Understanding public opinion on immigrant criminality - results from a Croatian study

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INTRODUCTION

- anti-immigrant sentiment, as well as a growing negative attitude towards immigrants, has been recognized and reported by various authors (Wang, 2002; Bren, 2006; Farkas, 2017)
- expansion of immigration has been consistently linked to an increase of crime despite the research showing that immigrants may contribute to lower crime rates (Sampson, 2008; Wang 2012). Theory and existing research suggest that the general public is commonly more punitive towards certain groups of offenders (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities)
- using experimental data from a sample of college students in Croatia, this research explores whether factors such as the immigrant status, offense, national origin, and age of a hypothetical offender, affect public attitudes towards criminality of immigrants

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical explanation

- social threat theory aka., minority group threat theory (Eisele & Taylor, 2008; Dollar, 2014) proposes that majority group uses social control to control the minority group in order to maintain the existing position of authority (economic, political, cultural)
- a larger share of immigrants as a percentage of a country’s population leads to an increased perceived threat of immigrants (Paas & Halapuu, 2012)

Public opinion research related to immigrants

- people tend to agree that immigrants commit more crimes than non-immigrants and that immigration increases crime (Farkas, 2017; Kubrin, 2014; Gallagher, 2014; Martinez & Lee, 2000). Furthermore, they tend to agree that immigration negatively impacts the economy, national culture, and the social status of domicile population (Card, Dustman, & Preston, 2005; Sauro, 2009)
- views of immigration are related to respondent education, income, race and ethnicity, age, religion, political affiliation/ideology, experience of living abroad, trust in social institutions and country of origin of migrants (rich vs. poor, Muslim vs. non-Muslim) (Breen, 2006; Hubert and Fussell, 2006; Paas & Halapuu, 2012)
- older respondents, men with low educational attainment and lower self-assessed socioeconomic status are more inclined towards anti-immigrant attitudes (Sauro, 2009)
- people tend to be more negative about immigrants of a different ethnicity (Card, Dustman and Preston, 2005)
- according to a recent survey conducted in the UK (Helliwell & Sinno, 2016), respondents questioned the problem of economic threats and the rise of crime primarily with Eastern European immigrants, and the problem of cultural threats and fear of terrorism with the Muslim group
- Christians of all denominations are more opposed to immigration than people of other religions, or people who profess no religion. (Card, Dustman and Preston, 2005)
- undocumented immigrants who have been accused of a crime are more likely to face pretrial detention because of the assumption that they may leave the country before being sentenced, depending on the national origin of the accused, incarceration rates are three to seven times higher than the crime rates of undocumented immigrants relative to citizens. (Bucur, 2011)

METHODS

Data

- collected in March 2019 at the University of Zagreb, Croatia
- each survey included one randomly assigned factorial vignette; experimental design
- n (vignette universe) = 225

Sample

- n = 407 undergraduate and graduate students
- 42% male; 75% Croatian ethnicity; 69% religious

Dependant variables

- punitiveness - measured in years/months; analyzed on quartiles
- perceived risk of recidivism - 5-point scale from Exrr. unlikely to Exrr. likely
- typicality of scenario - 5-point scale from Not at all typical to Completely typical
- dangerousness - 5-point scale from Far less dangerous to Far more dangerous

RESULTS

Variable | Punitiveness | Recidivism risk | Typical criminal | Dangerousness
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Offender age | 42 | .36 | .28 | .15 | .26 | -.07 | .26 | .37 | .30
63 | -.07 | .28 | .49 | .26 | -.52 | .26 | -.19 | .31
Immigrant status | Undocumented | .57 | .28 | .78 | .27 | .42 | .26 | -.12 | .31
Documented | .29 | .27 | .71 | .26 | -.07 | .26 | -.21 | .30
Country | Syria | .45 | .35 | .29 | .34 | .57 | .32 | .87 | .38
Serbia | -.77 | .37 | .00 | .34 | .40 | .33 | -.41 | .40
Nigeria | .13 | .35 | .09 | .34 | .60 | .33 | -.56 | .39
China | .10 | .35 | .57 | .35 | -.32 | .34 | -.28 | .39
Property | Rent | -.74 | .39 | .61 | .35 | .44 | .35 | -.83 | .41
Terrorism | 3.81 | .43 | .83 | .26 | -.24 | .35 | -.43 | .41
Drug | .81 | .36 | .96 | .34 | .48 | .33 | -.51 | .39
Rape | 1.96 | .37 | .58 | .35 | .44 | .35 | -.34 | .39
Respondent age | .03 | .04 | .03 | .03 | .03 | .03
Male | .48 | .26 | .11 | .24 | .16 | .23 | -.14 | .28
Congressive | .23 | .30 | .28 | .09 | .20 | .30 | -.25 | .13
Religious | .74 | .30 | .57 | .27 | .20 | .26 | -.38 | .31
Economic concern | .04 | .05 | .15 | .05 | .06 | .06 | .04 | .06
Property | .00 | .00 | .00 | .07 | .11 | .07 | .02 | .08
Fear of crime & victimization | .17 | .05 | .01 | .05 | .01 | .05 | .13 | .06
Trust in government | .00 | .07 | .02 | .07 | .03 | .06 | .05 | .08

Key independent variables:

Hypothetical offender age: not significant in any model

Immigration status:

- public is more punitive towards undocumented immigrants, compared to citizens
- undocumented and documented immigrants are more likely to be perceived risky to recidivate

Country of origin:

- public is less punitive towards Serbian offenders
- public is more likely to perceive Syrian immigrants as more dangerous

Offense:

- compared to assault - public is more punitive towards terrorism, drug offense, and rape
- public is more likely to see terrorism and drug offenders as riskier to recidivate
- property offenders are perceived as less dangerous

Respondent characteristics:

- conservative respondents are less punitive, less likely to think the offender is likely to recidivate, less likely to consider the offender a typical criminal for their minority group, and less likely to think that the offender is dangerous - contrary to research in US
- religious respondents are more punitive and more likely to think the offender will recidivate - consistent with research in US
- more fearful of crime are more punitive and more likely to perceive offenders as more dangerous - consistent with some research
- more concerned about immigrants affecting the economy are more likely to think the offender will recidivate
- Croats and those who are willing to have minority individuals in their proximity are less likely to consider the offender a typical criminal for their minority group, and less likely to perceive offenders dangerous
- those who associate immigration with increase in crime are more likely to consider the offender a typical criminal for their minority group

The results suggest that perceived threat from immigrants is not apparent in Croatia. This may be because immigrants make a small percentage of Croatian population, out-migration is more prevalent in Croatia than immigration since 2013, and Croatia has not had any terror attacks in recent history

Limitations:

- convenience sample
- potentially unrealistic scenarios
- did not control for “citizen born in Croatia”
- current models did not control for major and class standing

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