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ABSTRACT

Research on immigration and crime has experienced unprecedented growth. Studies reveal that immigration is not associated with increased crime rates in many countries including the United States, Canada, and Australia. In other places such as Europe, the findings are more mixed. Yet, limitations in this body of work hamper our understanding. In particular, researchers rely too heavily on conceptual dichotomies, or mutually exclusive categorizations (e.g., foreign-born vs. native-born, documented vs. undocumented, first generation vs. second generation), which insufficiently capture nuance or layers of diversity inherent in immigrant populations. Dichotomies must be replaced with an analytical framework that incorporates multiple dimensions of immigration. Beyond foreign-born (vs. native-born) status, intersections of immigrants' legal statuses, assimilation levels, motives for migration, and settlement contexts create diverse groups whose backgrounds, experiences, and opportunities all have potential consequences for crime.

The United Nations' International Organization for Migration estimated that the number of international migrants reached 281 million in 2020; nearly 4 percent of the world's population lived outside their country of birth. This occurred despite widespread restrictions on travel and international

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movement resulting from COVID-19 (Natarajan, Moslamani, and Lopez 2022). A significant share of these migrants settled in wealthy countries that feature diverse social, economic, and political conditions. Despite their differences, these countries share something in common: public concern that immigrants threaten public safety.

Motived by that concern, the study of immigration and crime has witnessed unprecedented growth in recent decades. Drawing from a range of theoretical frameworks, using various sources of data, and applying different methodological approaches, scholars have explored how offending levels of immigrants compare with those of the native-born, and how immigration to an area affects its crime rates. This growth in research has resulted in meta-analyses of the literature (e.g., Ousey and Kubrin 2018) and volumes that take stock of current knowledge (e.g., Kubrin and Ousey 2023). Consequently, Morenoff and Astor's (2006, p. 36) observation that "criminologists know relatively little about how crime in the United States might be affected by recent waves of immigrants and their descendants" is no longer valid.

A growing number of studies outside the US suggests the same can be said about other countries. Collectively, this research reveals that immigration is not associated with increased crime rates in the United States, Canada, and Australia. In other places such as Europe, the findings are more mixed.

Yet, limitations in this work hamper understanding of the ways in which immigration and crime are related. Most notably, researchers rely heavily on conceptual dichotomies, or mutually exclusive categories, to frame their work. The most common dichotomy—motivated by public concern—contrasts whether individuals are foreign-born or native-born to determine whether immigrants are more crime prone. But as table 1 shows, other dichotomies, including whether immigrants are documented or undocumented, first or second generation, and assimilated or unassimilated, among others, are evident in nearly all studies focused on the immigration-crime relationship.

The problem is that dichotomies are analytically simplistic and don't take us very far. While research using these dichotomies has produced important findings, what is largely missing is nuance, layering, intersectionality, and conditional effects—all of which require a different approach. Dichotomies are blunt instruments that fall short in an operation that requires sharper and finer tuned conceptual and analytical tools. Meaningful advances in current knowledge require researchers to theorize about, and

TABLE 1
Immigration-Crime Scholarship: A Dichotomized Approach

Dimension	Dichotomy	Research Questions	Example
Foreign-born Status	Foreign-born vs. native-born	Do immigrants offend at a higher rate than their native-born counterparts? (micro) Are immigration and crime associated across place? (macro)	Ousey and Kubrin (2009)
Legal Status	Documented vs. undocumented	Do undocumented immigrants offend at higher or lower rates than documented immigrants?	Light, He, and Robey (2020)
Generational Status	First vs. second generation	Do second generation immigrants offend at higher or lower rates than first-generation immigrants?	Bersani, Loughran, and Piquero (2014)
Immigrant Settlement Context	Traditional vs. untraditional (or new) destinations	Does immigrant offending or the immigration-crime relationship differ based on whether the broader context of reception is a traditional or new destination?	Harris and Feldmeyer (2013)
Immigration Policy	Opportunity vs. exclusion	Does immigrant offending or the immigration-crime relationship differ based on whether broader policies and practices reflect immigrant opportunity or exclusion?	Ewing (2012)

empirically investigate, the multi-faceted and layered dimensions of immigration to identify what makes particular immigrant groups—and particular immigrants—conceptually distinct, and analytically informative, for studying crime. Our goal is to move toward that end, identifying new directions to enrich future research and enhance understanding.

In Section I, we review scholarship in the US and some other countries. We begin by summarizing, with a broad brush, generally accepted conclusions from research published since the turn of the century. We discuss findings from both macro- and micro-level studies. The former, which prioritize structural and social organizational mechanisms, examine the immigration-crime relationship across places while the latter, which prioritize individual-level traits and characteristics, assess the immigrant-offending relationship across people (Ousey and Kubrin 2009). We pay particular attention to how past research uses conceptual dichotomies focused on single dimensions of immigration, which limit what can be learned. This discussion is the foundation that launches subsequent sections of the essay, which highlight an approach that future scholarship can engage to more effectively capture the diversity and complexity of immigration and its plausible connections to crime.

In Section II, we sketch a framework that moves beyond dichotomies to embrace a more complex and intersectional conceptualization of immigration. It recognizes the many ways that foreign-born individuals differ from one another, and from the native-born, and considers how multiple dimensions of difference intersect, creating diverse layers of variation in backgrounds, credentials, experiences, opportunities, and geographic and temporal contexts, all of which may condition crime risks. This framework incorporates the broader concepts of social inequality and dynamic contextualism, which we consider foundational for studying social groups, and which are particularly relevant in assessing the immigration-crime nexus. Social inequality refers to the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses in society. Dynamic contextualism reflects the fact that individuals' experiences and behaviors develop in, and are contingent upon, the distinctive time (e.g., history) and space (e.g., geography) settings in which they are embedded.

In Section III, we apply this framework to a commonly used dichotomy—foreign-born vs. native-born—to demonstrate the value of a layered approach. Using the foreign-born vs. native-born dichotomy as a starting point, we iteratively elaborate the dichotomy by introducing other critical dimensions of immigration. We pay particular attention to differentiation

associated with, for example, immigrants' legal status and their settlement context. Along the way, we further develop our analysis by incorporating additional layers and concepts including motives for migration, assimilation, social inequality, and dynamic contextualism. While a full-blown reconceptualization is beyond the scope of this essay, we explore, in abbreviated ways, how this framework can inform new directions for research.

