Open Letter on Immigrants and Crime  
July 2, 2007

[signed by over 130 scholars, published and sent through the Immigration Policy Center, DC, to the Bush Administration, all Members of Congress, and all Governors on July 2, 2007]

Dear Mr. President, Members of Congress, and Governors:

   Immigration has enriched the economy and culture of the United States since the founding of the nation. Yet immigrants long have been scapegoats for many social problems that afflict the nation. As a result, myths and stereotypes about immigrants, rather than established facts, far too often serve as the basis for public perceptions that drive misguided immigration policies.

   One of the most pervasive misperceptions about immigrants is that they are more likely to commit predatory crimes than are the native-born. Popular movies, television series, and a sensationalizing news media propagate the enduring image of immigrant communities permeated by crime and violence. But this widespread belief is simply wrong.

   Numerous studies by independent researchers and government commissions over the past 100 years repeatedly and consistently have found that, in fact, immigrants are less likely to commit crimes or to be behind bars than are the native-born. This is true for the nation as a whole, as well as for cities with large immigrant populations such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Miami, and cities along the U.S.-Mexico border such as San Diego and El Paso.

   That immigration does not automatically lead to higher crime rates is evident in the fact that crime rates have fallen in the United States at the same time immigration has increased. Since the early 1990s, immigration to the United States—both legal and undocumented—has reached historic highs. Yet rates of violent crime and property crime have declined sharply over the same period, and the violent crime rate has reached historic lows. Moreover, among men age 18-39 (who comprise the vast majority of the prison population), the incarceration rate of the native-born is much higher than the incarceration rate of the foreign-born.
Immigrants in every ethnic group in the United States have lower rates of crime and imprisonment than do the native born. This is true for all immigrant groups—including the Mexicans, Salvadoreans, and Guatemalans who comprise most of the undocumented immigrants in the country. Even though immigrants from these countries are far more likely than natives to have less than a high-school education and to live in poverty, they are far less likely to be behind bars or to commit crimes. Moreover, teenage immigrants are much less likely than native-born adolescents to engage in risk behaviors such as delinquency, violence, and substance abuse that often lead to imprisonment.

The problem of violent crime in the United States is not caused by immigrants, regardless of their legal status. To be sure, the large-scale undocumented immigration of the past 10 years has caused significant fiscal and administrative problems for state and local governments, and has placed unexpected burdens on overcrowded schools in areas where immigrants are concentrated. But it has not raised rates for violent crimes or crimes against property and immigrants should not be subject to selective laws and practices based on false claims to the contrary. Immigration is a national issue that requires uniform federal policies based on accurate assessments of U.S. economic and demographic needs.

There are real dangers inherent in the myth that immigrants are more prone to criminality than are the native-born. This inaccurate assumption has flourished in a post-9/11 climate of fear in which terrorism and undocumented immigration often are mentioned in the same breath. It was a key rationalization for provisions in the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act that authorized the arrest, imprisonment, and deportation of non-citizens without judicial review—practices that harken back to the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798.

Immigrants and natives alike deserve a reasoned public debate on immigration that addresses the many complexities of the issue. As state and national policymakers draft laws that affect immigrants, it is important that these laws be based on demonstrated facts rather than on false assumptions.

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