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Neighborhood Dynamics of Urban Violence:

Understanding the Immigration Connection

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Abstract

Social disorganization is the dominant framework linking neighborhood patterns of immigration to local rates of crime and violence despite inconsistent findings and evidence to the contrary. Using tract-level census data from 1970 to 1990 and Chicago homicide data from 1980 to 1995, this study explores whether and how the changing face of immigration is (un)related to homicide patterns within the contemporary urban environment. The results show that stable and consistent growth in foreign born is not associated with neighborhood trends in violence, whereas growth in recent arrivals occurs almost exclusively within the safest neighborhoods of the city. This research highlights the need to distinguish recent waves of immigrants/migrants from their historic counterparts.

Keywords

homicide trajectories; neighborhoods; foreign born; recent immigrant

During periods of economic uncertainty and especially after breaches in physical security such as 9/11, there can be an intensification of anti-immigration sentiment—or scapegoating—that is generalized to and directed at foreign-born persons, even those who entered the country legally. Concerns over immigration have escalated in recent years in response to a confluence of factors including, but not limited to, protectionism in the face of a global economy, terrorism at home and abroad, perceived threats to language and culture, policing the international drug trade, and volatile local economic conditions that inspire fears over wage suppression or unemployment (Chace, 2000; Sniderman, Hangendoorn, & Prior, 2004). In responding to America’s “discourse of fear” (Garland, 2001), border security has ostensibly expanded to detect and prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country without authorization (Nuñez-Neto, 2008). It is within this broader social context of anxiety and uncertainty that a renewed interest in the immigration–crime nexus has emerged (Sampson, 2008).

Fueled by recent political attempts to link immigration and crime as means of enacting more restrictive immigration policy (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007), the predominant belief among the American public is that crime is strongly related to immigration (Alba, Rumbaut, & Marotz, 2005; Sampson, 2008). However, contrary to the classic social disorganization literature that posits that new immigrants lack social ties to local residents and consequently undermine community controls (Shaw & McKay, 1942/1969), it is not clear that immigrants in contemporary American cities are generally concentrated in the highest crime

neighborhoods. Nor are they necessarily concentrated in the safest neighborhoods, although there is mounting evidence that national and citywide trends in immigration are at odds with crime-rate trends (Reid, Weiss, Adelman, & Jaret, 2005; Sampson, 2008). The limited within-city research that exists suggests that the relationship between immigrant concentration and neighborhood homicide rates is usually null and occasionally negative (Lee & Martinez, 2002; Lee, Martinez, & Rosenfeld, 2001; Martinez, 2002; Reid et al., 2005). Although research on patterns of immigration (largely from Europe) in cities during the early 20th century solidified the link between immigration and crime (see Shaw & McKay, 1942/1969; also see other issues in this volume), contemporary processes of urban redefinition and the growing diversity of migrant populations may have much more varied implications for local patterns of immigration, crime, and violence.

In investigating the relationship between immigration patterns and neighborhood homicide trends, we argue that it is important to distinguish ethnic enclaves comprised heavily of foreign-born residents who, in some cases, entered the United States decades ago from emerging immigrant-destination neighborhoods drawing recent arrivals from abroad. First, this distinction is necessary because recent waves of immigrants are believed to be more disadvantaged than both earlier immigrants and native-born populations (Clark, 1998) and more diverse (Singer, 2004), with many arriving from Latin America and Asia rather than Europe (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007). Moreover, public sentiment holds that large numbers of new immigrants will negatively impact economic conditions (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007) and positively affect crime rates (Alba et al., 2005). Second, recent immigrants and returnees are likely to select different kinds of destination neighborhoods depending on their socioeconomic status, familiarity with American cities/neighborhoods, employment opportunities, and proximity to social and cultural institutions, including places of worship, grocers or restaurants offering culturally specific cuisine, and access to immigrant enclave economies (Portes & Jensen, 1987). Third, the decline of racial and ethnic segregation means that destination neighborhoods are increasingly diverse (Logan, 2002). Thus, rather than a uniform course of assimilation, the modern process is considered to be much more segmented, whereby certain groups of newcomers experience a downward trajectory and end up living in ghetto-type poverty conditions, whereas other newcomers are more advantaged and shielded from common urban problems (Portes & Zhou, 1993).

