

IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT IMMIGRATION AND CRIMINALITY

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When faced with baseless charges that immigrants show a greater propensity to criminal behavior than native-born people, or when criminal incidents involving immigrants are cited as evidence of a general trend, fair-minded Americans need to be armed with accurate information to refute such charges. It is alarming to note that 73% of all Americans believe that immigration is causally related to crime.¹ The following set of quick facts has been assembled to educate the public on this issue:

- Both in the United States as a whole and in New Jersey as well, **immigrants have a lower crime rate than native-born Americans.** The U.S. incarceration rate for native-born males between the ages of 18 to 39, the group that constitutes the vast majority of the prison population in the United States, is 3.51%, as compared to 0.86% for immigrants. **The native rate is more than four times higher than the immigrant rate.**²
- According to research done by the Star-Ledger and published in April, 2008, non-U.S. Citizens (foreign-born permanent residents and undocumented individuals) make up 10% of New Jersey's population, but only 5% of the 22,623 inmates in New Jersey prisons as of July, 2007.³
- Indeed, some researchers have suggested that **immigration is a factor in reducing crime rates in major American cities**, such as Chicago and New York.⁴
- Although researchers find it difficult to study the undocumented population directly, the lowest incarceration rates among all Latin American immigrants are found among the least educated groups most often stigmatized as "illegal:" Salvadorans and Guatemalans (0.52%) and Mexicans (0.70%).⁵ Thus, **undocumented immigrants appear to be no different than documented immigrants in their rates of criminality.**
- The social factor in the general population that correlates most closely with criminality is lack of a high school diploma. Among all males between the ages of 18 and 39, non-high school graduates have a 6.91% incarceration rate as compared to 2.00% for graduates.⁶
- However, non-high school graduates among the immigrant male population in the same age bracket, although showing a trend of higher incarceration similar to the native-born population, have much lower rates than the native born. The Mexican rate of 2.84%, for example, is less than half the general rate of 6.91%.

- **Criminality among immigrants increases with exposure to the American environment.** Incarceration rates among immigrants tend to rise with length of residence in the United States, although still far below the general rate.
- Criminality also rises sharply among the second generation (U.S. born children of immigrants), all of whom were raised and educated in the United States. As one might expect, the increases are greatest among second generation drop-outs. This increase does not imply a predisposition to crime on the part of immigrant children, but rather the consequences of poor schooling and limited economic opportunity.⁷
- These trends mirror almost exactly those observed among immigrants arriving during the last great wave of immigration from 1880 to 1917, i.e. strong public perceptions of criminality among the immigrant population not borne out by the facts, but increasing criminality among the second generation.⁸
- Nativists will often challenge these findings by suggesting an undercount of criminal behavior among the foreign-born, caused by the proximity of Mexico as a criminal sanctuary or the underreporting of crime in immigrant neighborhoods.⁹ However, there is much evidence that **many police in the United States engage in profiling activities that result in more arrests and convictions among minority and immigrant populations.**¹⁰
- **It is time to speak out against the double standard of holding immigrants, be they Latino or Asian, or members of any minority group responsible for the criminal actions of a few, when a similar standard does not apply to white Americans.** In July of 2007, the nation's leading sociologists, criminologists, and legal scholars sent a letter to the President and all members of Congress deploring the attempt to depict the immigrant population as crime-prone.¹¹ Their initiative should be commended.

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¹ Ruben G. Rumbaut, Roberto G. Gonzales, Golnaz Komaie, and Charlie V. Morgan, "Debunking the Myth of Immigrant Criminality: Imprisonment Among First- and Second-Generation Young Men," Migration Policy Institute, April 16, 2007, 3.

² Rumbaut et al, 4.

³ "From Anecdotes to Evidence: Setting the Record Straight on Immigrants and Crime," The Immigration Policy Center, September 10, 2008. 2. Available at: <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/images/File/factcheck/SettingtheRecordStraightonImmigrantsandCrime9-10-08.pdf>.

⁴ The most notable proponent of this view is Harvard sociologist Robert J. Sampson. His views are discussed in: Eyal Press, "Do Immigrants Make Us Safer," New York Times Magazine, December 3, 2006.

⁵ Rumbaut et al, 5.

⁶ Rumbaut et al, 5.

⁷ Rumbaut et al, 5-8.

⁸ The so-called "second generation problem" was a major concern of social workers, academics and policy makers during the period from 1924 to 1941. Delinquency among the children of southern and eastern European immigrants led to numerous studies and the development of special programs to address their

needs. See Nicholas V. Montalto, A History of the Intercultural Educational Movement 1924-1941 (New York: 1982), 22-76.

⁹ See for example, Carl F. Horowitz, “An Examination of U.S. Immigration Policy and Serious Crime,” Center for Immigration Studies, April, 2001.

¹⁰ See for example, Vera Institute, Police Assessment Resource Center, Racial Profiling, March, 2002, 22 April 2007 < http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/162_249.pdf>, or Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, Personal Accounts of the Long-Term Impact of 9-11, February, 2007, 22 April 2007 <http://www.mnadvocates.org/sites/608a3887-dd53-4796-8904-997a0131ca54/uploads/97648_FINAL_Voices_From_Silence2.pdf>

¹¹ A copy of their letter may be found at: http://www.aif.org/ipc/ipc_openletter0507.shtml.