of immigration often argue that immigrants drive up crime rates. But newly released research from Stanford economist [Ran Abramitzky](#) and his co-authors finds that hasn't been the case in America for the last 140 years.

**The study** reveals that first-generation immigrants have not been more likely to be imprisoned than people born in the United States since 1880.

Today, immigrants are 30 percent less likely to be incarcerated than are U.S.-born individuals who are white, the study finds. And when the analysis is expanded to include Black Americans — whose prison rates are higher than the general population — the likelihood of an immigrant being incarcerated is 60 percent lower than of people born in the United States.

While other research has also debunked claims that immigration leads to more crime, this study of incarceration rates provides the broadest historical look at the relationship between immigration and crime across the country and over time, says author Abramitzky. Abramitzky is the Stanford Federal Credit Union Professor of Economics and senior associate dean of social sciences in the School of Humanities and Sciences, as well as a senior fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR).

The study is detailed in a working paper released by the National Bureau of Economic Research. Using U.S. Census Bureau data, it focuses on immigrants present in the Census regardless of their legal status and on men between the ages of 18 and 40.

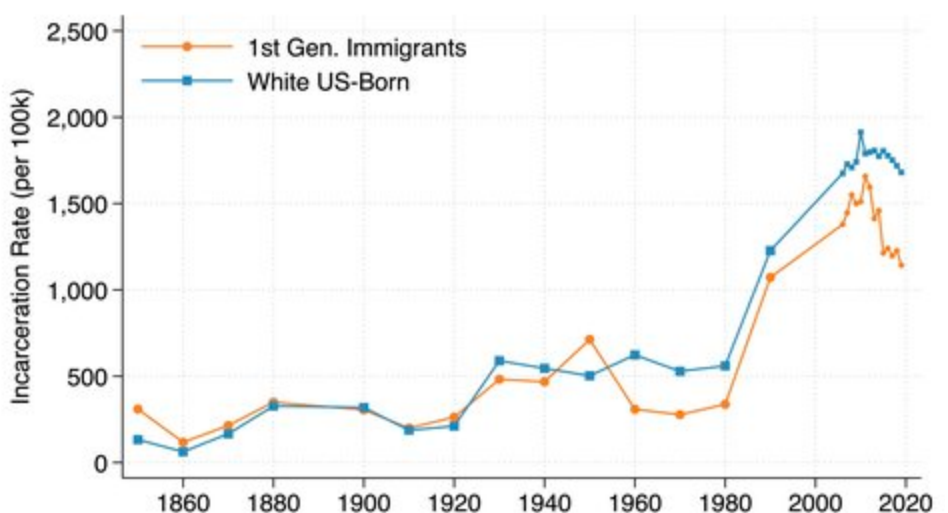
"From Henry Cabot Lodge in the late 19th century to Donald Trump, anti-immigration politicians have repeatedly tried to link immigrants to crime, but our research confirms that this is a myth and not based on fact," says Abramitzky, whose 2022 book, *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*, examines the many misconceptions around immigration.

In their analysis of Census data from 1850 to 2020, Abramitzky and his co-authors find that, compared to U.S.-born individuals, immigrants as a group had higher incarceration rates before 1870 and similar rates between 1880 and 1950. Since 1960, however, immigrants have been less likely to be incarcerated than have the U.S.-born.

According to the study, this is the case for almost every region in the world that is a major source of immigrants to the United States. As of 2019, immigrants from China and eastern and southern Europe were committing the fewest number of crimes — as measured by incarceration rates — relative to U.S.-born individuals.

The exception is Mexican and Central American immigrants, but the higher incarceration rates for this group since 2005 is largely attributed to the fact that the Census data combines incarceration for criminal acts with detentions for immigration-related offenses, the researchers say in the paper. Incarceration rates among Mexican and Central American immigrants were similar to those of U.S.-born individuals between 1980 and 2005.

What's more, comparing the imprisonment of Mexican and Central American immigrants to that of white males born in the United States based on education tells a different story, according to Abramitzky. Men without a high school degree are the group most likely to be incarcerated for criminal activity. "But Mexican and Central American immigrants with



An analysis of U.S. Census data by SIEPR Senior Fellow Ran Abramitzky and his collaborators shows immigrants have had similar or lower incarceration rates than white U.S.-born men for the last 140 years of American history.

low levels of education, which comprise a large share of immigrants from this region, are significantly less likely to be incarcerated than U.S.-born men with similarly low levels of education,” he says.

Abramitzky’s co-authors include Leah Platt Boustan, an economics professor at Princeton and co-author of *Streets of Gold*; Elisa Jácome, an assistant professor of economics at Northwestern and a former SIEPR postdoctoral fellow; Santiago Pérez, an associate professor of economics at the University of California, Davis; and Juan David Torres, a Stanford PhD student in economics and former predoctoral fellow at SIEPR.

## Immigrants vs. U.S.-born: Different economic forces

In setting out to compare criminality over time, the researchers took on a big challenge: Finding credible evidence of a connection between immigration and crime — and over a long time period — is extremely difficult. Other studies have relied on arrests records, but those do not include immigration status or birthplace. They also include arrests for minor infractions, which can reflect police bias more than actual crimes.

Instead, Abramitzky and his collaborators chose to analyze incarceration rates, which they say are better indicators of serious crime because they often require a conviction. As their primary data source, they turned to decennial censuses and surveys from the U.S. Census Bureau, which include information on individuals in correctional facilities and their birthplace — thereby allowing the researchers to build what they say is the first nationally representative dataset of incarceration rates for immigrants and the U.S.-born going back 170 years.

The researchers say it’s not entirely clear why the data show that immigrants have been imprisoned at increasingly lower rates than U.S.-born males since 1960.

“Many of the explanations we had in mind turned out to NOT be right when we looked at the data,” Abramitzky says. For example, examining differences in age, marital status, or education levels among immigrants didn’t provide a clue. Nor did changes in immigration policy or the states in which immigrants settled.

It is also unlikely, he says, that deportations contributed to the relatively lower rates of immigrant incarcerations.

The researchers conclude the likely explanation is that first-generation immigrants are faring better overall (and not just with respect to incarceration rates) than are U.S.-born men — especially compared to those without a high school diploma.

Globalization and advances in technology have hit white males hard, especially those who were born in the United States and who didn’t finish high school. Compared to immigrants, they are much more likely to be unemployed, unmarried, and in poor health — and perhaps more prone to commit crimes as a result, Abramitzky says.

The manual jobs that immigrants typically take on have been stable by comparison. Other studies have shown that immigrants also are, among other characteristics, highly adaptable and resilient.

“Recent waves of immigrants are more likely to be employed, married with children, and in good health,” Abramitzky says. “Far from the rapists and drug dealers that anti-immigrant politicians claim them to be, immigrants today are doing relatively well and have largely been shielded from the social and economic forces that have negatively affected low-educated U.S.-born men.”

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