Taken together, the extant literature suggests that the immigration–crime relationship is more complex than previously hypothesized. As such, researchers must move beyond simple in-group/out-group comparisons to examine within-group differences in the immigrant population. And because the assimilation process occurs over time, it is necessary that researchers consider that the relationship between immigration and criminal, economic, and social outcomes may depend on the recency of arrival to American cities. Building on research in Chicago that examined spatiotemporal trends in neighborhood homicide (Griffiths & Chavez, 2004) and on prior work by Martinez and colleagues (Lee et al., 2001; Lee & Martinez, 2002; Martinez, 2002; Nielsen, Lee, & Martinez, 2005), this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the effects of immigration on urban violence by providing preliminary evidence of considerable differences in neighborhood homicide trends between 1980 and 1995 among two distinctive neighborhood types: historic ethnic enclaves and destination neighborhoods for recent arrivals from abroad.

Data and Method

To explore the relationship between neighborhood immigration and homicide patterns across Chicago, we first replicate Griffiths and Chavez's (2004) semiparametric, group-based trajectory model estimating neighborhood clusters defined by similarities in homicide levels and trends. Given the diversity of recent waves of immigrants to the United States and

because the theoretical rationale for the immigration–crime relationship is based on cultural difference and attenuated social networks stemming from heightened residential instability, we then distinguish foreign-born persons—who may have lived in the United States for an extended period—from recent arrivals. Finally, we conduct ANOVA models to determine the relative associations between historic immigrant enclaves and destination communities for recent arrivals with neighborhood homicide trajectories. In doing so, we are able to demonstrate considerable local differences in the immigration–crime relationship by recency of arrival to the United States.

Homicide Trajectories

Information on homicides is taken from the public-use Chicago Homicide Data Set (ICPSR 6399; Block, Block, & the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 1998). There were a total of 12,541 homicides in Chicago between 1980 and 1995, excluding 164 cases of arson, which are omitted because they represent qualitatively different kinds of events. We use census tracts as reasonable approximations of neighborhood boundaries (see Hipp, 2007) and exclude those tracts with populations less than 100 at 1980, 1990, or 2000. The final data set contains 831 census tracts in the city of Chicago. Homicide data were matched with 1980, 1990, and 2000 census data by tract; we used a linear extrapolation of tract populations between census years to compute annual neighborhood homicide rates between 1980 and 1995.

For the present analysis, we used a customized SAS procedure called TRAJ (Jones, Nagin, & Roeder, 2001; Nagin, 1999), which is a semiparametric group-based approach for analyzing developmental trajectories over time. This methodology assumes that a population is composed of a mixture of groups with distinct developmental trajectories. Parameters defining each trajectory are free to vary independent of one another (Nagin, 1999). Groups may vary, then, not only in their level of homicide in any given year but also in the rate of change in homicide. This methodology does not assume a priori existence of groups and avoids overfitting of groups by providing a formal basis for determining the number of groups that fit the data and identifying posterior probabilities of group membership to evaluate the precision of group assignments (Nagin, 1999). The TRAJ procedure effectively identifies distinct groups of census tracts defined by similar homicide rate trajectories over a 15-year period (refer to Griffiths & Chavez, 2004, for a more detailed description of the methodology).

The Foreign-Born Population

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2002), the term *foreign born* refers to all persons who are not U.S. citizens at birth. This includes naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, temporary migrants (e.g., foreign students or work visa holders), humanitarian migrants (e.g., refugees), and known undocumented persons in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). In 2007, nearly 600,000 Chicagoans (594,841; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007) or one fifth of the city population self-identified as foreign born. Chicago has a long history as a destination for immigrants, many of whom originated from Europe (predominantly Germany, Italy, and Ireland) early in the 20th century (Paral & Norkewicz, 2003). However, Chicago's foreign-born population has become significantly more diverse in recent years. Based on the reported world region of birth, a randomly selected foreign-born resident from Chicago in 2007 is almost as likely to have originated from Asia (18.2% of the city's foreign-born population) as Europe or North America combined (18.9%) and is considerably more likely to have originated from Latin America (58.2%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The city of Chicago thus represents a patchwork of immigrant ethnic enclaves, racially segregated neighborhoods, and more ethnically and racially diverse communities, comprised of residents with varied arrival periods in the United States.