I. Research to Date: Approaches and Findings

Concerns about societal consequences of immigration to the US, including its impact on crime, date back to the nation's colonial-era beginnings (Mc Mahon 2024; see also Wickersham Commission 1931; Tonry 1997; Marie and Pinotti 2024). Even so, the research boom is more recent. Acute attention to the immigration-crime nexus has been a defining feature of criminology in the past quarter-century. While most studies examine the US experience, concerns about immigration and its relationship to crime are not uniquely American. Residents in many countries including Canada, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and in the European Union, worry that immigration produces unfavorable consequences for the economy and for crime (Fasani et al. 2019; Marie and Pinotti 2024). As a result, researchers outside the US are increasingly investigating how immigration and crime are associated. What have we learned from this body of scholarship? To answer this question, we review key findings from studies of places (macro-level) and people (micro-level).

A. Places

One fundamental research question involves geographic places. It asks: Do places with greater or increasing immigrant populations experience more crime? Social and economic theories suggest various reasons why immigration may alter the demographic, economic, and organizational structure of places in ways that increase crime. For example, social disorganization theory argues that immigration is associated with neighborhood residential instability, or the repeated turnover of residential populations, leading to increased crime rates in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants. Are these theories correct? In general, the evidence indicates that they are not.

Dozens of US-focused studies analyze the immigration-crime relationship across geographic places ranging in size from states to neighborhoods (Kubrin and Ousey 2023). The most common finding observed for more

than 60 percent of effect estimates in a recent meta-analysis is that immigration and crime are not significantly related across US places (Ousey and Kubrin 2018). Findings, of course, vary to some extent. A handful of studies report that places with higher concentrations of immigrants have higher levels of some types of crime (e.g., Shihadeh and Barranco 2010a, 2010b; Wadsworth 2010) but a much larger number find that places with higher levels of immigration have lower levels of crime (e.g., Kubrin and Ousey 2009; Light and Miller 2018; Adelman et al. 2021). Important qualifications warrant mention. First, studies employing longitudinal data and research methods—generally preferred because they better capture the inherent temporal dynamics, or "population change" aspects, of immigration—show that the immigration-crime association is, on average, significant and negative but of modest magnitude (Martinez, Stowell, and Lee 2010; Ousey and Kubrin 2014; Light and Miller 2018). Second, the null or negative association is also found in studies that focus specifically on undocumented immigrants (Green 2016; Light, Miller, and Kelly 2017; Light and Miller 2018). Third, the immigration-crime association across places is varied and contingent depending upon where immigrants settle (Ousey and Kubrin 2018); it is more strongly negative in places with long immigrant histories and in locations that are more receptive to immigrants than in more recently settled destinations and those that are less receptive (Kubrin and Ishizawa 2012; Lyons, Vélez, and Santoro 2013; Ramey 2013).

Does research outside the US yield a decidedly different picture? Kubrin and Alvarado (2025) analyze findings from dozens of studies in countries outside the US including Canada, Australia, and several European nations. Their answer to this question is both "yes" and "no."

Research in Canada, Australia, and some European nations finds that the immigration-crime relationship is quite similar to that observed in US-based studies, although caution is warranted in drawing conclusions because the body of research in these places is considerably smaller than in the U[illegible]ace-level studies in Canada, for example, covering units ranging from census tracts to provinces (e.g., Andresen and Ha 2020), report that immigration is either unrelated to crime (Zhang 2014; Jung 2020) or significantly negatively related (Andresen 2013; Jung 2020; Ha and Andresen 2022). There are some exceptions to these findings, but they arise when narrower dimensions of immigration, such as immigrant birthplace heterogeneity or new immigrant concentration, are analyzed (Jung 2020; Ha and Andresen 2022). Studies across regions in Australia find little material relationship between immigration and crime (Sinning and

Vorrell 2011). Neighborhood analyses in two major cities, for example, report that changes in immigration—both for the overall population and for immigrant groups defined by ethnicity, language, or religion—are either not associated with violent crime or are significantly negatively associated (Sydes 2017, 2022).

Some research in Western Europe echoes these findings. Several studies show that immigration and crime, including violent, property, and drug offenses, are unrelated in Italy (Bianchi, Buonanno, and Pinotti 2012; Fasani et al. 2019) and in England and Wales (Jaitman and Machin 2013; Stansfield 2016; Fasani et al. 2019). Studies in France (Aoki and Todo 2009) and Belgium (Bircan and Hooghe 2011) also find little evidence of a significant relationship between immigration and crime across geographic places once economic factors are controlled. Boateng, Pryce, and Chenane's (2021) analysis of more than 20 European countries reports that immigration has little effect on violence. Marie and Pinotti's (2024) analysis across 55 countries for 1990–2019 also finds no evidence that immigration is significantly related to homicide. Finally, although research in other countries or regions is relatively scarce, Ajzenman, Dominguez, and Undurraga (2023) report that immigration was not significantly related to robbery, larceny, burglary, theft, assault, vehicle theft, or homicide in Chile, even though the country's immigrant population more than tripled in less than a decade (2010–2017).

A much smaller body of scholarship outside the US offers different results. Research in the United Kingdom finds that immigration does not affect violent crime, but its relationship with property crime varies from weakly positive to weakly negative depending on the timing of the immigration wave (e.g., asylum seekers in the late 1990s and early 2000s compared with the post-2004 EU expansion; Bell, Fasani, and Machin 2013). Other studies in Europe report a significant positive relationship between immigration and crime. Solivetti's (2018) analysis of 103 Italian provinces over four periods finds that increases in immigration were associated with higher violent and property crime levels. Alonso-Borrego, Garoupa, and Vazquez (2012) find that a 1999–2009 wave of immigration in Spain was associated with increases in four crime measures. Studies of immigration effects in Germany also find a significant positive association with crime (Chapin 1997; Piopiunik and Ruhose 2017). Finally, a study using EUROSTAT data for 38 European countries shows that the stock of international migrants is positively associated with sexual violence and theft, but not homicide (Cohn, Coccia, and Kakar 2021).

