

## The Imagined Immigration and the Criminal Immigrant: Expanding the Catalog of Immigrant-Related Ignorance

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### **Abstract**

*Whether it be about population size, origin, or legal status, what ordinary citizens imagine about immigrants is often incorrect. Furthermore, these misperceptions predict greater dislike of foreigners. But, if one considers all the facts that people could get wrong, researchers have likely only scratched the surface. To advance toward a more complete catalog of misperceptions, the current study focuses on one commonly held stereotype: immigrants' propensity for crime. Using original data from a sample of college students, we examine the crime perception alongside nine established components of the imagined immigration, comparing their extent and consequences for a hypothetical anti-immigrant policy. Findings indicate that misperception levels vary across the ten factual questions considered. Many mistakes are consequential, but the criminal stereotype is the most damaging. It constitutes an important missing component in imagined immigration studies. The findings present implications for anti-immigrant sentiment research and for developing a more accurately informed population.*

**Keywords:** *Misperceptions; Anti-Immigrant Sentiment; Crime; Welfare; Population Innumeracy*

Immigrants represent an often-maligned, stereotyped, and scapegoated population in the US. Some of this animosity may be because when Americans think about immigrants, what they imagine is often factually inaccurate. Public opinion researchers have documented these misperceptions for decades. But, if one considers the universe of facts that one might get wrong about immigrants, which is the most consequential?

Many examine misperceptions about the immigrant population size — dubbed population innumeracy (Hjerm, 2007; Semyonov, Rajman, Yom Tov and Schmidt, 2004; Semyonov, Rajman and Gorodzeisky, 2008; Sides and Citrin, 2007; Citrin and Sides, 2007; Herda 2010; Strabac 2011; Hooghe and de Vroome 2015; Lundmark and Kokkonen 2017; Steele and Perkins 2019; Lutz and Bitschnau 2022). Most respondents believe their country has significantly more immigrants than the reality. When they do, they also tend to express more anti-immigrant sentiment (Alba et al. 2005; Herda 2013; Semyonov et al. 2004; Sides and Citrin 2007; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020). However, innumeracy only scratches the surface of what citizens might get wrong. Blinder's (2015) "imagined immigration" concept considers the many characteristics that people think about when they picture the typical immigrant, and many of these thoughts stray from the truth. So far, we know that respondents misperceive immigrants' motives, their most common origins, whether they are temporary or permanent, various socio-economic characteristics, and if they have documentation (Blinder

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2015; Herda 2018; Zhirkov 2021; Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva 2022). Furthermore, many of these mischaracterizations have stronger links to anti-immigrant policy support, than innumeracy (Herda 2015; Alesina et al. 2022).

However, there are other areas of potential ignorance to examine. The current study advances a more complete consideration of immigrant-related misperceptions by adding another consequential form of ignorance: the link between immigrants and crime. Despite ample evidence refuting the characterization, claims-maker reference it frequently and many Americans believe it (Chavez 2008; Lee 2015; Garand et al. 2017; Ousey and Kubrin 2018; Cox 2017). Regardless, the perception would make immigrants seem more threatening, which could increase anti-immigrant sentiment.

Using an original sample, we compare ten forms of possible ignorance regarding immigrants': 1) population size; 2) typical legal status; 3) citizenship; 4) English abilities; 5) national origins; 6) motivations; 7) unemployment; 8) level of poverty; 9) welfare utilization; and 10) propensity for criminality. The large number misperceptions considered here will help to construct a more comprehensive catalog of immigrant-related ignorance. The findings indicate that misperceptions are common, though there are many instances of accuracy. A few predict greater anti-immigrant hostility, including misperceptions of the population size, citizenship, and welfare receipt. However, the criminal immigrant stereotype is particularly corrosive.

### **Immigrant population innumeracy**

Researchers consistently demonstrate inflated immigrant population size perceptions throughout the world (Ipsos 2015; Lutz and Bitschnau 2022). Citrin and Sides (2008) found that respondents in 21 countries overestimated their immigrant population on average. However, Americans were the most “egregious overestimators” (42) with a mean guess of 28 percent. Compared to the actual figure, Americans viewed immigrants as 16 percentage points — 133.33 percent — larger than the reality.

This innumeracy is troubling from a Group Threat Theory perspective, which argues that prejudice emerges when a dominant population perceives minorities as a competitive threat to social resources (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1983). Native-born citizens feel entitled to jobs, neighborhoods, and other areas of privilege. Any perceived encroachment into these arenas by immigrants will elicit prejudice as a defensive reaction. According to Blalock (1967), the larger the out-group size, the more threatening it will appear. Subsequent research confirmed this prediction (Quillian 1995; 1996; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Schneider 2008; Semyonov, Raijman, and Gorodzeisky 2008).