Recent Immigrants/Migrants

In this preliminary exploration, we use the only global measure of recent immigrants/migrants available in the decennial census—persons 5 years and older living outside of the United States 5 years prior to the census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). This category is broad and may include recent foreign-born immigrants, recent foreign-born visa holders, military personnel who return from being stationed overseas, and other American citizens who have recently returned from residence abroad. When respondents reported that they resided in a different house 5 years ago, they were prompted to provide the state (or foreign country), the U.S. county, city or town, and ZIP code of residence on April 1, 5 years prior to the census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Missing data were entered based on either information from other family members or imputed based on respondents with similar characteristics. Data for 1970 and 1980 include those whose previous residence was in a foreign country, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, or the U.S. Virgin Islands, including members of the armed forces and their dependents. For the 1990 census, however, only persons 5 years and older who resided outside the United States and Puerto Rico are included.

Unfortunately, the aggregated nature of the census data precludes us from distinguishing recent immigrants/migrants by citizenship. Nonetheless, the extant literature on immigration to the United States suggests that there has been a shift in the types of neighborhoods where new foreign-born immigrants are likely to settle. Recent immigrants increasingly choose residential areas away from traditional immigrant port-of-entry neighborhoods in the center of the city and toward the suburban outskirts of Chicago (Paral & Norkewicz, 2003). Although these selection criteria may generalize across both native and foreign-born migrants re/settling in the United States, the presence of long-standing immigrant enclaves is expected to assume greater weight in the residential relocation decisions of foreign-born immigrants than American returnees.¹ We suggest that in broadening the focus from foreign born to recent immigrants/migrants, researchers can better understand how variability in the in-migration of recent arrivals across neighborhoods is associated with neighborhood homicide trends. Subsequent researchers should collect more refined measures distinguishing between types of recent immigrants/migrants if we find purchase with the general and somewhat crude measure used here.

In the analyses presented below, we begin by distinguishing Chicago neighborhoods by their levels and trends in homicide rates between 1980 and 1995. We then conduct a series of one-way ANOVA models to estimate whether and how both patterns and trends in proportion foreign born and proportion recent immigrants/migrants are associated with neighborhood homicide trajectories. Because Shaw & McKay (1942/1969) described relatively static neighborhood characteristics of immigrant communities that are theorized to be conducive to violence, we examine levels and changes in proportion foreign born and recent immigrants/migrants immediately prior to and during our observation period. In the first ANOVA models, we contrast percentage of foreign born and percentage of recent immigrants/migrants with neighborhood homicide trajectory membership at the 1970, 1980, and 1990 censuses, respectively. To estimate how change in the proportion of foreign born and recent immigrants/migrants over time are associated with neighborhood trends in homicide, we then contrast percentage change in both migrant populations between 1970

¹Zero-order correlations suggest that the variability in destination neighborhoods is far greater for recent immigrants/migrants than for the foreign-born population in Chicago. For example, the bivariate correlation between neighborhood proportion foreign born in 1970 and absolute change in proportion foreign born between 1970 and 1990 is positive and significant (.192; $p < .01$). Thus, neighborhoods with large foreign-born populations in 1970 grew their foreign-born population over time. By contrast, the bivariate correlation between neighborhood proportion of recent immigrants/migrants in 1970 and the absolute change in proportion recent immigrants/migrants between 1970 and 1990 is negative and significant (−.361; $p < .01$). This suggests that over the 20-year period, new immigrants/migrants were settling in different neighborhoods compared to their earlier counterparts.

and 1980 (immediately before the start of the period captured in the homicide data) and then again between 1970 and 1990 (both before and during most of the period captured by the trajectory models).

Results and Discussion

Replicating Griffiths and Chavez (2004), we find that neighborhoods vary considerably in their initial levels of homicide and in trends in homicide rates over time. Three distinct homicide rate trajectories are identified for Chicago neighborhoods between 1980 and 1995 (see Figure 1). The majority of census tracts (54%) are relatively free of homicide over the period (Group 1). Group 2 represents approximately 40% of neighborhoods, each of which exhibit a mid-range homicide rate in 1980 and follow a quadratic trajectory thereafter, dipping slightly before increasing steadily through 1995. Group 3 neighborhoods, comprising the final 6% of remaining tracts, display a relatively high homicide rate and follow a cubic trajectory in line with the overall citywide trend in Chicago between 1980 and 1995.