Clearly, and in contrast with overall patterns in the US, Canada, and Australia, studies in Europe offer more diverse findings. This may be due to differences in immigration policies, or due to differences in the characteristics of immigrants settling in various places (Tonry 1997; Kubrin and Alvarado 2025). Whatever the reason, with limited exceptions, research finds that immigration is not a primary driver of increased crime rates.

B. People

A complementary body of work investigates an individual-level question: Do immigrants commit crimes at higher (or lower) levels than native-born citizens or non-immigrants? This question was at the heart of one of the earliest US-based studies on this topic, reported by the Wickersham Commission (1931); it concluded that involvement in crime is lower among immigrants than among the native-born.

Recent American research reaches the same conclusion. Immigrants are less involved than the native-born in overall offending (Butcher and Piehl 1998; McCann, Zhang, and Boateng 2022), violent offending (Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2011; Jiang and Peterson 2012; Vaughn and Salas-Wright 2018), property offending (Vaughn et al. 2014; Vaughn and Salas-Wright 2018), drinking and driving (Maldonado-Molina et al. 2011), and more minor infractions such as school violations (Peguero 2011; Peguero and Jiang 2014). There is also evidence that arrest rates—both self-reported and officially documented—are lower for foreign-born individuals (Bersani and DiPietro 2016; Light, He, and Robey 2020; Orrick, Guerra, and Piquero 2021), although evidence concerning undocumented immigrants is more mixed (Bersani et al. 2018; Light, He, and Robey 2020). Findings from longitudinal studies also suggest that foreign-born individuals are less likely than native-born people to exhibit patterns of high-rate persistent offending and are more likely to desist from offending during the transition to early adulthood (Bersani, Loughran, and Piquero 2014). Research on criminal victimization, both violent and property, also reports lower levels for the foreign than the native-born (Peguero 2009, 2013; Xie and Baumer 2021). Lastly, institutionalization rates are lower among immigrants than the native-born (Butcher and Piehl 2008), for both authorized and unauthorized immigrants (Landgrave and Nowrasteh 2018; Orrick, Guerra, and Piquero 2021). Abramitzky et al. (2023) find that immigrants have had lower incarceration rates than the native-born for the past 150 years.

Some somewhat puzzling patterns, however, emerge across immigrant generations. Criminal involvement is often higher for US-born children (second generation immigrants) and grandchildren (third and higher generations) than for the first generation (Taft 1933; Morenoff and Astor 2006; Jiang and Peterson 2012). These differences appear in studies of offending (DiPietro and McGloin 2012; Vaughn et al. 2014; McCann, Zhang, and Boateng 2022) and victimization (Peguero 2008, 2009).

Studies in other countries also investigate whether immigrants are more likely to offend than native-born individuals, and once again, findings are more mixed than in US studies. Research on two cohorts of adolescents in Canada reports that foreign-born individuals are less likely to be involved in crime than native-born individuals (Dinovitzer et al. 2009), while research on Swedish youths reports that offending trends are declining more for first but not second-generation immigrants compared to native-born Swedish youth (Vasiljevic et al. 2020). Studies in Italy (Melossi et al. 2009) and England and Wales (Papadopoulous 2010) report no differences in offending between immigrants and the native-born whereas Adamson (2020) finds that immigrants are overrepresented in Swedish crime data, with the overrepresentation decreasing over time among first-generation immigrants but increasing for the second generation. Finally, Killias (2009) finds divergent patterns in Switzerland: immigrant youth were more likely to commit violent delinquency than native Swiss youth, but less involved in shoplifting and selling drugs.

To summarize, evidence from the US suggests lower offending among immigrants relative to the native-born. The evidence is strongest for first-generation immigrants, with second and later generations exhibiting higher levels of involvement. Findings from other countries are more diverse, with some reporting lower immigrant offending, others reporting no significant differences, and still others indicating higher immigrant involvement in at least some types of crime.

II. Future Research: Moving Beyond Binaries

It is clear from this summary that research is largely fueled by basic questions about how immigration and crime are related. It is also clear that dichotomies dominate how researchers analytically frame their studies. We propose a layered framework that seeks to move beyond binaries.

Our approach builds on the insights, findings, and take-aways that Tonry (1997) and colleagues advanced in the Crime and Justice volume

Ethnicity, Crime and Immigration, which emphasizes moving beyond a "simplistic" (p. 22) treatment of the immigration-crime link. Our approach is also motivated by Hawkins' (1999, p. 202) observation that "within-group comparisons have received much less scholarly and public attention" in analyses of race, ethnicity, and violence. Lastly, our approach is inspired by Sampson and Bean's (2006) theoretical reformulation of the culture/structure debate, which calls for new directions in the study of race, ethnicity, and crime. We illustrate our approach using as a starting point a common dichotomy among researchers: foreign-born vs. native-born. Our aim is to show how a layered approach generates new insights and offers a more comprehensive analysis of the immigration-crime relationship, providing an agenda for scholars moving forward. The backdrop to our analysis identifies two broad concepts essential to studying the immigration-crime nexus: social inequality and dynamic contextualism.

A. Social Inequality

Social inequality, characterized by the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses in society, is foundational for the study of social groups and their outcomes, and is particularly relevant for assessing the immigration-crime nexus. Immigrants, as individuals and as groups (e.g., the undocumented, immigrants from different racial and ethnic backgrounds) may experience inequality in everything from resources to networks to capital to access and opportunities, including the ability to live in a safe neighborhood, secure housing, access health care, find jobs, get educated, participate civically, and more. These forms of inequality can affect criminal offending, consistent with theoretical arguments.