Logically, if one *perceives* an out-group as artificially large, it may produce the same feeling of threat, irrespective of the actual size. Thinking that there are many immigrants, may make one believe that there are too many. Several studies confirmed this pattern. Across Europe and North America, overestimating is associated with support for lowering immigration levels and curtailing immigrants' rights (Sides and Citrin 2007; Semyonov et al. 2004; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020).

### **A Mere Drop in a Sea of Misperceptions**

Blinder's (2015) imagined immigration concept holds that when individuals develop immigration-related policy positions, they do so without consulting official data sources.



Rather, they take as evidence what they imagine to be true. But what could someone use to characterize the typical immigrant? Population size may factor into this, but the universe of characteristics that one may imagine is seemingly endless. If respondents view immigrants in ways that make them seem qualitatively threatening, it could engender anti-immigrant sentiment.

Blinder (2015) tested a few possibilities among 728 British respondents. On average, they imagined the typical immigrant as a non-EU citizen, seeking asylum, and with permanent status. At the time of the survey, education was the most common motivation, not asylum, and temporary status was more common than permanent. However, the typical immigrant was indeed a non-EU national. Regardless, misperceiving predicted a stronger preference for reducing immigration. Those imagining permanent status, asylum seekers, or EU citizens — all misperceptions — exhibited significantly greater hostility. The findings are interesting, but Blinder's work opens the door to a long list of characteristics that native-born respondents could imagine incorrectly and the potential consequences thereof. Subsequent studies have begun compiling a catalog of ignorance.

### **Where are they coming from?**

Do respondents think of a particular origin or ethnic background when they imagine immigrants and does this matter for anti-immigrant sentiment? Zhirkov (2021) examined the perceived ethnicity of immigrants in a US sample. The larger the perception of Hispanic immigration, the more harmful respondents believed that immigration is for the country. Alesina et al. (2022) found similarly in the US and Western Europe. When, respondents inflated the proportion of Middle Eastern and North African immigrants, they exhibited greater hostility toward immigrants overall.

### **Documented or Undocumented?**

Undocumented immigrants receive exaggerated negative attention from politicians and the news media (Lyons, Coursey, and Kenworthy 2013; Berg 2009; Hood and Morris 1998; Goo 2015; Espenshade and Calhoun 1993). Respondents may consequently imagine the typical immigrant as undocumented. Herda (2018) found this among most Americans and Italians, and large minorities in Germany, France, the UK and Spain. Across the sample, faultily perceiving the typical immigrant as undocumented predicted greater desires to exclude them from the country.

### **Socio-Economic Characteristics?**

Alesina et al. (2022) and Zhirkov (2021) considered several socio-economic characteristics that one might imagine about immigrants. Their employment, education, poverty, English proficiency, and welfare use could all be imagined incorrectly and influence immigration attitudes. Indeed, both found that many respondents think that immigrants are poorer, less educated, and less likely to work, hold a professional job, and be English proficient than the reality. Furthermore, when citizens perceive immigrants as weaker socio-economically, they express greater hostility.

Welfare perceptions are particularly notable. It is a common stereotype despite not holding up in the US (Nowrasteh and Orr 2018). Alesina, et al. (2022) found that at least 14% of Americans, Italians, French, and Swedes think immigrants receive double the welfare benefits as native-born citizens. Such beliefs had a strong association with reduced support for

immigrants. Welfare on its own is controversial, but the idea of immigrants taking from the system undeservedly fits perfectly into the group threat logic (Garand et al. 2017).

### **Immigrants and Crime: Toward a Complete Catalog of the Imagined Immigration**

A similarly threatening stereotype that remains absent from imagined immigration studies is the association between immigration and crime. This idea is pervasive in the public discourse in the US. Former President Trump kicked off his campaign in the summer of 2016 with a speech characterizing Mexican immigrants as bringing “crime” and being “rapists.” This statement, while controversial, resonates with many Americans. He used the sentiment to justify smorgasbord of anti-immigrant policies. By 2017, a full 40% of Americans — 57 percent of Republicans —viewed immigrants as increasing crime in local communities (Cox 2017). Yet, this imagined association is nothing new. We have connected immigrants to crime for generations (Dingeman and Rumbaut 2009).

Regardless, the criminological literature finds no basis for the characterization. Whether through individual-level self-reports (Bersani 2014) or community-level data (Adelman et al. 2017), immigrants are less involved in crime than the native-born. Across 51 studies between 1994 and 2014, Ousey and Kubrin (2018) found that “overall, the immigration-crime association is negative—but very weak” (64).

Yet, the stereotype persists and can make criminality come to mind when Americans think about immigrants (Cox 2017). The misperception is understudied as a component of the imagined immigration. It is unclear if such faulty views are as pervasive or powerful as population innumeracy or the other bases of ignorance described above. The current study seeks to examine these possibilities.