The graphs presented in Figure 2 illustrate the extent to which variation in neighborhood levels of foreign born and recent immigrants/migrants vary by homicide trajectory membership based on one-way ANOVA models.² A consistent pattern emerges both between neighborhoods following different trajectories and within trajectory groups over time. In all census years, neighborhoods on unique homicide trajectories varied significantly from one another in their concentrations of foreign-born residents. Those neighborhoods with the lowest and most stable levels of homicide had the highest proportion of foreign-born residents in all census years and demonstrated an upward trend from a group average of 13.4% foreign born in 1970 to a group average of 18.9% by 1990, although showing only marginal increases between 1980 and 1990. Group 2 neighborhoods, with moderate and relatively stable levels of lethal violence, had a significantly lower proportion of foreign-born residents than Group 1 neighborhoods—increasing from an average of 9.1% in 1970 to an average of 11.2% by 1980 and remaining largely unchanged through 1990. Finally, neighborhoods with very high and unstable rates of lethal violence had the lowest proportion of foreign-born residents in all periods, wherein foreign-born residents comprised, on average, between 5% and 6% of the local populations.

When we examine proportions of recent immigrants/migrants by neighborhood homicide trajectories, we find a relatively similar pattern.³ Not surprisingly, recent immigrants/migrants constitute a much smaller portion of the population in all neighborhoods than do foreign-born residents; recent immigrants/migrants comprise between 1.3% and 4.14% of neighborhood populations, according to group-specific averages. Nevertheless, as was the case for foreign born, recent immigrants/migrants were far less likely to be found in the most violent neighborhoods (Group 3), were moderately more likely to be found in Group 2 neighborhoods, and were most likely to be found in the safest neighborhoods (Group 1) at all census years. Indeed, regardless the period examined, Group 1 neighborhoods had significantly higher levels of recent immigrants/migrants than did Group 3 neighborhoods. Looking across decennial census years, it is of note that Group 2 neighborhoods did not significantly differ from Group 1 neighborhoods in 1970, but by 1990 they did not significantly differ from Group 3. Over time, then, the proportion of recent immigrants/

²Levene statistics are significant for all comparisons. Therefore, equal variances cannot be assumed and significance tests are based on the Games–Howell criterion.

³Equal variances could not be assumed in the 1970 and 1990 comparisons and therefore the Games–Howell test is used to determine significance levels. Data for the 1980s show equal variances; in this case, the Bonferroni test is used.

migrants residing in Group 2 neighborhoods began to approach the proportions in the most violent, rather than the least violent, neighborhoods.

To better assess how foreign born and recent immigrant/migrant population trends are associated with local homicide trends, we turn to an examination of patterns of change in percentage foreign born and percentage recent immigrants/ migrants by homicide trajectory membership. These analyses reveal distinctly different patterns for the two immigrant/ migrant populations (see Figure 3). Using the proportion foreign born and recent immigrant/ migrant population at 1970 as a baseline, we compare the percentage change in this baseline over first a 10-year (percentage change from 1970 to 1980) and then a 20-year (percentage change from 1970 to 1990) period. This strategy allows us to determine whether and how foreign born and recent immigrant/migrant populations changed both before and during the time frame covered by our homicide trajectory models.

Despite public sentiment to the contrary, percentage change in proportion foreign born between both the 10-year (1970–1980) and 20-year (1970–1990) periods are unrelated to neighborhood homicide trajectory membership.² None of the comparisons between neighborhood homicide trajectory groups are statistically significant. These patterns suggest that changes in the relative size of foreign-born populations in Chicago neighborhoods are not related to levels and trends in local homicide rates.

The ANOVA results for changes in the proportion of recent immigrants/migrants are strikingly different. According to the second graph shown in Figure 3, Group 1 neighborhoods—or those with the lowest and most stable levels of homicide—are clear target destinations for new immigrants/migrants. The proportion of new immigrants/ migrants in the safest neighborhoods of Chicago more than doubled between 1970 and 1980, and almost quadrupled between 1970 and 1990. Thus, Group 1 neighborhoods not only have the highest proportion of recent immigrants/ migrants but also exhibit the highest increases in growth of recent immigrants/ migrants over the period. Trends for these Group 1 neighborhoods are significantly different from trends for both Group 2 and Group 3 neighborhoods in the 10- and 20-year comparisons ($p < 0.001$).² Between 1970 and 1990, the relative proportion of recent immigrants/migrants declined from the 1970 baseline for both Group 2 and Group 3 neighborhoods, with the former losing an average of 9% in their proportion of recent immigrants/migrants and the latter falling by an average of 24%. Not coincidentally, levels of homicide peaked in both Group 2 and Group 3 neighborhoods during the early 1990s.