For example, because immigrants, like members of racial and ethnic minorities, are more likely than native-born whites to reside in areas where "structural conditions have altered the status systems away from idealized middle-class norms and toward a culture of opposition . . . cultural theories imply that immigrant communities should exhibit high rates of crime" (Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld 2001, p. 562; see also Mears 2002, p. 284; Reid et al. 2005, p. 760). Many immigrant communities are segregated from mainstream society and marked by poverty, joblessness, and other disadvantages (Martinez and Lee 2000; Vélez 2009; MacDonald and Saunders 2012, p. 126) reflecting not "communities of choice" but rather "ghettos of last resort" (Glaser, Parker, and Li 2003, p. 526). As immigrants navigate these environments, they may adopt the local "street code" that

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encourages violence as a strategy for problem-solving (Tonry 1997, pp. 21–22; Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003). Moreover, as some immigrants face language barriers and experience discrimination in housing and employment markets, they are denied access to legitimate means to attain culturally prescribed goals of wealth, and may turn to crime as an alternative strategy (Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld 2001, p. 561; Mears 2002, p. 284; Reid et al. 2005, p. 759).

Inequality also drives formal neighborhood social control efforts, which determine, in part, crime and arrest rates, consistent with racial threat theory. Racial threat theory maintains that as minority populations grow larger or reach a tipping point, whites are more likely to view minorities as an economic, political, and criminal threat, leading them to pressure police and other criminal justice officials to engage in efforts to manage this threat (Liska 1992; see also Jacobs and Helms 1999; Eitle, D'Alessio, and Stolzenberg 2002; Parker, Stults, and Rice 2005). Racial threat theory has its basis in conflict theory, specifically the idea that "the greater the number of acts or people threatening to the interests of the powerful, the greater the level of deviance and crime control" (Liska 1992, p. 18). Conflict theory is frequently invoked to explain why state elites use crime-control bureaucracies, such as the police, to manage and contain "dangerous classes," who are viewed as posing a threat to the existing order (Kane 2003, p. 268). The "dangerous class" includes members of racial and ethnic minority groups who are stereotyped as economic liabilities and criminal offenders (Kane 2003, p. 269). Racial threat theory argues that whites perceive racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants included, as criminal threats (Liska, Lawrence, and Benson 1981), increasing their fear of crime whenever such (culturally dissimilar) groups are perceived as more prevalent (Chiricos, Hogan, and Gertz 1997; Feldmeyer et al. 2015). This threat perception motivates crime control efforts as individuals in power translate their perceptions into policy (Turk 1969; Quinney 1970; Chamlin 1989, p. 355).

B. Dynamic Contextualism

The concept of dynamic contextualism also constitutes an integral part of our conceptual backdrop. Sampson (1993) first introduced the concept in an essay designed to guide criminological inquiry in light of two key developments: rediscovery of the importance of communities and macrosocial forces in understanding crime, and research on longitudinal patterns of individual criminal offending. After reviewing research in these areas,

Sampson concludes that what is missing is an understanding of how events develop in time and space in distinctive or contingent ways. Arguing that most explanations of crime are "generalizing, not temporal, in their logic" (p. 430) and motivated by Abbott's (1992, p. 5) observation that "no social fact makes any sense abstracted from its context in social (and often geographic) space and social time," Sampson (1993) calls on researchers to "join time and place in theoretical unity" (p. 427).

Sampson (1993) proposes dynamic contextualism to link time and place under the umbrella of a life-course perspective. The life course, defined as pathways through the age-differentiated life span (p. 432), includes age-graded transitions (e.g., getting a job, getting married) and longer-term trajectories (e.g., parenthood, work-life balance), both of which are embedded in social institutions and subject to historical change. In this way, the life-course perspective rejects the assumption that developmental processes are universally applicable; rather, life is dynamic, and processes operate differently in different cultures and historical time periods (p. 432). While our focus is not life-course research, the dynamic contextualism approach is useful because its emphasis on layering, linkages, and contingencies is consistent with what we advance here.

In the following section, through an extended illustration we explore nuances that push immigration-crime research beyond conceptual dichotomies.

III. Researching Immigration and Crime: A Multi-Dimensional, Layered Approach

Most prior studies, at both individual- and macro-levels, use the foreign-born vs. native-born conceptual dichotomy to explore links between immigration and crime. Some find small differences in offending using this dichotomous classification. Yet almost none identify the specific traits or social dimensions that make immigrants more (or less) crime-prone than the native-born. Both foreign-born and native-born populations—in the US and elsewhere—are heterogenous, meaning this dichotomy necessarily lumps together immigrants who vary dramatically along demographic, economic, and social dimensions, and likely on criminal propensity as well. Indeed, within-immigrant (or within native-born) variation is likely greater than variation between immigrants and their native-born peers. Hence, the foreign-born vs. native-born dichotomy is simply too broad to offer significant conceptual and analytical value. Moving forward, researchers'

efforts are better spent identifying and measuring critical dimensions of difference among immigrants.

In this spirit, we provide an extended illustration that attempts to do just that. We use the foreign-born vs. native-born dichotomy as a starting point and iteratively introduce dimensions of immigration to elaborate the dichotomy, paying particular attention to sources of differentiation associated with immigrant legal status and context of reception that are outlined in table 1. Along the way, we incorporate additional layers and concepts including motive for migration, assimilation, social inequality, and dynamic contextualism.

A. Legal Status

Moving beyond a simple comparison of the foreign-born and native-born, what differences are potentially consequential and deserve exploration? Research points to legal status as a meaningful dimension of differentiation among immigrants, one that may be associated with mechanisms that could affect crime propensity. Whether because of their personal characteristics or because their legal status is linked to social, economic, and legal disadvantages, undocumented immigrants are commonly perceived as more likely to offend than documented immigrants or native-born citizens. Likewise, places with concentrations of undocumented immigrants are expected to have higher crime rates, in part because these communities are thought to experience greater difficulty creating social ties, networks, and collective efficacy, which help constrain crime rates.

1. *Research Findings to Date.* Focusing on legal status is a step in the right direction because undocumented and documented immigrants differ, their difference is defined in clear legal terms, and this distinction has real world consequences. For example, it determines access to some pathways of legitimate opportunity (e.g., legal employment, social support programs) and is likely to create between-immigrant inequities on pathways to social integration and assimilation by shaping the ability to openly participate in formal institutions (e.g., education, civic organizations). Legal status is a dimension that meaningfully differentiates among immigrants, hinting at ways that inequalities in economic opportunities, resources, and crime are created.