## **Data, Variables, and Methods**

### **Data**

The current data are from an original survey collected between March and April 2017 at a private, medium-sized, residential, 4-year college in Massachusetts. The intended purpose of this convenience sample was to develop and test a catalog of imagined immigration components through an initial pilot study, which could later motivate a larger, more representative sample. The recruitment was primarily via Facebook pages constructed yearly by the college for students in each incoming class. The final analytical sample contains 195 native-born citizens, omitting any identifying as immigrants ( $n = 12$ ).

### **Imagined Immigration Variables**

We consider 10 possible ways to mischaracterize immigrants. The exact wordings from the survey are included in Table 1. The immigrant population innumeracy variable is the only one measured continuously. Respondents wrote-in a number between 0 and 100. The response options for the categorically measured imagined immigration components are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.



**Table 1.** Imagined Immigration Components and their Corresponding Survey Questions

<b>Imagined Immigration Components</b>	<b>Question Wording</b>
Population Size Perceptions	“What percentage of people currently living in the United States were born outside of the US?”
Perceived Motivations	“What is the most common motivation from immigrants who come to the US?”
Perceived Origins	“What country is the most common place of origin for foreign-born individuals currently living in the US?”
Typical Documentation	“What percentage of foreign-born individuals currently living in the US are undocumented immigrants (ie: illegal immigrants)?”
Typical English Fluency	“What percentage of foreign-born individuals currently living in the US can speak English fluently?”
Typical Citizenship Status	“What percentage of foreign-born individuals currently living in the US have obtained citizenship?”
Unemployment Comparison	“What is your perception of the unemployment rate among immigrants in the US?”
Poverty Comparison	“What is your perception of the poverty rate among immigrants in the US?”
Welfare Use Comparison	“What is your perception of the percentage of immigrants who receive some form of public assistance (ie: welfare or food stamps)?”
Criminality Comparison	“What is your perception of the rate of serious crime (ie: violent crime or property crime) committed by immigrants in the US?”

### **Anti-Immigrant Policy Dependent Variable**

A hypothetical anti-immigrant policy position acts as our dependent variable. Specifically, we use a three-category measure of respondents’ preferred level of immigration. Possible answers include whether it should be 1) increased, 2) kept the same, or 3) decreased. The variable is coded so that higher scores indicate greater hostility.

### **Demographic Controls**

Each regression applies several demographic controls, including dichotomous measures of gender (female = 1), race (non-White = 1), and second-generation status (at least one foreign-born parent born = 1). Parent’s education has three categories: 1) high school or less; 2) bachelor’s degree; and 3) graduate degree. Political conservatism has a seven-point scale, ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Lastly, state/region includes three categories: 1) Massachusetts; 2) other New England; and 3) other US states.

### **Methods**

The analysis begins by describing the analytical sample. We then examine the extent of each variable compared with official statistics from reliable sources. Lastly, multivariate ordinal logistic regression analyses test the associations between the imagined immigration components and immigration policy preferences.

## Analysis

### Analytical Sample

The sample reflects the regional Massachusetts college from which it was drawn (see Table 2). It is 60 percent female, 90 percent white, and 88 percent third generation or more. Over 60 percent originate in Massachusetts, while only 11 percent are from outside New England. Nearly three-quarters had one parent with a bachelor's degree or more. On average, the sample is centrist in its political leaning.

**Table 2.** Sample Demographic Characteristics

	Percentage/Mean
<b>Sex</b>	
Female	62.05%
Male	37.95%
<b>Race</b>	
White	91.79%
Other	8.21%
<b>Immigrant Generation</b>	
2nd Generation	12.31%
3rd Generation+	87.69%
<b>State</b>	
Massachusetts	60.51%
Other New England	28.72%
Other US	10.77%
<b>Parent's Education Level</b>	
High School Degree or less	25.64%
Bachelor's Degree	44.10%
Advanced Degree	30.26%
<b>Political Conservatism</b>	3.64
<b>Observations</b>	195

