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Immigrants and Crime: Some Pesky Facts

Back around the end of the Bill Clinton presidency I got into a minor argument with an acquaintance over immigration and crime. The man, named Mark, was upset about the recent wave of immigration into Minnesota because it had brought with it an increase in crime. Or so he believed. I had recently done some research on this very subject, and had published an essay pointing out that a rather dramatic upsurge in immigration in Minnesota over the previous few years had coincided with a rather dramatic decrease in both violent and nonviolent crime.

I mentioned my research to Mark. While we both agreed on the fact that immigration had increased, he had trouble with the idea that crime had gone down, saying, “Well, that isn’t true. Where did you get that information?” (Even though this is 18 years ago, I can still quote him almost verbatim.) I mentioned that my crime statistics came from the FBI’s “Uniform Crime Reports.” It quickly became apparent that it didn’t matter what I said, nor where I got my information, since he “knew” that more immigrants means more crime. The argument went nowhere, as I recall.

That argument occurred in the year 2000. But the myth to which Mark was so attached lives on in the year 2018. The March 31st New York Times reported that “As of 2017, according to Gallup polls, almost half of Americans agreed that immigrants make crime worse.”

This delusion is nurtured, on a regular basis, by our 45th President and his Attorney General Jeff Sessions. I won’t go into the details here, but if you want to type the words “trump immigration crime comments” into your search engine you’ll get the picture.

Fortunately, while the myth of immigrant criminality lives on, so do the facts. One good thing about the Trump presidency is that he has pushed many mainstream media outlets into a stance that *should* be their modus operandi with every White House, and that is healthy skepticism and a willingness to challenge even the most powerful myth-mongers.

This healthy skepticism is likely what led the New York Times to publish a really fine article on March 31st entitled “The Myth of the Criminal Immigrant.” The article references two academic studies that should have received wide coverage but, for the most part, did not. I’ll offer some excerpts here.

The first study was published in January of this year in the *Annual Review of Criminology*. Entitled *Immigration and Crime: Assessing a Contentious Issue*, this study goes on and on for 25 pages, looking at 20 years of research (1994-2014) in the field of criminal justice. The authors found that “The field has witnessed a veritable explosion of studies on the immigration-crime relationship, including aggregate analyses of neighborhoods, cities, counties, and metropolitan areas.” And what did they find? “Findings indicate that, overall, the immigration-crime association is negative—but very weak.” (By “negative” they mean that higher immigration rates mean lower crime.) They underline the point later on, saying that “Overall, our narrative review reveals that the most common outcome reported in prior studies is a null or nonsignificant association between immigration and crime.”

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By the way... The Spring 2018 Nygaard Notes Pledge Drive is OVER!

But the response over the past two weeks has been great! Wow.

I’ll do my best to maintain the high standard that you all deserve. Thank you to all! Nygaard

Greetings,

Observant readers may have noticed this interesting comment in the last issue of Nygaard Notes: “And please consider making a Pledge of support for Nygaard Notes. Now in its 30th year!”

I’ve been feeling a bit old lately, but not THAT old! Nygaard Notes is in its 20th year, not its 30th. Maybe we’ll make it to 30 years, who knows? But we’re not there yet!

Awaiting spring here in Minnesota. Sigh...

Nygaard

Crime from page 1

In other words, immigration has little or nothing to do with crime, and if there is any relationship, higher immigration rates appear to correlate with *lower* crime rates.

The negative correlation is even stronger in a 2017 article in the Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice called “Urban Crime Rates and the Changing Face of Immigration: Evidence Across Four Decades.” (Who among us even knew that there IS such a publication as the Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice?) In it, the authors “investigate the immigration-crime relationship among metropolitan areas over a 40 year period from 1970 to 2010.” The summary published with the article says this: “Research has shown little support for the enduring proposition that increases in immigration are associated with increases in crime. Although classical criminological and neoclassical economic theories would predict immigration to increase crime, most empirical research shows quite the opposite.”

The study authors state that “individual-level research based on arrest and offense data of the foreign-born shows that they are overall less likely to offend than nativeborn Americans.”

Something a bit unusual about this study is mentioned in the press release that announced the publication. It said, “For the current study, the authors stepped back from the study of individual immigrants and instead explored whether larger-scale immigration patterns in communities could be tied to increases in crime due to changes in cities, such as fewer economic opportunities or the claim that immigrants displace domestic workers from jobs.” In other words, even if immigrants don’t *commit* many crimes, does increased immigration *cause* crime to go up?

The study finds that “in spite of the varying social conditions in 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010, the

immigration–property crime relationship remains consistently negative throughout the entire period. Metropolises with higher percentages of foreign-born populations had consistently lower rates of murder, robbery, burglary, and larceny.”

They repeat and underline the point: “Our results indicate that, for property crimes, immigration has a consistently negative effect. For violent crimes, immigration has no effect on assault and a negative effect on robbery and murder. This is strong and stable evidence that, at the macro-level, immigration does not cause crime to increase in U.S. metropolitan areas, and may even help reduce it.”

The idea that more immigrants does not mean more criminals—immigrant or nativeborn—is so contrary to prevailing wisdom in this country that the study repeats the point numerous times, including toward the end of the article, when they plaintively state: “Our results are clear and overarching that immigration does *not* lead to increases in crime in American metropolitan areas.” [emphasis in original]

One final point: Not only do increased immigration levels NOT lead to more crime, but there is evidence that immigration actually revitalizes urban neighborhoods: “Thus, our research leads us to conclude that revitalization is most likely the dominant mechanism linking immigration to crime in U.S. metropolitan areas over the past four decades, further solidifying scholarly support for the idea that immigrants, on the whole, have positive impacts on American social and economic life.”