What does research reveal about the association between immigrant legal status and crime? Evidence is scarce, primarily due to limitations in data availability. Navigating around such limitations, researchers have estimated the effects of unauthorized immigration on crime. Michael Light

and colleagues (Light, Miller, and Kelly 2017; Light and Miller 2018), for example, paired estimates of unauthorized immigrants from the Center for Migration Studies and the Pew Research Center with official crime data, as well as data on drug- and alcohol-related fatalities. Their analyses, covering 50 US states and Washington, D.C., from 1990 through 2014, find that the relationship between undocumented immigration and violent crime is either null, or significant and negative (Light and Miller 2018), and that the relationship between undocumented immigration and drug or DUI arrests and drug-related fatalities also is negative. Green's (2016) cross-sectional, state-level analysis also finds undocumented immigration is not associated with violent crime, but reports a weak positive association for drug sales and possession.

Findings from micro-level studies in the US suggest that legal status may differentiate immigrants from each other as well as from the native-born. Using data on violent, property, and drug crime arrests from the Texas Department of Public Safety, Light, He, and Robey (2020) find that offending levels are lower for undocumented immigrants than for documented immigrants or the native-born. Bersani et al's (2018) study of juvenile offending in California offers a more complex picture. While undocumented immigrants are found to have lower levels of self-reported offending compared to documented immigrants or native-born youth and are more likely to decrease their offending after a first arrest, they find undocumented immigrants are more likely to be rearrested, perhaps reflecting differing levels of formal social control.

Data challenges also exist outside the US but some evidence on crime among undocumented immigrants is available. In a study in the Netherlands, Engbersen and van der Leun (2001) find that a majority of the undocumented immigrants interviewed refrained from criminal activity. Their analysis of police files shows that most are not arrested for criminal activities but rather because of illegal labor, illegal residence, and fare dodging. They also report that unauthorized immigrants are less involved in crime, except for drug-related offenses, than a comparable group of legal residents. In Canada, Yeager (2002, p. 178) finds that among immigrants who entered the country with a foreign criminal history (under the provisions of the Canadian Immigration Act), 97.5 percent were not re-arrested over a three-and-a-half-year period, indicating relatively low recidivism. Finally, research in Italy suggests that while undocumented immigrants are overrepresented in official crime statistics relative to both documented immigrants and native-born citizens (Fasani et al. 2019),

efforts to untangle whether these differences reflect variations in crime propensity or are a result of differences in legal status suggest the latter. Italy granted amnesty to undocumented immigrants in the 1990s and 2000s. Using quasi-experimental methods, researchers show that crime significantly declines among those granted amnesty while remaining elevated among those not granted amnesty (Fasani 2018; Fasani et al. 2019).

In sum, due in part to data limitations, research examining the undocumented immigration-crime relationship is in its infancy. Even so, studies yield interesting findings—evidence of some differences in offending or arrests among undocumented immigrants, documented immigrants, and native-born individuals. Without question, then, this work is a useful elaboration of the simple conceptual dichotomy that differentiates immigrants and non-immigrants.

2. *Beyond the Dichotomy.* Yet, there are also limitations associated with this body of work. Research largely substitutes one conceptual dichotomy for another—undocumented vs. documented replaces immigrant vs. native-born—neglecting nuances on each side of the dichotomy. As Caraballo (2024, p. 2) points out, the common categorization of immigrants into documented (legal) and undocumented (illegal) results in identically classifying individuals who, in reality, occupy diverse, hierarchically differentiated positions defined by legal immigration status. For example, foreign nationals who seek permanent or extended residency in the US through legitimate immigration legal channels are classified as "documented," while all individuals who circumvent such legal channels, or who overstay temporary resident visas, are classified as "undocumented." The reality, of course, is more complex. Some documented immigrants gain citizenship through a process of naturalization, which confers full citizenship rights. Others, designated as "lawful permanent residents" (or "green card holders"), are allowed to relocate permanently in the US, become employed, receive financial assistance for college, and enlist in the military, even without the full rights afforded to citizens. A third classification, "refugees," are granted special permission to reside in the country because they are fleeing persecution in their home country. Refugees must apply for lawful permanent resident status after one year and typically can legally work or receive some government benefits. Other foreign nationals may be granted temporary authorization to stay in the US, usually for purposes of work, education, or travel. Each group is afforded some level of resources unavailable to undocumented individuals, yet there are important legal variations between them. This begs the question: Do status variations

among documented immigrants shape social and economic experiences in ways that ultimately affect risks of offending? Although an intriguing question, it is obscured by the conceptual dichotomy that classifies all documented (i.e., authorized/legal) immigrants the same way.

While documented immigrants—regardless of category—are more advantaged relative to undocumented immigrants, the contrast framed by the documented/undocumented dichotomy ignores that advantages and disadvantages vary among undocumented immigrants as well. While the dichotomy places all undocumented immigrants in the same group, a key source of differentiation is the routes by which individuals became unauthorized. In the US, for example, a common assumption is that unauthorized immigrants are those who enter the country illegally, managing to avoid detection at immigration checkpoints. Yet the reality is different. Some undocumented immigrants gain entry based on falsified or fraudulent documents. Others enter the country legally via a visa granting temporary authorization, often for employment or educational purposes, and overstay the terms of their authorization (Straut-Eppsteiner 2021; Caraballo 2024). In recent years, visa overstayers outnumber those who cross the border illegally (Warren 2019). Do these differing "types" of undocumented immigrants experience similar or different access to resources and opportunities, and if so, how might that matter for crime? One argument is that in comparison to individuals who cross the border illegally, foreign nationals who overstay their visas are better positioned to be socially and economically successful given personal characteristics (i.e., high educational levels and socio-economic status) associated with being granted a visa in the first place. For these individuals, their motive for migration is likely quite different (i.e., employment in a high-skilled labor position).