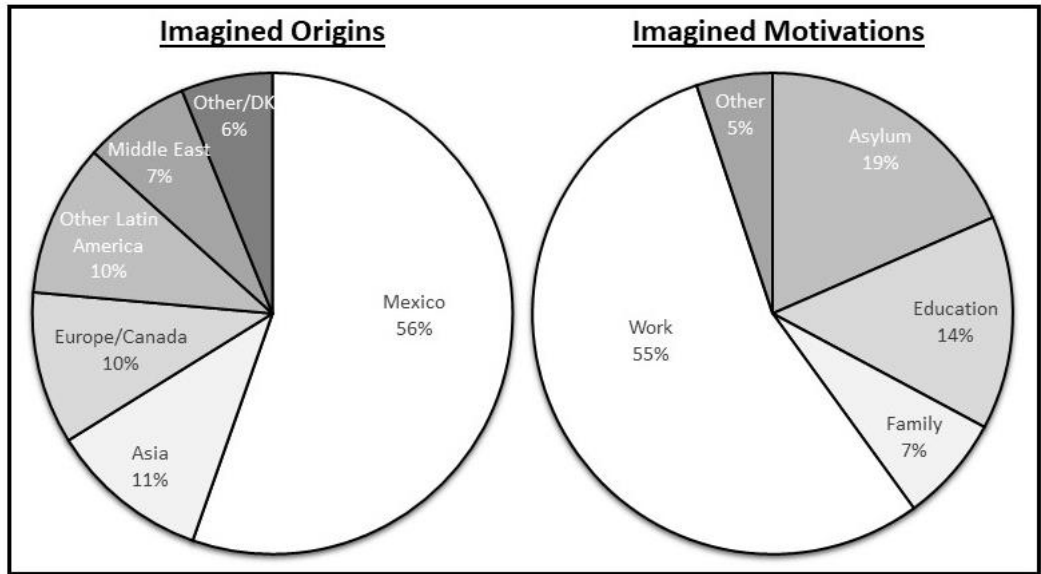
### Describing the Imagined Immigration

Respondents view immigrants as 37.49% of the country. This is a substantial over-estimate given the actual size of 13.7% (Budiman 2020). They view immigrants as 23.79 percentage points — more than 2.5 times — larger than the official figure.

The pie charts in Figure 1 display perceptions of immigrants' most common origin and motivation. Most originate in Mexico and a majority of the sample (55 percent) imagines this accurately. But, many envision something different, with roughly equal proportions identifying Asia, Europe/Canada, Latin America (besides Mexico), or the Middle East.

**Figure 1.** Respondents' Perceptions of Immigrants' Most Common Motivation and Origin Country





In the US, family reunification is the most common motivator (Zhirkov 2021). However, this is not what the respondents imagine. Most see the typical immigrant as present for work. They also more often imagine education and asylum over family.

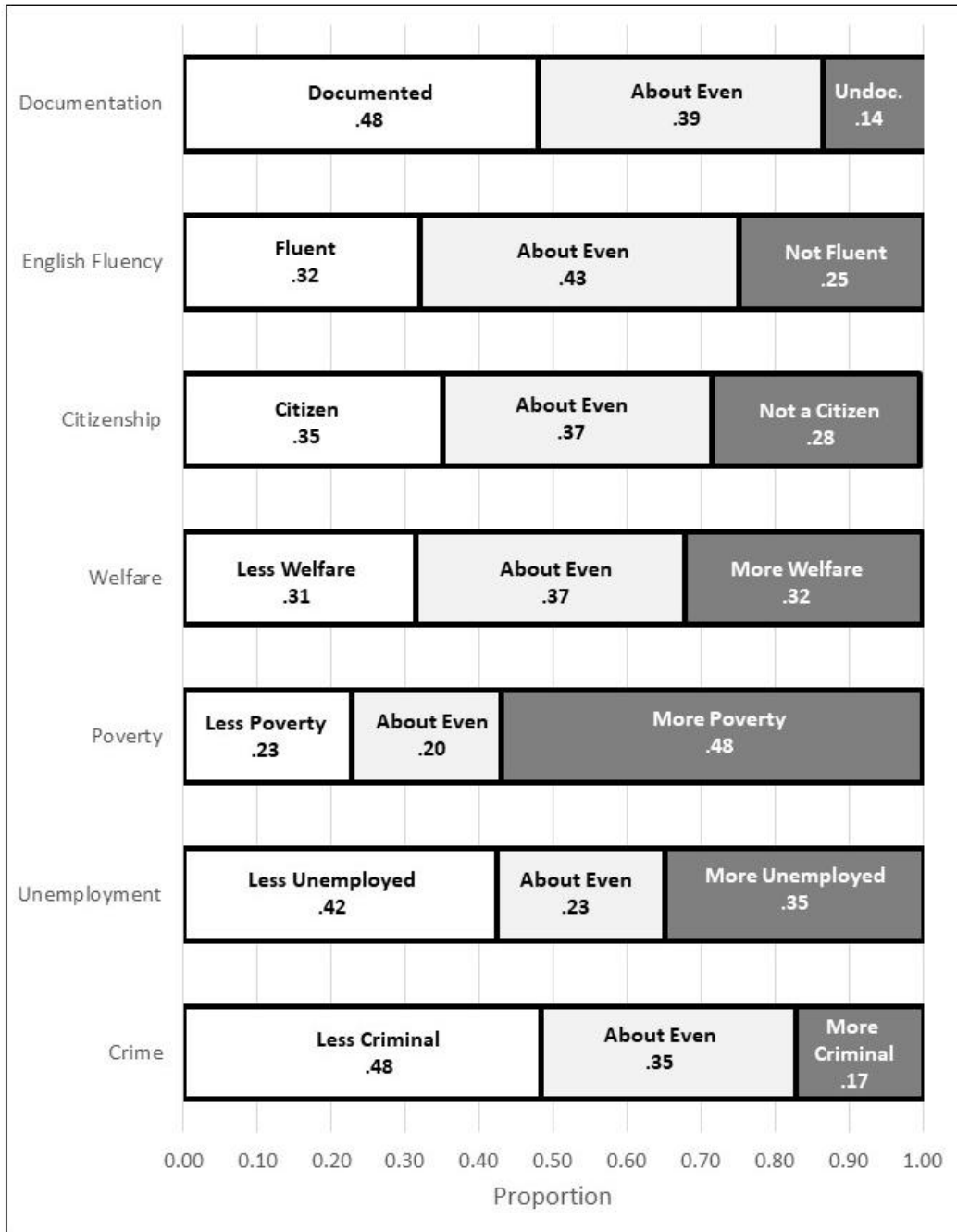
Figure 2 displays several three-category perception variables. In the US, more than three-quarters of immigrants are documented (Budiman 2020). Nearly half of the respondents imagined this accurately. However, most view undocumented immigrants as either half (38 percent) or the majority (13 percent) of all immigrants. This is muted relative to Herda (2018) where 60% viewed the typical immigrant as undocumented.

