



Criminal epidemiology and the immigrant paradox: Intergenerational discontinuity in violence and antisocial behavior among immigrants



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: A growing number of studies have examined the immigrant paradox with respect to antisocial behavior and crime in the United States. However, there remains a need for a comprehensive examination of the intergenerational nature of violence and antisocial behavior among immigrants using population-based samples.

Methods: The present study, employing data from Wave I and II data of the National Epidemiologic Survey of Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC), sought to address these gaps by examining the prevalence of non-violent criminal and violent antisocial behavior among first, second, and third-generation immigrants and compare these to the prevalence found among non-immigrants and each other in the United States.

Results: There is clear evidence of an intergenerational severity-based gradient in the relationship between immigrant status and antisocial behavior and crime. The protective effect of nativity is far-and-away strongest among first-generation immigrants, attenuates substantially among second-generation immigrants, and essentially disappears among third-generation immigrants. These patterns were also stable across gender.

Conclusion: The present study is among the first to examine the intergenerational nature of antisocial behavior and crime among immigrants using population-based samples. Results provide robust evidence that nativity as a protective factor for immigrants wanes with each successive generation.

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Introduction

Although there is continuity in prosocial and antisocial behaviors across generations—one exception may occur among immigrants to the United States. Several recent studies have examined the relationship between immigrant status and various forms of maladaptive behaviors including deviance by contrasting the prevalence of nonviolent criminal and violent antisocial acts among native-born and first-generation immigrants in the United States (cf., Allen & Cancino, 2012; Bersani, Loughran, & Piquero, 2013; Chen & Zhong, 2013; DiPietro & Cwick, 2014; DiPietro & McGloin, 2012; Jennings, Zgoba, Piquero, & Reingle, 2013; MacDonald & Saunders, 2012; Peguero & Jiang, 2014; Piquero, Bersani, Loughran, & Fagan, 2014; Vaughn, Salas-Wright, DeLisi, & Maynard, 2014). Thus far, findings indicate that immigrants are significantly less likely to be antisocial than native-born Americans. This is known as the *immigrant paradox*, whereby first-generation immigrants display better behavioral outcomes than native-born Americans and

more highly acculturated immigrants despite the relative socioeconomic disadvantages and risk factors that immigrants face. Several constructs have been examined to explain the immigrant paradox including cultural factors (Sampson, 2008; Wirth, 1931), changes to family and peer dynamics (Bacio, Mays, & Lau, 2013), various lifestyle and routine activities (Peguero, 2013), and school factors (Jiang & Peterson, 2012; Peguero & Jiang, 2014; Watkins & Melde, 2009). As such, these studies suggest that non-USA nativity serves to protect against involvement in a wide range of antisocial behaviors across various developmental periods and among immigrants from various regions of the world.¹

Despite the advances made by recent studies; however, several important questions related to the dynamics of the immigrant-crime link have yet to be fully explored. For instance, in light of evidence highlighting the multigenerational effects of the immigrant paradox for social development and health-risk behaviors (Bacio et al., 2013; Bui, 2013; Guarini, Marks, Patton, & Coll, 2011; Marks, Ejese, & García Coll, 2014), does immigrant status protect against crime across multiple generations or is their stable intergenerational continuity in antisocial behavior in population-based samples? Second, given the importance of gender in terms of predicting criminal behavior (Bontrager, 2013;

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Kruttschnitt, 2013), does the protective effect of immigration status function similarly among men and women?² A careful examination of these multigenerational and gender-related factors can serve to provide important information about the robustness and nature of the relationship between immigrant status and crime.

Immigration and generational effects

Just as behaviors unfold from one immigrant generation to the next, there has been related criminological interest in the ways that crime unfolds from one generation to the next within families. Historically, researchers have noted that antisocial behavior sharply concentrates within families such that a relatively small number of families are disproportionately responsible for crime and related antisocial conditions (Boutwell & Beaver, 2010; Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Kalb, 2001; McCord, 1991; Robins, 1966; Rowe & Farrington, 1997). In line with these observations, more recent investigations on the intergenerational continuity in crime and antisocial behavior indicate moderate-to-strong familial aggregation. Employing data from the Rochester Youth Development Study, Thornberry, Feeeman-Gallant, Lizotte, Krohn, and Smith (2003) examined intergenerational continuity in antisocial behavior across three generations. Evidence was found for moderate intergenerational continuity in antisocial behavior particularly with respect to father's antisocial behavior. Findings also showed that financial stress and parental warmth and consistency in parental discipline functioned as mediators more strongly among mothers. Other longitudinal studies relying on self-report data, including research within a behavior genetic framework (DeLisi, Beaver, Vaughn, & Wright, 2009) have also found evidence of intergenerational continuity in antisocial behavior (Raudino, Fergusson, Woodward, & Horwood, 2013). For instance, using official records from a nationwide registry study of 12.5 million individuals residing in Sweden, Frisell et al. (2011) found strong evidence that violent acts aggregated within families, particularly among first-degree relatives who were more than four times more likely to be convicted of a violent crime compared to non-relatives. Although it is assumed that offspring are similar to their parents with respect to behavior, this also assumes relatively equal environments. This is not typically the case with respect to the experience of immigrant populations, thus there might be greater intergenerational discontinuity in their behaviors.