Beyond this example, research recognizes that motive for migration differentiates immigrants from one another, potentially affecting their criminal propensity—offering another layer to the analysis beyond legal status differentiation. The reasons immigrants migrate powerfully shape criminality and other indicators of successful adaptation (Tonry 1997, p. 24). Migration motive varies along several dimensions, a key one being socioeconomic (Bauer, Lofstrom, and Zimmermann 2000; Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld 2001, p. 573). Economic theory on the international transferability of human capital is instructive (Chiswick (1978, 1986).[1] Economic

[1] See Duleep and Regets (1997) for a formal model and Borjas (1994) for an overview on the earnings assimilation of immigrants.

theory predicts that immigrants from countries similar to the host country in terms of economic development, schooling, language, and culture are better able to assimilate into the labor market due to the rapid transferability of the human capital they accumulated in their home country. The theory predicts these individuals are less likely to criminally offend.

Migrants such as asylum seekers and refugees do not migrate for economic reasons but rather due to the political situation in their home country. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that they do not fully plan migration and may not have invested in the labor market skills needed in the receiving nation. Asylum seekers and refugees are thus likely to face greater earnings disadvantages compared to other immigrants, which may affect their crime propensity (Brauer et al. 2000).

Evidence supports the argument that refugees are disadvantaged and experience worse labor market outcomes than both natives and other immigrants with similar characteristics (Fasani, Frattini, and Minale 2017). Does this also mean that refugees or asylum seekers offend at higher levels, and that their presence is associated with increased crime rates? Although sparse, research reports mixed findings. Studies in the UK (Bell, Fasani, and Machin 2013), Germany (Gehrsitz and Ungerer 2017; Dehos 2021; Lange and Sommerfield 2024), Turkey (Akbulut-Yuksei et al. 2024), and the Greek Islands (Megalokonomou and Vasilakis 2023) find that increases in refugees are associated with higher rates of some violent and property crimes. Other studies in Turkey (Kayaoglu 2022; Kirdar, Cruz, and Türküm 2022) and in 15 EU countries over the 1995–2016 period (Fasani et al. 2019) find that increased concentrations of refugees do not elevate crime rates. In the US, two county-level studies also find no evidence of a relationship (Amuedo-Dorantes, Bansak, and Pozo 2021; Masterson and Yasenov 2021). More research is needed to better understand whether and how this form of diversity, both across immigrant groups as well as within them, is related to crime in different countries and in different time periods. Still, this emerging body of work highlights the kind of scholarship needed moving forward.

Returning to an earlier point, foreign nationals who overstay visas are potentially better integrated into the fabric of society because their period of authorization may have afforded them opportunities to develop social ties and social capital. Experiencing a period of legal legitimacy could translate into more in-country social networks, and greater exposure to language development opportunities and other cultural resources. Although losing legal status does reduce options, access to some resources

remain intact even after visa expiration. Thus, although undocumented immigrants experience greater disadvantages in comparison to documented immigrants, they also differ in disadvantage levels relative to one another. These social inequalities likely correlate with crime propensity, especially because research reveals immigrant victimization is linked to social inequality. Menjivar and Salcido (2002, p. 898), for example, describe how immigrant-specific factors such as language ability, legal status, and family and community support, exacerbate the already vulnerable position—as dictated by class, gender, and race—of immigrant women in domestic violence situations.

At the same time, immigration is an inherently dynamic process and statuses are in flux and fluid. As such, status transition itself is an important dimension, one potentially related to crime. This is obscured by a simple documented vs. undocumented dichotomy. When foreign-born individuals on a visa overstay their terms, for example, their legal status shifts from authorized to unauthorized. What are the consequences for their day-to-day lives? Does it materially shift their circumstances in ways that increase offending?

There is some evidence that such a shift happens. In Italy, some formerly unauthorized immigrants have been granted legal amnesty during designated periods. Quasi-experimental research assessing the impact of amnesty finds that immigrants who became legalized saw a reduction (from 1.1 percent to 0.6 percent) in the probability of offending (Pinotti 2017; Fasani et al. 2019). Other research reports that regions in Italy with a larger share of immigrants obtaining legal amnesty saw a greater decrease in crime (Fasani 2018). Whether effects also occur in the reverse direction—with loss of legal status increasing crime risk—is unknown.

B. Context of Reception

Another dimension highlighted in research is the context of reception that immigrants face in the locations where they settle. The context of reception defines the social, political, and economic conditions of geographic places, determining whether they are relatively open and supportive of immigrant settlement or closed and less supportive. Places have unique immigration histories, provide varying systems of social and cultural support, offer diverse labor market opportunities, and have different policies and practices, all of which may affect offending levels and crime rates. Immigrants settling into areas where they closely match the skill requirements of available jobs and where employers are willing to hire them experience

a better economic context of reception than one where they are poorly matched to available jobs or where employers are unwilling or unable to hire them. Likewise, places where the dominant political stance is anti-immigrant, and the foreign-born are excluded from opportunities and support systems, or are vulnerable to harsh, restrictive, and exclusionary policies and practices, are worse contexts of reception than those where politics, policies, and practices are supportive and welcoming. At the same time, an immigrant's personal characteristics, legal status, and motive for migration powerfully shape their ability to select, and settle in, specific locations or preferred contexts of reception.

1. *Research Findings to Date.* The idea that contexts of reception vary with consequences for crime is an emerging area of interest (Lyons, Vélez, and Santoro 2013; Painter-Davis 2016; Gostjev and Nielsen 2017). To date scholarship relies heavily on defining the context of reception in dichotomous terms: traditional immigrant destinations vs. nontraditional or new immigrant destinations. While measured differently across studies, the former is conceptualized as places with significant immigrant population bases over multiple decades while the latter is conceptualized as places where, historically, the immigrant population base has been low but is growing (perhaps rapidly). Research in the US finds that destination context moderates the immigration-crime relationship (Kubrin and Ishizawa 2012; Ramey 2013; Shihadeh and Barranco 2013). The relationship is significant and negative in traditional destinations, and either null or significant and positive in non-traditional destinations. Research outside the US reports similar findings (Bell, Fasani, and Machin 2013). Context of reception is thus an additional dimension that warrants analysis, including how it intersects with, or is layered on, other dimensions such as immigrant legal status.

