

Reference:

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When the proportion of residents of Canada's cities who are foreign born increases, crime generally decreases and when the proportion of foreign born goes down, crime goes up.

About 21% of Canada's total population in 2011 were foreign born. But the origins of those immigrants are changing. Prior to 1971, about three quarters were from Europe, but now more are from Asia than elsewhere in the world. This paper examines whether changes in the proportion of foreign-born people in Canada's cities are associated with changes in crime rates.

Theoretical arguments can be cited for expecting either that increased immigration would be associated with increases in crime (e.g., immigrants are often disadvantaged or face barriers in getting jobs; the increased heterogeneity associated with increased immigration may weaken informal social control) or decreases in crime (e.g., they may revitalize poor urban areas, or they may bring with them pro-social values that protect against criminal behavior).

This paper looks at crime rates in Canada's 32 urban areas (populations greater than 100,000) as a function of changes in immigration as measured by the Statistics Canada census at 8 points in time between 1976 and 2011. Immigrant populations are very unevenly distributed across Canadian cities. In Toronto, for example, the proportion of the population that was foreign born increased from 35% in 1976 to 45% in 2011. In contrast, in Saskatoon, between 1976 and 2001, the proportion of foreign born decreased from 14% to 7.5%.

Immigration was assessed by combining two highly related measures: the portion of the population that was born outside of Canada and the proportion with a mother tongue other than one of Canada's two official languages – English and French. Three different measures of crime were used – total (non-traffic) crime, property crime, and violent crime. In all cases, Statistics Canada crime incident data were estimated for each metropolitan area as the average rate for the three-year period surrounding each of the census years.

Fixed-effects linear regression models were used because the focus of the study was on within-city changes in crime and immigration. This approach controls for within-city differences that are stable over time. But in addition, various controls that do change over time within cities (e.g., percent home ownership, percent low income, labour force participation) were included in the model.

The effect of changes in the main index of immigration (% foreign born and % mother tongue other than English/French) was quite consistent. Analysis of changes within cities demonstrated that after controlling for demographic and socio-economic factors, increases in immigration were associated with declines in total, property, and violent crime. Other analyses demonstrated that the overall pattern held both for cities where immigration increased and for cities in which the proportion of immigrants decreased: increased immigration was associated with decreased crime. But in addition, decreasing immigration was associated with increases in crime. These results are generally consistent with the findings from studies

carried out elsewhere (see Criminological Highlights, 5(4)#6, 10(6)#7, 11(1)#4, 13(6)#7, 16(1)#2, 17(1)#3, 17(4)#1).

Conclusion: Canada's overall crime rate in its cities dropped by an average of 52% between 1981 and 2011. In this same 30-year period, the immigration index used in this study showed an increase of 250%. The results of this study suggest that these changes are related: when immigration increased in a city, crime went down. But similarly, when the proportion of immigrants declined, crime tended to increase. Immigrants, it would seem, should be held responsible for lowering Canada's crime rates.