

Does Immigration Enforcement Reduce Crime? Evidence from “Secure Communities”

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Research Question

Does immigration control reduce crime?

- Longstanding focus of immigration policy has been the immigration-crime debate
- Virtually no previous attention

What was the impact of “Secure Communities” program?

- Fingerprint technology to streamline background checks
- Reduce cost to investigate (and detain) illegal immigrants: no longer need presence of federal officer
- Detained over 250,000 immigrants through the program and deported over 200,000

Identification Strategy

County-by-county rollout over 4 years

- Rollout across 3,000 U.S. counties
- Differences-in-differences
- Continuous measure of treatment: number of immigrants detained
- No reduction in violent crime when county-specific time trends are included
- Reduction in burglary and motor vehicle theft

Identification Strategy

$$\ln C_{it} = g(\text{Activate}_{it})\delta + X_{it}\beta + \alpha_i + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it},$$

- C_{it} : Number of offenses per 100,000
- X_{it} : County and time-varying controls: fraction foreign born, hispanic, black, population density, income, female-headed households, officers per 100,000, etc.
- α_i, α_t : county and time fixed effects
- weight by county population
- cluster standard errors at county level

Identification Strategy

$$\ln C_{it} = g(\text{Activate}_{it})\delta + X_{it}\beta + \alpha_i + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

- Was it random? (No: Southern border first, where there were more Hispanics)
- Use variation in intensity (Number of detainees is endogenous to crime activity)
- Exclusion restriction (Search to detain can be correlated with search to arrest)
- Standard errors (Should we cluster at state level)
- Functional form sensitivity checks (LASSO double-selection)
 - Controlling for urban density, level of crime no longer predicts activation

Conceptual Framework

Secure Communities reduces cost of policing

- $\frac{\partial \beta}{\partial S} = \alpha_i \frac{\partial \beta_i}{\partial S} + (\beta_i - \beta_n) \frac{\partial \alpha_i}{\partial S}$
- Deterrence: $\frac{\partial \beta_i}{\partial S} < 0$
- Incapacitation: $\frac{\partial \alpha_i}{\partial S} < 0$
 - If immigrants are more crime-prone ($\beta_i > \beta_n$), then Becker framework unambiguously predicts reduction in crime, else ambiguous prediction
- However, other theoretical predictions are possible
 - Benabou and Tirole, Chen and Yeh: affects perceived norms (backlash), which could increase crime
 - $v^* - c + \mu E(v_a|1) = \mu E(v_a|0)$
 - Affects other policing activities (“piggybacks on standard arrest procedures” p.17)

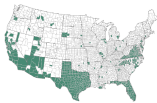
Rollout

Where immigration is greatest

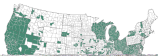
Counties Activated Prior to Oct. 1, 2009



Counties Activated Prior to Oct. 1, 2010



Counties Activated Prior to Oct. 1, 2011



Counties Activated Prior to Oct. 1, 2012

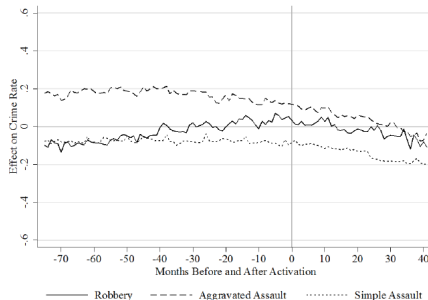


- Mexico border, where there are many Hispanics
- State-by-state clumping (so county is not the right treatment level)

Rollout

Where immigration is greatest

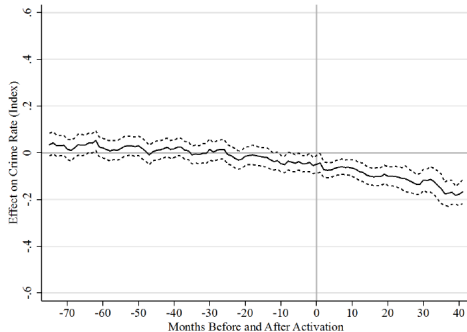
A. Violent Crimes (Robbery, Aggravated Assault, Simple Assault)



- Might short-moving upward crime trend (rather than level of crime) predict activation?

Specification

First-Differences



- Authors do: $\Delta \ln C_{it} = \Delta g(\text{Activate}_{it})\delta + \Delta X_{it}\beta + \tilde{\alpha}_t + \tilde{\varepsilon}_{it}$
- What about: $\Delta \ln C_{it} = g(\text{Activate}_{it})\delta + X_{it}\beta + \alpha_i + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it}$

Endogeneity

- Magnitude of program's intervention is endogenous (the cumulative number of immigrants taken into federal custody)
 - Possible that police detain more when there is more crime
 - Instead: Use ex ante measure to predict program intensity
- Controls are point-in-time controls
 - Possible that program affects these controls
 - Instead: Use baseline controls before October 2008
 - Instead: Show specification removing potentially endogenous controls

Sensitivity

- Finding: significant negative association of 4% decline in crime rate disappears to when county-specific time trends are included
- Many of the sensitivity checks seem to use endogenous measures of intensity (persons deported, persons in custody, interactions)
- Some effects on burglary, larceny, motor theft
 - Why do we think crime trends are linear?