Although relatively few in number, studies of multigenerational rates of antisocial behavior among immigrants are one way to unravel the effect that new or changing environments have on the intergenerational transmission of problem behavior.³ While it appears immigrants commit less crime, evidence also suggests that the intergenerational continuity in antisocial behavior among immigrants may be transitory. In a study of Conduct Disorder (CD) prevalence across generations of immigrants from Mexico to the United States, for instance, Breslau et al. (2011) found that rates of CD were lowest in immigrant families relative to the general population, but higher in children of Mexican-born parents who were raised in the U.S. Uniquely, however, the highest prevalence of CD was observed in the third generation—that is, Mexican-American children of U.S. born parents. Similarly, Bersani (2014) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 found that first-generation immigrants displayed lower criminal offending in adolescence and early adulthood, but second generation immigrant youth resembled native-born White youth in their patterns of offending and were essentially “catching up”. However, this same study also found that differences remained whereby immigrant youth were involved in serious offenses at still lower rates than Black or Hispanic youth. Based on data from the Pathways to Desistance Study—a longitudinal study of serious youthful offenders—Piquero et al. (2014) suggested that legal socialization is a significant explanation for the immigrant paradox. In their analyses, first-generation immigrants had more positive views of the law/criminal justice system, had less cynical attitudes about the legal system, and reported greater costs/negative

consequences associated with punishment compared to second-generation immigrants and native-born youth. Taken together, these results suggest that over time the protective mechanisms among newly arrived immigrants begin to wane.

There are a number of competing explanations for the lack of intergenerational continuity in offending among immigrants (see, DiPietro & Cwick, 2014; DiPietro & McGloin, 2012; Peguero & Jiang, 2014; Piquero et al., 2014). Generally, it can be viewed to be a result of a parallel process of assimilation to the host culture and distancing from the culture of origin. In such a scenario, second and third generation immigrant youth are becoming behaviorally and socially more like native born youth (Bersani, 2014; Hagan, Levi, & Dinovitzer, 2008; Zimring, 2010). More specifically, an underlying susceptibility for antisocial behavior may become expressed as a result of unfavorable environmental exposures occurring during the acculturation process.

Another simpler explanation is that first generation immigrants are the anomaly and are so because they have a lot to lose including fear of deportation. Thus, for first generation immigrants in a new land there may be a greater deterrent effect operating where avoiding legal entanglements is a high priority. The deterrent effect may be especially concentrated and reinforced for first generation immigrants who are more likely to live among other recent immigrants. Moreover, selection processes suggest that immigrants are motivated to come to the U.S. and therefore “play by the rules”. These deterrent and motivational effects lose their force and fade for second and third generation immigrants.

The present study

The present study sheds light on multigenerational processes of antisocial behavior among immigrants by employing data from a population-based longitudinal study (i.e. the National Epidemiologic Survey of Alcohol and Related Conditions [NESARC]). The NESARC is well-suited to address these questions given its far-reaching scope and extensive assessment of crime and antisocial behavior among non-immigrants and immigrants across multiple generations. One of the shortcomings of previous research on immigration and crime is the over-reliance on arrest records. The primary weakness of this measurement approach is that most people who commit antisocial acts are not arrested. As such, the full extent of antisocial behavior remains unfathomed. Drawing from Waves I and II of the NESARC, we examine the degree to which the immigrant paradox persists across multiple generations. Specifically, we examine the prevalence of nonviolent criminal and violent antisocial behavior among first, second, and third-generation immigrants and compare these to the prevalence found among non-immigrants in the United States. We also systematically examine the prevalence of violent and non-violent acts among immigrant generations, namely by comparing third generation immigrants to first and second generation immigrants. We hypothesize a severity gradient in the prevalence of these behaviors across each generation. Finally, so as to assess the stability of these relationships across gender, we examine the multigenerational links between immigration and antisocial behavior and crime among men and women.

Method

Participants

Study findings are based on data from Wave I (2001–2002) and Wave II (2004–2005) of the NESARC. Here we present the design and methods in a summarized form; however, a detailed description of the study procedures is available elsewhere (Grant & Dawson, 1997; Grant et al., 2004; Hasin, Stinson, Ogburn, & Grant, 2007). The NESARC is a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized U.S. residents aged 18 years and older. The survey gathered data from individuals living in households and group settings such as shelters, college

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