Executive Summary: The Causes of Crime in the United States

Approximately 1 million people immigrated into the United States in 2001. The generally accepted discourse in the United States is that immigration increases crime. Surely immigration effects the United States’ economy, crime rates, tax burden, etc., as the following studies will illustrate. It is rational to assume that people integrating or assimilating into American culture by the millions every year have some affect on crime: by virtue of poverty, cultural conflicts, community instability, or assimilation hardships, immigration is generally accepted as a contributor to crime. Political scientists, Sociologists, and Historians have been studying the impact of immigration on U.S. culture for decades. Men like Shaw and McKay were pioneers of immigration research in early 20th century America. However, despite the volume and depth of previous research, there is no consensus on what impact immigration has on crime, businesses, wages, the housing market, and on society in general. There may be truth to this theory, but it is important to look at the evidence rather than blindly accepting the general discourse.

Many researchers have studied the relationship between immigration and crime, but their results are very conflicting. Dr. Anthony Peguero has found that Latino high school students who were non-native English speakers and did not speak English well were more likely to be victims of school violence than Latino native English speakers. Matthew Lee, Ramiro Martinez, and Richard Rosenfeld presented research that dispels this notion of immigrant-induced instability and increased crime. Still other researchers contend that immigration and

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crime cannot be studied in a vacuum—context is necessary to provide accurate results. When studying immigration and crime, it is extremely important to consider and account for social, familial, economic, geographic, and ethnic context. Immigration increases crime. Immigration can also have no effect on crime. Context is the deciding factor in most cases. More research is needed to determine the nature of the relationship between these two phenomena.

The overall research question for this study was ‘What factors significantly affect crime rates in the United States?’ The overall hypothesis projected an increase in crime as the number of immigrants increased in a given state. This study used data from the Uniform Crime Reports of 2000 and the U.S. Census of 2000 to test seven independent variables. Poverty, population density, education level, racial diversity, immigrant population, age, and unemployment rate were all analyzed through a regression to discover a correlation between these factors and crime.

The regression analysis that was conducted revealed that immigration is not a good predictor of a state’s overall crime rate: the number of first and second generation immigrants living in a given state does not influence crime in any meaningful way. However, this is a very meaningful finding, as the overall hypothesis predicted an increase in crime as the number of immigrants increased.

The findings confirm research presented by Anne Morrison Piehl of Rutgers University in Chapter 2 of this project. However, in agreement with Ramiro Martinez, there remains to be no consensus on the effects of immigration on crime. These findings suggest that perhaps proponents of tighter immigration policies in the United States are misinformed or uninformed.

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If increased immigration does not lead to higher crime, as the model suggests, their fears of immigrant revolts and destruction of the fabric of society may be unfounded.

Certainly no body of research is perfect: each project is forced to deal with issues such as data insufficiency, data limitations, and so forth. This body of research is no exception. While the research model produced seemingly groundbreaking results indicating that virtually nothing influences crime, there were inherent flaws in the project. This project analyzed crime rates and population demographics at the state level and the nature of the data prevented the discovery of any significant results. The potential relationship between race and crime serve as an excellent example: it is logical and likely to assume that increased racial diversity leads to increased racial tension, which could feasibly lead to higher rates of crime. However, consider the geographical limitations on this state-level data: inner-cities that are typically more racially diverse with higher rates of crime are averaged in with suburban and rural populations of homogenous racial makeup. The rates of crime in the inner-cities and the rates in the rural areas effectively cancel each other out, resulting in a lack of significant findings. This body of research would have been greatly more effective had it measured crime and other demographics at the county or metropolitan level. Unfortunately this data was not available from the Uniform Crime Reports which was deemed the most accurate crime database, so the research proceeded at the state-level of analysis. Future research should focus on metropolitan and county level data, should that data become available through an accurate source.

While this body of research did not produce any results of statistical significance, it did produce conceptual significance and served as a model for future research in this field. The project contributes to the overall body of knowledge on crime by deemphasizing state-level research and shifting the focus towards local studies. Future researchers should continue to
evaluate these same variables and hypotheses at the local level—these theories are too important to be ignored or rejected on the basis of one project. Discovering significant causes of crime is crucial to the continued success and life of society. Researchers often spend too much time analyzing the effectiveness of the consequences and overlook the underlying causes of criminality; law enforcement and analysts over emphasize retroactive management and neglect proactive, preventive management of real problems. Rooting out the causes of crime should be the primary focus of people and governments. Therefore, the search for causation must continue.