2. *Beyond the Dichotomy.* Scholarship should move beyond the traditional vs. non-traditional destination dichotomy and specify the factors that meaningfully differentiate contexts of reception and influence the relationship between critical dimensions of immigration and crime. Some researchers adopt this approach in a limited way. Lyons, Vélez, and Santoro (2013), for example, eschew the traditional vs. non-traditional dichotomy by arguing that places differ in "immigrant political incorporation," evidenced by variations in political opportunities for immigrants and pro-immigrant legislation and policy. They find that in neighborhoods embedded in cities with a political climate more favorable to immigrants, immigration is more likely to produce a crime suppressing effect.

Building upon this finding, future research might consider how contexts of reception differentially affect immigrants with unique personal traits, legal statuses, and motives for migration. We know little, for instance, about which immigrants are resilient to unfavorable contexts of reception, and why. Potential explanations are that they share the same race or ethnicity as the area's dominant population, have high levels of education and economic capital, or are embedded in pre-existing networks or other forms of social capital, including "weak ties." We also know little about whether context of reception effects operate similarly among individuals with different legal statuses (e.g., lawful permanent resident, guest-worker, visa overstayer) or motives for migration (e.g., work visa, asylum seeker). These unknowns raise important questions. In a pro-immigrant locale, why do some immigrants still offend? In a non-supportive locale, why are most immigrants able to avoid offending?

Like legal status, contexts of reception are fluid, shifting over time. In addition to being influenced by crime trends, moral panics about (rising) crime rates, and changing crime policies, contexts of reception shift in response to major historical events (e.g., the COVID-19 Pandemic), economic cycles (e.g., the 2008 Financial Crisis), political realignments (e.g., from the Biden to Trump administrations), and changing immigration policies and practices (e.g., the devolution of immigration enforcement). Identifying these temporal changes and determining their individual and collective effects on the immigration-crime relationship requires an approach rooted in dynamic contextualism (see Widdowson et al. 2024).

The dynamic nature of immigration is perhaps most evident when integration and assimilation are considered. Assimilation reflects "the social processes that bring ethnic minorities together into the mainstream American life" (Alba and Nee 1997, p. 828). It refers to how immigrants adjust to their new environment, adopt native lifestyles, language, customs and norms, and slowly shed features of their country of origin. The classic assimilation model proposes that "over time, and particularly across generations, immigrant groups would slowly gain economic parity and cultural similarity with, and come to resemble, the native majority" (Wildsmith 2004, p. 90). Here, assimilation is assumed to be natural, inevitable, and unavoidable—an assumption that has been challenged (Portes and Zhou 1993).

Theory aside, as discussed earlier, research in the US finds that assimilated immigrants have higher rates of criminal involvement than unassimilated immigrants (Zhou and Bankston 2006, p. 124; Alvarez-Rivera,

Nobles, and Lersch 2014; Bersani, Loughran, and Piquero 2014). Studies also find that the individual-level link between immigrants and offending wanes across generations with the children of immigrants born in the US offending at higher levels than their parents. Finally, for both immigrants and their children, the risk of incarceration increases with their length of residence in the US (Rumbaut and Ewing 2007, p. 11). Once again, research almost always adopts a dichotomous approach, where immigrants are defined as either "assimilated" or "unassimilated," even though assimilation is a fluid, dynamic process better conceptualized along a continuum. The same is true for generational status.

These findings reflect an "assimilation paradox" (Rumbaut and Ewing 2007, p. 2) in which the "crime problem" reflects "not the foreign born but their children" (Tonry 1997, p. 20). Why is this the case? As traditionally theorized, at least in the US, the process of assimilation involves acquisition by immigrants (and their children) of English-language proficiency, higher education levels, valuable new job skills, and other attributes that ease entry into US society and improve chances of economic success thereby reducing—not increasing—criminal behavior. Attempting to explain these counter-intuitive findings, scholars propose alternative models of assimilation that emphasize more troubling aspects of American culture into which immigrants may assimilate: "The children and grandchildren of many immigrants—as well as many immigrants themselves the longer they live in the United States—become subject to economic and social forces, such as higher rates of family disintegration and drug and alcohol addiction, that increase the likelihood of criminal behavior" (Rumbaut and Ewing 2007, p. 2). The children of immigrants thus offend more than their parents because they assimilate into, for instance, "deviant subcultural values of youth gangs" (Tonry 1997, pp. 21–22; see also Le and Stockdale 2008; DiPietro and McGloin 2012).

At the same time, assimilation is thought to present a set of challenges that increase criminal propensity: "Born or raised in the United States, they [children of immigrants] inherit their immigrant parents' customs and circumstances but come of age with a distinctively American outlook and frame of reference and face the often-daunting task of fitting into the American mainstream while meeting their parents' expectations, learning the new language, doing well in school, and finding decent jobs" (Rumbaut et al. 2006, p. 65; see also Samaniego and Gonzalez 1999; Foner and Dreby 2011). Illustrating this, a case study of youth living in a Vietnamese enclave in New Orleans finds that children experience two opposing sets

of influences: "On the one hand, the ethnic community was tightly knit and encouraged behaviors such as respect for elders, diligence in work, and striving for upward social mobility into mainstream American society. The local American community, on the other hand, was socially marginalized and economically impoverished, and young people in it reacted to structural disadvantages by erecting oppositional subcultures to reject normative means to social mobility" (Zhou and Bankston 2006, p. 119).

What are the implications of this? The simple dichotomization of assimilation and generational status is at odds with increasingly nuanced theory, which identifies variable routes and types (e.g., straight-line, segmented, downward) of immigrant assimilation. Beyond this, we can consider how adopting a nuanced, layered approach might complicate what the current approach teaches us about how assimilation and offending are related. It encourages scholars to identify factors, conditions, or contingencies that alter paths of assimilation, and determine how they relate to offending.