The evidence is in, the verdict is clear. So please make some noise when you hear the President, or anyone else, attempt to link immigration to increased crime. Making such a link serves someone’s interests. Notice who is making this link, and remember it when you next enter a voting booth. ♦

SNAP to Attention: Save the Food Stamp Program

Safety-net and anti-poverty programs are under attack on so many fronts that I hesitate to focus on any one program. But that's what I'm about to do, and the object of my concern is the federal SNAP program, previously known as the Food Stamp program. It's under attack by the reactionary right, as the Congress haggles over the Farm Bill that expires in September. The Farm Bill is huge and complicated, but one part of it has to do with funding the SNAP program.

The haggling has begun, and the basic issue is summed up in a March article in the agricultural publication *Agri-Pulse*: “The Republican farm bill proposal would cut Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits by more than \$20 billion over 10 years and reduce enrollment through expanded work requirements and stricter eligibility rules...”

Here's another quotation, this one from the *Food Research & Action Center*, in their excellent 2-page flyer “Congress Must Protect and Strengthen SNAP,” published in February:

“If SNAP were weakened, many millions of older Americans, people with disabilities, children, veterans, struggling parents—working and unemployed—and others would be harmed. The nation would see more hunger and food insecurity, worse health and educational outcomes, a less productive workforce, and higher health costs.”

Be that as it may, Republicans are so determined to weaken the program that the entire Farm Bill “could be derailed by a deep divide over SNAP,” as PBS reported this week. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities gave some details in a statement on February 15th:

“President Trump's 2019 budget proposes to cut the SNAP program by more than \$213 billion over the next ten years—nearly a 30 percent cut—through radically restructuring how benefits are delivered, cutting eligibility for at least 4 million people, and reducing benefits for many others. The unemployed, the elderly, and low-income working families with children would bear the brunt of the cuts. These proposals come on the heels of a tax law the President championed that will mainly benefit the wealthy and corporations and that's expected to add \$1.5 trillion to deficits over ten years.”
[Note that the Trump proposal is much more severe than

the already-draconian cuts mentioned above.]

This is an example of an attack on a program that is already inadequate, as is indicated in an almost unreported study published by the Urban Institute and the University of Illinois on February 22nd called “How Far Do SNAP Benefits Fall Short of Covering the Cost of a Meal?”

That title tells you what the study was aimed at. On page one the study authors list six things they found out:

1. The SNAP benefit does not cover the cost of a low-income meal in 99 percent of US continental counties and the District of Columbia.
2. The average cost of a low-income meal is \$2.36. This is 27 percent higher than the SNAP maximum benefit per meal of \$1.86, which takes into account the maximum benefit available to households of varying sizes.
3. Monthly SNAP benefits fall short of the cost of average low-income meal by \$46.50 per person.
4. The 20 counties with the largest gap between average low-income meal cost and SNAP benefit include high-cost urban areas such as New York, San Francisco, and Alexandria, VA, as well as smaller rural counties, such as Blaine County, ID; El Dorado County, CA; and Leelanau County, MI.
5. In those 20 counties, average meal costs range from \$3.13 to \$4.39—68 to 136 percent higher than the SNAP per meal benefit.
6. We also examine the 10 percent of continental US counties with the largest gap between average low-income meal costs and the SNAP maximum per meal benefit. This highest-cost group of 310 counties spans 40 states and Washington, DC. The average cost per meal among these counties is \$2.70, 45 percent more than the SNAP per meal benefit.

My point here: We need to not only resist the draconian cuts that are on the table, we need to push to bring this crucial program up to a level that really meets the needs of the food insecure in our crazy economy.

Here are a few resources to help you learn more and take action to help protect and strengthen the SNAP program:

I mentioned earlier a 2-page flyer from the Food Research & Action Center. Check out this →→→

→→ one-page flyer for a summary of what's *good* about SNAP: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/frac-facts-snap-strengths.pdf>

The group *Just Harvest* does a good job of countering many of the myths about food stamps. Read “The Truth About Food Stamps” on their website: www.justharvest.org/advocacy/the-truth-about-snap-food-stamps/

If you want a bigger picture, the *National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition* has a page on their website called “What is the Farm Bill?” <http://sustainableagriculture.net/our-work/campaigns/fbcampaign/what-is-the-farm-bill/>

And the always-excellent Institute for *Agriculture and Trade Policy* has a “Farm Bill Portal” on their website: www.iatp.org/blog/201803/farm-bill-portal

The SNAP program—crucial as it is for the food security of millions of US Americans—is really only a band-aid on a much larger, systemic problem. The wonderful group called “FOOD FIRST” lays it out like this: “Food First envisions a world in which all people have access to healthy, ecologically produced, and culturally appropriate food. After 40 years of analysis of the global food system, we know that making this vision a reality involves more than technical solutions—it requires *political transformation*.” They say a lot more HERE: <https://foodfirst.org/about-us/> ♦

“Quote” of the Week: “*Make Severe Hunger in America Rare*”

This week’s “Quote” of the Week comes from a policy paper put out in February by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The paper is called “Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)”. It begins by saying what SNAP is: “SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is the nation's most important anti-hunger program. In a typical month in 2017, SNAP helped more than 40 million low-income Americans afford a nutritionally adequate diet.” It also says this:

“SNAP and other nutrition programs have helped make severe hunger in America rare. Before the late 1960s, when the federal government began providing nutrition assistance, hunger and severe malnutrition could be found in many low-income communities in the United States. Today, in large part because of these programs, such severe conditions are no longer found in large numbers.”

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