

# Beyond Myths and Stereotypes

## Facts about Immigration and Crime

Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA)

**Introduction:** Anti-immigration groups, the media, and politicians continually spread information to the American public suggesting that immigration is linked with crime. These assertions are often baseless in that they are more opinion than documented fact. Recent research suggests that the claims that immigration (either documented or undocumented) causes crime are false, and that in reality immigrants may have dramatically lower crime rates than United States-born citizens.

### Facts and Evidence from Recent Research

**Fact:** Immigration in the United States may have contributed to *decreased* crime rates, and immigrants as a whole may have *lower* crime rates than native-born citizens.

**Evidence:** A 2007 study by Dr. Ruben Rumbaut and Dr. Walter Ewing connected higher rates of immigration in the 1990s and 2000s with a nationwide drop in crime rates. According to that study, “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” (1). In addition, a 2008 study by Harvard University professor Dr. Robert Sampson found that first-generation immigrants in Chicago were 45 percent less likely to commit violence than third-generation Americans (29).

**Fact:** Immigrant cities in California may be safer than those with fewer immigrants.

**Evidence:** In a 2008 study, The Public Policy Institute of California found that California cities with a high share of recent immigrants have lower rates of both property crimes and violent crimes than other cities in the state. The relationship between immigration and lowered violent crime rates is particularly strong, and is statistically significant (17). Finally, the report found that “crime rates fell more in cities with a larger newly arrived foreign-born population” between 2000 and 2005 (18).

**Fact:** Immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated than natives in California and United States jails.

**Evidence:** The Public Policy Institute of California found that in *both* California and the United States as a whole, men ages 18-40 “the age group most likely to commit crime,” the U.S.-born are approximately ten times more likely than the foreign-born to be in jail or prison (10-13). In addition, the Migration Information Source (2006) found that in 2000, “the incarceration rate of the US born (3.51 percent) was four times the rate of the foreign born (0.86 percent). The foreign-born rate was half the 1.71 percent rate for non-Hispanic white natives, and 13 times less than the 11.6 percent incarceration rate for native black men.”

**“The weight of the evidence suggests that immigration is not associated with increased levels of crime.”**

**– Jacob I. Stowell and Ramiro Martinez,  
2007 (568)**

**Fact:** Immigrants may be less likely to commit homicides than US-born citizens.

**Evidence:** Following a thorough review of recent literature, Dr. Jacob Stowell and Dr. Ramiro Martinez (2007) conclude that “the literature consistently finds a negative effect of immigration on crime, and *particularly homicide*” (568). A “negative effect” means that research has demonstrated that in the cities and neighborhoods studied immigrants often have a *lower* homicide rate than would otherwise be predicted. Stowell and Martinez also find that the groups of immigrants they studied in Houston and Miami, which they separated by ethnicity, also “yielded a combination of negative and null effects of the presence of foreign-born ethnic groups on violent crime” (577). This means that immigration either decreased violent crime rates or had no effect.

**Conclusion:** Recent research presents evidence suggesting that immigrants in Los Angeles, California and throughout the United States have lower crime rates, rates of violent crime, and rates of incarceration than United States-born citizens. California cities with high numbers of immigrants also appear to be safer than those with fewer immigrants.

### **References:**

Butcher, K., & Piehl, A. M. “Crime, Corrections and California: What Does Immigration Have to do with It?” *California Counts: Population Trends and Profiles* 9.3 (2008).  
<[http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/cacounts/CC\\_208KBCC.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/cacounts/CC_208KBCC.pdf)>.

Sampson, Robert J. “Rethinking Crime and Immigration.” *Contexts* 7 (2008): 28-33.  
<[http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts\\_winter08\\_sampson.pdf](http://contexts.org/articles/files/2008/01/contexts_winter08_sampson.pdf)>.

Stowell, Jacob I. and Ramiro Martinez, Jr. “Displaced, Dispossessed or Lawless? Examining the Link Between Ethnicity, Immigration, and Violence.” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 12 (2007): 564-581.

Rumbaut, Rubén G., Roberto G. Gonzales, Golnaz Komaie, and Charlie V. Morgan. “Debunking the Myth of Immigrant Criminality: Imprisonment Among First- and Second-Generation Young Men.” *Migration Information Source* (June 2006). <<http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=403>>.

Rumbaut, Rubén G. and Walter A. Ewing. “The Myth of Immigrant Criminality and the Paradox of Assimilation: Incarceration Rates among Native and Foreign-Born Men.” *Immigration Policy Center* (Spring 2007). <<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/index.php?content=sr20070221>>.

**Edited by:** Cynthia Buiza, CHIRLA Director of Policy and Advocacy  
**Prepared by:** Elizabeth Venable, CHIRLA Policy Assistant  
**Published:** October 2008



### **Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA)**

2533 W. Third Street, Suite 101  
Los Angeles, CA 90057

Telephone - 213.353.1333  
Fax - 213.353.1344

Toll-free - 1.888.6-CHIRLA [1.888.624.4752]