Consider, for example, variations in contexts of reception related to family and community culture, where some—even disadvantaged—communities are able to buffer immigrant youth from problematic street codes that encourage downward assimilation. Zhou and Bankston (2006) find that the family and community helped adjudicate competing forces associated with assimilation: "Although Vietnamese young people lived in a socially marginal local environment they were shielded from the negative influences of that environment by being tightly bound up in a system of ethnic social relations providing both control and direction" (pp. 119–20). They conclude (p. 136), "The more that families function to pull young people into the ethnic community, and the more the ethnic community guides them toward normative orientations consistent with those of the larger society, the less those young people are drawn toward the alternative social circles of local youth."

In sum, recognizing the complexity of assimilation, within-immigrant heterogeneity, and variability in contexts of reception, we hypothesize that assimilation and offending do not go hand-and-hand for all types of immigrants or in all places and times. A key task moving forward, then, is to identify which immigrants, in which places or times, are more or less likely to offend as they assimilate. Stated alternatively, we ask: What amplifies the assimilation-offending relationship? What dampens it?

Immigrants are varied and unequal, in part due to differences linked to legal status, motive for migration, assimilation, and other personal

characteristics that are critical but not discussed at length here (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, sex). They are embedded in differently advantaged and time-varying contexts of reception. Over-reliance on dichotomies insufficiently captures this complexity. This complexity, however, shapes immigrants' realities, including their identities, experiences, understandings, abilities, opportunities, and so much more, with consequences for offending levels and crime rates.

IV. Conclusion

In this essay we revisit what is known about immigration and crime from decades of scholarship around the globe. Our goal is not only to summarize key findings and take-aways but to identify limitations in this body of work—most notably, an over-reliance on dichotomies—that constrict our thinking and fail to capture immigration's many complexities. Inspired by calls for theoretical reformulation (Sampson and Bean 2006) and greater emphasis on within-group comparisons (Hawkins 1999) in the study of race, ethnicity, and crime, including how immigration and crime are related specifically (Tonry 1997), we offered a preliminary framework that considers how various intersections create diverse groups of immigrants with different backgrounds, experiences, and opportunities, all with consequences for crime. The good news is that significant research advances have been made, generating a baseline of findings from which to draw and build upon. And the question of immigration and crime remains as salient as ever. But the increasing diversification of society and the inherently dynamic nature of immigration demand that scholars reexamine the immigration-crime link. Through an extended illustration we did just that, identifying new directions for research.

One essay cannot do justice to the complexity of the challenge, so we were necessarily selective in our points of emphasis. For example, it was beyond our scope to identify the many theoretical perspectives on the immigration-crime link (see Kubrin and Ousey 2023, chap. 2), engage in a detailed review of the literature (chap. 4), or offer concrete steps on how researchers might go about empirically examining various aspects of this framework given data limitations (chap. 3). At the same time, while the concepts of social inequality and dynamic contextualism provide a useful analytical backdrop, additional concepts warrant attention moving forward: capitalism, democracy, the American Dream, culture, and globalization. It is not difficult to see how these concepts might matter in relation

to the observations and questions raised in our illustration. It is also not difficult to see how associated historical contingencies might also matter. Whether it is national immigration policy and practice linked to different political regimes, historical crises like war and economic depression, or large-scale crime booms and busts (LaFree 1999), these realities and forces represent additional layers worthy of consideration. These considerations await future research.

Awaiting future research, too, is consideration of barriers involved in researching the immigration-crime nexus. Take, for example, challenges associated with crime and victimization data. Official crime data do not provide sufficient information to address many broader questions. They do not capture an individual's immigration status, limiting researchers' ability to ascertain the true distribution of offenders and victims who are immigrants, at least on a national scale. Some countries use nationality identifiers in their crime and justice system data, but many do not. The US does not. This wasn't always the case. Nationality data were once collected in the US but that was nearly a century ago: "Through the 1930s, US and Canadian data often recorded nationality, but as 'crime and the foreign born' declined as a controversial political issue after large-scale immigration stopped in the mid-1920s, use of nationality identifiers stopped" (Tonry 1997, pp. 9–10). Official data collected by jurisdictions today thus virtually ignore differences by immigrant status (Reid et al. 2005, p. 763), so researchers are unable to determine whether either perpetrators or victims of crime are immigrants (Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld 2001, p. 573) let alone analyze other dimensions of differentiation, including legal status.

The inability to differentiate among legal statuses is a problem not only in official crime data but in all national data sets that researchers employ. Undocumented residents do, in fact, respond to government surveys such as the decennial Census and the Current Population Survey, but these surveys do not ask the foreign-born questions about their legal status, including whether they are documented. Thus, "... we lack reliable and accurate data about inflows and outflows of immigrants as a whole, much less along 'legal' and 'illegal' dimensions" (Mears 2002, p. 285).

At the same time, the problem of underreporting is acute among immigrants (Kubrin 2013; Trager and Kubrin 2014). Horowitz (2001, p. 5) claims that "Much of the crime committed by immigrants, very often against other immigrants of the same nationality, is going underreported" and suggests this occurs for a greater proportion of crimes by the foreign-born than the native-born. Domestic violence, sexual assault, and gang violence are

most commonly underreported (Davis and Erez 1998, p. 2). Reasons for underreporting are wide and varied. One study, which reports findings from a survey and selected site visits undertaken to identify barriers immigrant groups encounter in the criminal justice system, lists several reasons: fear of becoming involved with authorities, embarrassment to families, language difficulties, cultural differences in conceptions of justice, and lack of knowledge of the criminal justice system (Davis and Erez 1998). Whatever the reasons, one thing is known for sure: underreporting among immigrants is common in crime and victimization data. Our illustration underscores that both quantitative and qualitative data are needed to account fully for the diverse, complex nature of immigration and its association with crime (for a discussion of data requirements, see Kubrin and Ousey 2023, chap. 3).

We hope this essay, discussion, and illustration inform research efforts moving forward. Although fairly abstract, we believe our arguments have important implications for concrete causal thinking and empirical testing. Some work now exemplifies the nuanced, layered approach we advance here (e.g., Menjivar and Salcido 2002; Caraballo 2024; Widdowson et al. 2024). We look forward to seeing more of it.

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