

Crime study disputes immigration claims

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Illegal immigrants subject to deportation pose no greater risk to public safety than those who cannot be deported when they are released from jail, a study by RAND researchers has found.

The study, published in this month's edition of the journal *Criminology and Public Policy*, found age, criminal offenses and other traits are the primary factors in determining whether illegal immigrants re-offend, and not their legal status.

"That is our finding in a nutshell," said Laura Hickman, an assistant professor with the Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute at Portland State University and a researcher at RAND, a nonprofit research organization based in Santa Monica. "We set out to test a real straightforward question. It was a question about whether deportable aliens are cycling through the local criminal justice system."

The study compared deportable immigrants, people who entered the United States illegally, overstayed their student or other visas or committed other violations, with non-deportable immigrants - those with legal documents or those who have become naturalized.

The study examined nearly 1,300 male immigrants released from jail during a 30-day period. It watched them for a year to see who returned to jail and whether they were deportable or non-deportable immigrants.

Hickman said the common belief is that illegal immigrants are more likely to engage in crime than legal immigrants.

"We wanted to just compare their arrest records to see if those that were deportable were more likely to get arrested at least once and how quickly," Hickman said.

The study followed 517 men who were eligible for deportation and 780 who were not after they were released from the county jail system from Aug. 4, 2002, to Sept. 2, 2002.

Hickman said the numbers might show more deportable immigrants were arrested than legalized immigrants, but a statistical analysis that considered other factors showed it wasn't that simple.

"Something else is causing the difference between the two groups," Hickman said.

"Deportability is a red herring."

Researchers examined more than the men's legal status, factoring in age, ethnicity, criminal histories and offenses and found that the differences in the deportable and non-deportable immigrants disappeared, Hickman said.

Other research has shown that younger people and drug offenders are more likely to repeat their crimes, and the statistical study determined that played a role, Hickman said.

The study is one of the first to consider if the fear that illegal immigrants increase crime in a community is legitimate.

"I think our bottom line is there is so much untested rhetoric out there," Hickman said. "I think people are just spouting off their mouths without any basis in data."

Researchers say the study's limitations included the fact it relied upon the arrestees to provide their birthplaces.

It also did not take into account the deportable immigrants who were taken to prison or into federal custody of immigration officials.

The study did not look at whether immigrants were more likely to be arrested than native-born American citizens.

It did find that 38 percent of all immigrants were re-arrested after one year, compared with an earlier study that showed 50 percent of immigrants and native-born Americans were arrested following a year.

Hickman said the deportable immigrants studied were supposed to go into the custody of federal immigration authorities, but for some reason were released into the community instead.

Hickman conducted the study for the RAND Safety and Justice Program. The program conducts public policy research on corrections, policing, public safety and occupational safety.