Overall, between 1970 and 1990, growth in the foreign-born population was consistent for all neighborhoods, regardless of homicide trajectory membership, reflecting general increases in immigration across the city. However, residential patterns for recent immigrants/migrants varied greatly by local homicide levels and trends. The most dangerous and volatile neighborhoods exhibited net negative growth in recent immigrants/migrants between 1970 and 1990, whereas the safest neighborhoods in Chicago were clear destinations for settlement. Moreover, these striking and contrary results hold despite the operational overlap in proportion foreign born and proportion recent immigrant/migrant populations within neighborhoods. Many of the recent immigrants/migrants are also foreign born, but most of those comprising the foreign born category are not recent immigrants. This suggests, then, that the differences in patterns of growth for foreign born and recent immigrants/migrants by neighborhood homicide trajectory membership are primarily a function of recency of arrival.

Conclusion

Researchers need to reconsider what is meant by “immigration” and “immigrant.” Clearly, the foreign-born population does not represent a monolithic group. We argue that, at least at the neighborhood level, it is useful to distinguish very recent immigrants/migrants from the more established foreign-born population who have resided in the United States for at least 5 years but, in many cases, for much longer. Likewise, given the diversity of the recent immigrant/migrant population, future researchers should attempt to distinguish American citizens who return to the United States after living abroad as civilians or military personnel from recent foreign-born immigrants newly arriving in the country. This distinction may be important, particularly as the results presented here confirm that growth in recent immigrants/migrants is limited to neighborhoods demonstrating a low and stable homicide trajectory but also that recent immigrants/migrants do not congregate in precisely the same “safe” neighborhoods (refer to Note 1). Therefore, contemporary patterns of immigrant settlement are unique compared to historic waves in which newcomers were drawn to immigrant and ethnic enclaves.

Popular opinion, aided by political rhetoric, has largely concluded that increases in neighborhood foreign-born populations are related to increases in crime and violence (see Sampson, 2008). Contrary to these expectations, we find that growth in foreign-born populations across all neighborhoods is ultimately unrelated to trends in violence, whereas increases in recent immigrants/migrants occur only in the most stable neighborhoods with the lowest levels of violence. Indeed, neighborhoods with high and volatile trends in homicide had the lowest proportion of recent immigrants/migrants at all time periods and demonstrated marked decreases in newcomers both preceding and during the periods of escalating homicide rates. Thus, the most lethal and volatile neighborhoods were not targets for recent immigrants/migrants and, as Martinez and colleagues (Lee et al., 2001; Martinez, 2002; Nielsen et al., 2005) suggested, homicide rates are dampened in those neighborhoods with large and/or growing new immigrant/migrant populations. The argument is further buttressed by our finding that Group 2 neighborhoods exhibited levels and growth patterns in recent immigrants/migrants similar to the most dangerous neighborhoods over this period. This leads us to speculate that neighborhood declines in recent immigrants/migrants may actually be associated with increases in neighborhood homicide rates.

These analyses provide initial evidence suggesting that studies of the relationship between immigration and crime should consider two important criteria in defining immigrants/migrants: (a) recency of arrival and (b) the heterogeneous nature of newcomers. That is, established foreign-born immigrants should be distinguished from recent arrivals, and recent arrivals comprise both foreign-born residents and Americans returning from abroad. Although we cannot disentangle various types of recent immigrants/migrants in this preliminary analysis, we argue that the null and sometimes contradictory results in the immigration and crime literature may have its roots in the failure to disentangle the effect of historic immigrant enclaves—localities with stable, consistent, and significant proportions of foreign-born residents—from that of new destination neighborhoods for both recent waves of foreign-born immigrants and American citizens who have newly returned to the United States. Our analyses suggest that such distinctions are warranted.

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Figure 1.
Neighborhood Trajectories of Homicide Rates, Chicago 1980–1995

Figure 2.

Percentage Foreign Born and Recency of Immigration/Migration by Homicide Trajectory Assignment

Note: Significance levels of group comparisons within year; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 3.
 Percentage Change in Proportion Foreign Born and Recency of Immigration/Migration by
 Homicide Trajectory Assignment
 Note: Significance levels of group comparisons within period; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$