About half of immigrants in the US can speak English at least “very well” (Budiman et al. 2020), making the middle option the best choice. This is the modal category. However, sizeable minorities view the typical immigrant as fluent (33 percent) and non-fluent (24 percent).

In 2017, 45% of immigrants held US citizenship, which makes the middle option roughly accurate (Budiman 2020). Over one-third imagine immigration this way. A comparable proportion view the typical immigrant as a citizen, while only 28% see them as a non-citizen.

**Figure 2.** Respondents’ Perception of the Typical Immigrant with Regard to Legal Status, English Fluency, U.S. Citizenship, Welfare Dependence, Poverty Level, Unemployment, and Criminality





The largest proportions view immigrants as “more” and “less” unemployed. “About even” is the rarest category. Before the pandemic, the unemployment rate among foreign-born residents was slightly lower than in the overall population (BLS 2017).





The distribution for the welfare perception divides roughly into thirds. The middle category is the mode. Slightly smaller percentages perceive immigrants as less and more likely to receive welfare. According to Nowrasteh and Orr (2018), the middle category would be the most accurate.

Most imagine immigrants as more prone to poverty than the native-born. This is an accurate characterization, though the difference in reality is small: 12 percent versus 14 percent (Batalova, Hanna, and Levesque 2021).

Despite the stereotype, nearly half of the respondents imagine immigrants as less criminal than the native-born. An accurate perception would either fall in the categories of “about the same” or “slightly less.” However, a non-trivial portion — about 17 percent — imagines immigrants as more criminal.

### Consequences of Inaccurately Imagined Immigration

With the extent of misperceptions established, we turn now to the question of whether any are consequential. We consider the associations between what respondents imagine and their policy positions beginning in Table 3. Larger population size estimates predict significantly ( $p < .10$ ) more anti-immigrant preferences. Each percentage-point increase in respondents’ guesses are associated with a .016 unit increase in the log odds of selecting a more exclusionary option. Alternatively, guessing one point larger increases the odds of choosing a more exclusionary option by 1.6 percent ( $e^{.016}$ ). Guessing 10 points larger was associated with a 16% increase.

**Table 3.** Ordinal Logistic Regression Models Predicting Immigration Exclusion using Population Innumeracy

	Coef.	Std. Error
<b>Population Innumeracy</b>	<b>.016+</b>	<b>.009</b>
<b>Female</b>	-.526	.335
<b>Non-White</b>	<b>-1.614*</b>	<b>.720</b>
<b>2nd Generation</b>	-.585	.558
<b>Parent's Highest Degree</b>		
	<i>Bachelor's Degree</i>	.095
	<i>Professional Degree</i>	.139
<b>Conservatism</b>	<b>.705***</b>	<b>.138</b>
<b>Region</b>		
	<i>New England (Non-MA)</i>	-.261
	<i>Other State</i>	.030
<b>Constant 1</b>	.853	.748
<b>Constant 2</b>	<b>4.320***</b>	<b>.823</b>
<b>Log Likelihood</b>		-157.637
<b>AIC</b>		337.275
<b>BIC</b>		373.278
<b>Observations</b>		195

Respondents can imagine much more beyond population size and we turn our focus to these in Figure 3. The coefficient plot displays the slopes from two regression models including imagined motive and imagined origin, net of controls. Each circle represents the point estimate and each line represents a 90-percent confidence interval. Neither perception matters

for policy attitudes. None of the coefficients reach statistical significance, as indicated by the confidence intervals crossing the vertical dashed zero line.

**Figure 3.** Ordinal Logistic Regression Coefficients Predicting Immigrant Exclusion with Imagined Motive and Imagined Origins (90 Percent Confidence Intervals)

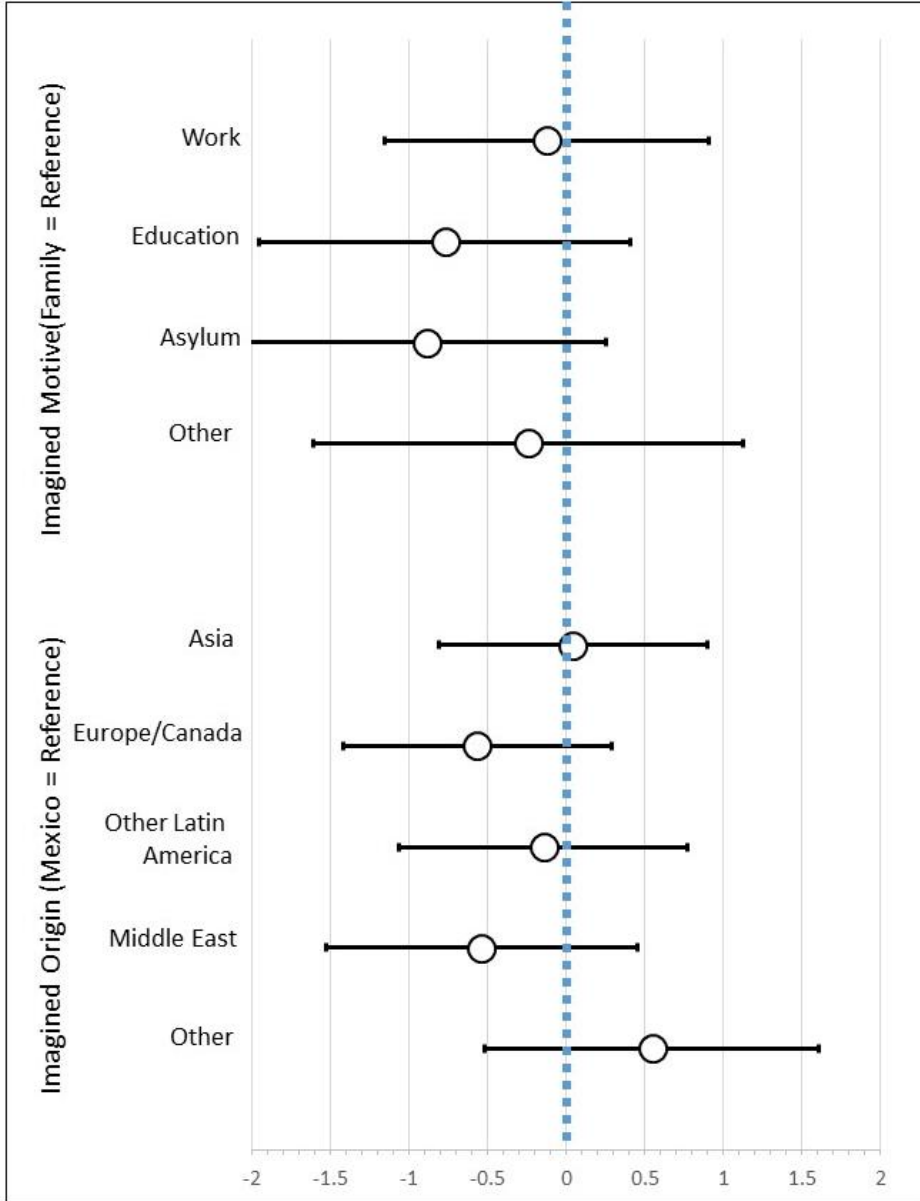
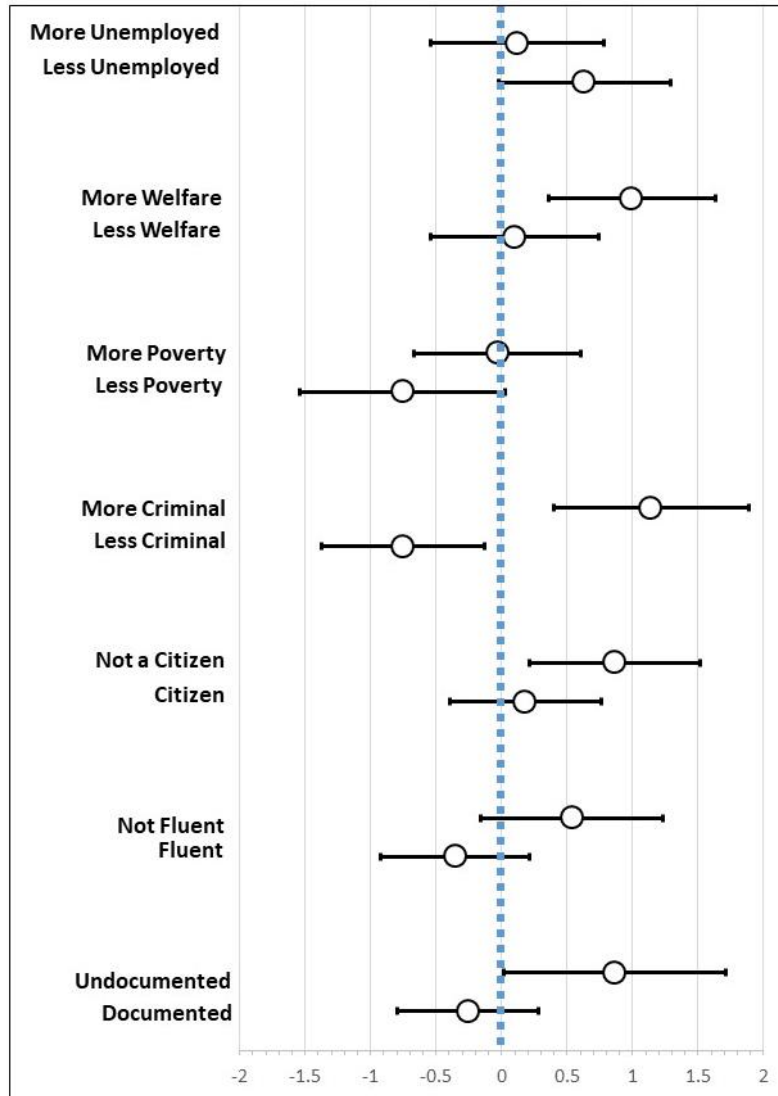


