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Why immigrants help your city stay crime free

By Richard Florida

US crime levels have fallen to their lowest reported levels in nearly half a century despite [major unemployment](#) and the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Even more remarkably, the drop was steepest in America's big cities – which are still popularly believed to be cauldrons of criminality. The question is: why?

Research from the Brookings Institution recently noted that the hubs of the 100 largest US metro areas benefited most from declining crime rates. But even in the suburbs, the results were surprising: “Older higher-density suburbs saw crime drop at a faster pace than newer, lower-density emerging and exurban communities on the metropolitan fringe.”

When crime rates first began to plummet in the 1990s, economists such as *Freakonomics* author Steven Levitt argued that legalised abortion had been responsible, since unwanted children were more likely to grow up to be criminals. Others suggested America's astronomical incarceration rates could be responsible. Myriad other theories also emerged, with some experts even attributing much of the drop in violent crime to children's reduced exposure to lead.

Elsewhere, big city police forces developed clever statistical methods to target crime, many of which proved successful. We as individuals changed our behaviour too – from locking our doors to investing in burglar alarms for our homes and special locks for our cars.

It remains confounding that crime would decline even in hard economic times. Nonetheless, my own analysis, conducted with my colleague Charlotta Mellander, turned up no statistical associations between crime and changes in unemployment levels across metros, or between crime and the level of income inequality. And the link between crime and the poverty rate has weakened substantially over the past two or three decades.

More interestingly, however, the relationship between crime and race has greatly weakened too. From evening news headlines to crime shows on TV, popular culture underlines the propinquity between crime and race. The Brookings research assembles powerful evidence to show that that relationship has in fact declined significantly over the past two or three decades.

Urban crime expert James Wilson suggests instead that the recent drop-off in crime is explained by positive cultural changes. “The cultural argument,” he writes, can help explain not only the current drop in crime, but also “the Great Depression’s fall in crime and the explosion of crime during the sixties”. In the first period, on this view, people took self-control seriously; in the second, self-expression – at society’s cost – became more prevalent. Criminologist Alfred Blumstein of Carnegie Mellon University suggests that a similar “Obama effect” might be at work today, in which young black males’ increased optimism about their futures makes them more likely to refrain from violence.

But there is another factor in play that might be even more important: the growing racial, ethnic and demographic diversity of our cities and metro areas. Our analysis found the Hispanic share of the population is negatively associated with urban crime. Crime also fell alongside the percentage of the population that is non-white, and the percentage that is gay. But of all the variables, the one most consistently negatively associated with crime is a place’s percentage of foreign-born residents.

It is hard to wrap your mind around this, especially with so much [immigration demagoguery in public debate](#). But the logic is clear, as Elizabeth Kneebone, an author of the Brookings study, notes: “Crime fell fastest in big cities and high-density suburbs that were poorer, more minority, and had higher crime rates to begin with. At the same time, all kinds of suburbs saw their share of poor, minority, and foreign-born residents increase. As suburbia diversified, crime rates fell.”

Along with their entrepreneurial energy and their zeal to succeed, it turns out that immigrants are good neighbours too. They exhibit many cultural and economic factors that militate against criminal behaviour, not just in their own enclaves but in surrounding communities as well.

The writer is author of ‘The Great Reset’ (out in paperback on July 5), senior editor at The Atlantic and director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto.