

Illegal doesn't make them criminals

by *The Indianapolis Star*

The arrest of 14 illegal immigrants for their alleged ties to two notorious gangs might provide interesting insights into how those groups operate. But the arrests should not strengthen stereotypes that paint immigrants as law-breaking desperados who came to the United States to expand their criminal activities.

Young male immigrants, including those who arrived in this country without proper documentation, are five times less likely to land in prison than their native-born counterparts, according to a 2005 study of U.S. Census Bureau data by Kristin Butcher, a senior economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, and Rutgers University criminologist Anne Morrison Piehl.

Young male immigrants - who made up 17 percent of the total young male population in 2000 - accounted for just 4 percent of the prison population in 2000, the study showed.

These statistics offer further support of some sort of reforms that accurately reflect the economic and social realities created by and faced by immigrants. President George Bush recently made a strong move for reform, but it was rejected by the U.S. Senate. Though passionate debate over immigration reform has cooled since last year's round of rallies, the stereotype of undocumented immigrants as violent criminals remains one underlying reason against more liberalized immigration laws.

The gang-related arrests in Indianapolis, which has experienced an increase in crime as its immigrant population has grown, perpetuates the stereotype. So do other highly publicized incidents such as the 2004 scandal at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, in which four workers allegedly aided undocumented immigrants in obtaining licenses. In another case, a man was returned to his homeland after facing child molestation charges.

But the research done by Butcher and Piehl shows that criminal activity is more the exception than the rule among immigrants.

In their analysis of census and crime data, the researchers determined that urban areas with the greatest increases in immigrant populations have also seen the greatest decreases in crime. More importantly, those committing felonies are sent back to their former homelands; 31 percent of those deported were sent back because of criminal activity.

Entering the country without documentation is illegal, which is why that description is commonly used. The problem lies not with the immigrants, but with a dysfunctional immigration quota system originally created to ban certain racial and ethnic groups from the country.

The fact that some immigrants must wait more than 20 years to become permanent legal residents suggests weaknesses with the system. Stereotypes and generalizations shouldn't be allowed to further confuse this complex issue.

Most illegal immigrants quickly integrate into the nation's economic and social fabric. That reality, not the myth of violent crime, is what deserves notice in this debate.

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