Figure 4 considers the remaining three-category imagined immigration perceptions. The plot reads the same as in Figure 3. In total, the chart displays 7 unique regression models — one for each perception variable. In each, the middle category acts as the reference.



Several perceptions do not matter in shaping the anti-immigrant policy outcome. Perceiving the typical immigrant is not fluent in English, more impoverished, and more unemployed than the native-born — regardless of accuracy — does not affect exclusionary leanings. But, this is not the case for all. Viewing the typical immigrant as a non-citizen ( $p < .05$ ) and undocumented ( $p < .10$ ) — both misperceptions — predict a significantly greater desire to restrict immigration.

**Figure 4.** Ordinal Logistic Regression Coefficients Predicting Immigrant Exclusion with Imagined Immigration Components (90 Percent Confidence Intervals)



The largest association is for the crime stereotype ( $b = 1.142$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Imagining immigrants as more criminal significantly increases the likelihood of an exclusionary position. Erroneously believing that immigrants are more prone to crime raises the likelihood of choosing a more

anti-immigrant option by 213 percent ( $e^{1.412}$ ). Compared with the innumeracy effect in Table 3, it is equivalent to a size estimate of 70%. Additionally, those believing that immigrants are less criminal express significantly more welcoming attitudes ( $b = -.751$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This is the only perception where all categories are significantly different from one another.

Similarly, when respondents view immigrants as welfare recipients, they are more likely to endorse an anti-immigrant position. The association ( $b = .995$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was the second largest in the analysis and statistically equivalent to the crime association. Those who erroneously believe that immigrants are more welfare-dependent are 170 percent more likely to take an exclusionary position ( $e^{.995}$ ). This effect is equivalent to a 60 percentage point size estimate from Table 3.

**Table 4.** Ordinal Logistic Regression Model Predicting Immigrant Exclusion with Imagined Immigration Components

	<b>B</b>	<b>se</b>
<b>Population Innumeracy</b>	<b>.022*</b>	<b>.010</b>
<b>Immigrants and Crime Perceptions</b>		
<i>Less Criminal</i>	<b>-.745+</b>	<b>.405</b>
<i>More Criminal</i>	<b>.974*</b>	<b>.487</b>
<b>Immigrants and Welfare Perceptions</b>		
<i>Less Welfare</i>	.348	.406
<i>More Welfare</i>	<b>.698+</b>	<b>.420</b>
<b>Immigrants' Legal Status Perceptions</b>		
<i>Documented</i>	-.237	.359
<i>Undocumented</i>	.398	.580
<b>Immigrants' Citizenship Status</b>		
<i>Citizen</i>	.332	.387
<i>Not a Citizen</i>	<b>.844+</b>	<b>.438</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>-.787*</b>	<b>.359</b>
<b>Non-White</b>	<b>-1.786*</b>	<b>.777</b>
<b>2nd Generation</b>	-.319	.584
<b>Parent's Highest Degree</b>		
<i>Bachelor's Degree</i>	-.001	.416
<i>Professional Degree</i>	-.011	.439
<b>Conservatism</b>	<b>.514***</b>	<b>.152</b>
<b>Region</b>		
<i>New England (Non-MA)</i>	-.303	.360
<i>Other State</i>	-.211	.542
<b>Constant 1</b>	.307	.956
<b>Constant 2</b>	<b>4.187***</b>	<b>1.011</b>
<b>Log Likelihood</b>	-186.334	
<b>AIC</b>	326.440	
<b>BIC</b>	388.627	
<b>Observations</b>	195	

As a final test, Table 4 estimates regression models that include all of the immigrant perceptions with significant associations from the previous analyses along with the demographic controls. Any without significant effects were omitted. Generally, the



associations hold from the previous models, though the effect sizes are smaller. The undocumented perception is the only one to lose significance. The criminal perception again has the largest and most consistent association with the outcome.

