



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS

A state of confusion over illegals and crime

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The immigration-crime debate has [once again](#) surfaced as the controversial Arizona immigration law is about to take effect. Even with lowering rates of violent crime, supporters of the measure argue that the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico has led to more violence in Arizona and other border states. Meanwhile, [critics](#) contend that a high concentration of Hispanics is associated with less crime, not more. Oddly enough, both positions are contrary to the facts.

The table below shows the national rankings of the four Mexican border states in terms of crime rates for 2008 and several demographic and economic indicators. Of course, it is difficult to make much sense of this collection of data — even without the figures for the remaining 46 states, so let me summarize by pointing to the underlying statistical correlations.

Ranking of crime and demographic/economic factors (1=highest level)

State	NM	CA	TX	AZ
Violent Crime	8	14	12	21
Property Crime	9	25	8	1
Homicide	6	16	19	14
Rape	2	41	21	39
Robbery	23	5	13	15
Agg. Assault	5	18	14	21
Burglary	9	25	8	1
Larceny	3	25	11	15
Auto Theft	18	40	5	1
%Hispanic	1	2	3	4
%Black	40	26	19	36
%White (NonHisp)	49	48	47	42
%Fam Poor	3	17	4	15
Mdn Income Fam	47	13	37	34
%Indiv Poor	3	21	5	15
Mdn Income Indiv	47	13	37	34

Crime rates are indeed positively correlated with the percentage of the population that is Hispanic as well as the percentage that is African American. Conversely, the percentage of the population that is non-Hispanic white possesses a moderating effect, having a negative correlation with crime rates.

However, before jumping to any quick confusions that might improperly fortify a racist position, these associations between crime rates and demographics are to a great extent

the result of the socio-economic conditions that tend to be linked to a high concentration of minorities, rather than of race/ethnicity itself.

State crime rates correlate with various measures of income and poverty. Not surprisingly, rates of crime are higher in states that have lower income levels and a greater share of its population living below the poverty line. More important, after controlling for these economic conditions, correlations between crime rates and the percentage of Hispanics in the population virtually disappear.

Besides these state comparisons, there have been reports out of Arizona suggesting that illegal immigrants are overrepresented among those [convicted](#) of crimes and those [incarcerated](#) in the state's prisons. However, this is not an issue of national origin, but again of class and poverty. One would likely find the same pattern of over-representation for any underclass group, regardless of race/ethnicity. Moreover, although some of the over-representation may indeed suggest differential levels of crime involvement, they may also reflect the higher likelihood that illegal immigrants or any other disenfranchised group get arrested, convicted, and ultimately sentenced to prison. The title of a criminological classic says it all: [The rich get richer and the poor get prison.](#)

So once again, we may debate the issue of illegal immigration and how best and appropriately to respond from now until the burros come home. But crime, and fear of violence, should be left out of the discussion.

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Point of clarification: The status of being an illegal immigrant is not counted or included as a serious crime. The often-heard argument that those entering the country illegally are by definition criminals is off-point.