## **Summary**

Immigration is a topic rife with misperceptions. The current study seeks to understand the consequences of widespread inaccuracy by considering multiple components of the imagined immigration. These results have several implications for future research.

## **Widespread and Diverse Misperceptions**

Much of our sample imagined something different from the reality when they thought about immigrants. A majority inflated their numbers and saw immigrants as having motives that differ from the reality. Substantial proportions thought immigrants were more criminal, impoverished, welfare-dependent, and unemployed than they actually are. Many saw them as originating from countries that differed from the reality and as less English-fluent, less likely to be citizens, and more likely to be undocumented than the reality. This demonstrates the wide array of bases for factual ignorance that could be in peoples' heads and potentially informing their opinions. It is notable that for some perceptions — poverty, crime, and origins — the majority imagined the reality accurately. However, there is always a misperceiving minority.

The current study considered many imagined immigration components, but others likely exist and may be consequential. As the research continues toward a full catalog of misperceptions, it is important to be as exhaustive as possible. A task for future scholars is to identify and describe additional bases of ignorance, test their consequences, and compare them to previously documented misperceptions. Moreover, a consideration of misperceptions has applicability beyond immigrants. Facts about native-born racial and ethnic minority populations are also the subject of ignorance in the general population (Alba et al. 2005). Understanding which errors are most common and consequential could help to further develop the immigrant misperceptions catalog and perhaps understand intergroup relations more generally.

## **Consequential Ignorance**

Some components of the imagined immigration matter for shaping immigration policy positions. This was true for misperceptions about documentation, citizenship, and welfare dependence, and when inflating population size. Each could make immigrants seem more threatening, which could elicit anti-immigrant sentiment.

However, the most important misperception was the immigrant-crime stereotype, which is missing from other imagined immigration studies. This belief makes immigrants appear particularly threatening. It endures despite the abundant research that refutes it. While only a small portion imagined immigrants in this way, those that did were significantly more likely to support reducing immigration. The effect size far outpaced the more often-considered immigrant population innumeracy. These results should make clear that future research on immigration misperceptions ought to move away from solely considering size perceptions.

## **Not all Misperceptions Matter**

Some misperceptions seem more innocuous. Most respondents were incorrect about immigrants' motives, but such mistakes made no difference in exclusionary preferences. The same was true for misperceiving origins, English fluency, poverty, and unemployment. However, this lack of an association is still informative. If there are misperceptions that can be ignored with little consequence, it will permit researchers to concentrate on the ones that do matter.

### **Data Limitations**

The data collection procedure employed here is unideal for generalizability and the authors do not claim that it is representative of the overall US population. The high levels of parents' education and universal status of college students might indicate more accurate perceptions than the general population. The sample may also be more pro-immigrant, given the generally more liberal leanings of college students. Regardless, it is necessary to replicate this analysis with a larger sample that is more representative of the US as a whole. The current sample was intended to serve as a pilot that would motivate the development of a comprehensive battery of imagined immigration components and future research that can test it using a national sample. Subsequent studies should continue to this end.

### **Future Directions**

All of the perceptions considered here have correct answers, which can be demonstrated to those believing something different from the reality. Several innumeracy studies recommend a strategy of disseminating this information to improve intergroup relations (Alba et al. 2005; Nadeau et al. 1993; Sides and Citrin 2007; Sigelman and Niemi 2001). So far, experimental research testing this approach's effectiveness has found mixed results (Lawrence and Sides 2014). However, studies have not yet considered the effects of spreading correct information about the components of the imagined immigration beyond size perceptions. The current results provide some insight into which misperceptions might be the most crucial to address.

Given the abundance of statistics that people get wrong, the classroom may be the most effective avenue through which to disseminate correct information. The context provides a captive audience and the opportunity to engage not only with the statistics, but also the more general phenomenon of misperceptions and the consequences thereof. Herda (2017; 2019) describes an in-class activity and tests its effectiveness for reducing misperceptions. The experience can be expanded to include the most important misperceptions outlined here. Using such an exercise will help to promote more accurate perceptions, but also increase self-awareness with regard to how often we tend to imagine immigrants incorrectly.

### **Conclusion**

What Americans imagine to be true about immigrants often strays from the reality. When we consider multiple bases of misperceptions simultaneously, it reveals that only some are consequential. The belief that immigrants are more criminal than native-born citizens is particularly damaging. If it is indeed a goal of academia to reduce misperceptions, it is important to focus our efforts on the most harmful. The current study provides some valuable additions for the developing catalog of immigrant misperceptions. Continuing in this direction can help us understand anti-immigrant sentiment more completely.



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