

DAILY NEWS

Thank immigrants for safe cities

The Tsarnaevs don't change that

By [Richard Florida](#) / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS



Craig Warga/New York Daily News

Young immigrants fill out paperwork at St. Mary's Church on the lower East Side to receive free legal advice on how to apply for the Department of Homeland Security's deferred action program.

In the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing and the hunt for the Tsarnaev brothers, libertarian Sen. Rand Paul sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid demanding hearings into the “specific failures of our immigration system,” wondering, “Why did the current system allow two individuals to immigrate to the United States from the Chechen Republic in Russia, an area known as a hotbed of Islamic extremism, who then committed acts of terrorism?”

It was inevitable that the bombing would spark a backlash against immigration. Texas Rep. Louie Gohmert, who made his reputation with alarmism about anchor-baby terrorists, connected the Boston bombing to both Arabs and Hispanics: “We know that Al Qaeda has camps over with the drug cartels on the other side of the Mexican border,” he said. “We know that people are being trained to come in and act like they’re Hispanic when they’re radical Islamist.”

Considering the importance of immigration reform and the high emotions roused by the Boston bombing, it’s important to look at what we actually know about the connections (or the lack thereof) between immigration, crime and American cities.

In 2006, Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson published a New York Times Op-Ed titled “Open Doors Don’t Invite Criminals.” First-generation immigrants of any nationality, Sampson found, “were 45% less likely to commit violence than were third-generation Americans, adjusting for family and neighborhood background. Second-generation immigrants were 22% less likely to commit violence than the third generation.” He concluded that increased immigration accounted for the huge drop in crime during the 1990s.

A statistical study by the University of Colorado sociologist Tim Wadsworth, published in a 2010 issue of the *Social Science Quarterly*, tested Sampson’s theory. Wadsworth found that the cities that experienced the “largest increases in immigration between 1990 and 2000” also “experienced the largest decreases in homicide and robbery during the same time period.”

Last May, an issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, edited by Sampson and John M. MacDonald, a criminologist at Penn, brought together research by leading scholars on immigration, crime and cities. “There is compelling evidence,” the editors wrote, “that today’s immigrant gateway cities in the United States have experienced some of the largest reductions in crime.”

Sampson and MacDonald noted that “cities of concentrated immigration are simply some of the safest places around.”

Criminologist John Roman of the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute summed up the state of research on immigrants, crime and cities to me this way: “Areas within cities with large concentrations of immigrants have lower, often much lower, crime rates than the poverty data would predict. Cities with faster growing immigrant populations are the ones becoming more safe.” And he adds this is not only the case in big cities like Boston, but in smaller rural areas, as well.

My own research has uncovered two key characteristics in cities that have seen dramatic reductions in their homicide rates: They have high levels of college grads and knowledge workers, and they have had massive inflows of immigrants who have helped to bring back disadvantaged neighborhoods and tamp down violent crime. Conversely, cities where murder rates have remained high have seen far less reurbanization and have had far lower rates of immigration.

Where does Boston fit in? The city and its broader metro area fit the profile of a knowledge-based immigrant city with a falling homicide rate.

The number of murders has dropped dramatically in recent years, from a high of 152 in 1990 to 58 last year. Boston's rate of gun homicide, according to statistics compiled by the Centers for Disease Control, is less than that of San Francisco, Denver and Minneapolis.

Just over one in six of metro Boston's population is foreign-born, the 14th highest among America's 50 largest metros. Greater Boston's immigrants are highly educated, a result of its colleges and highly skilled labor market. Nearly one in five adults with a college degree is an immigrant, while one in four of Boston's scientists and engineers is foreign-born.

Attempts to link immigrants to urban violence are nothing new. "Let us whip these Slavic wolves back to the European dens from which they issue, or in some way exterminate them," the Chicago Times editorialized after the Haymarket bombing in that city in 1886.

While the present surge in anti-immigrant sentiment mirrors that of the late 19th century, the numbers tell a different story. Immigrants are good for America, especially for its cities. The atrocities committed by the Tsarnaevs don't change that.

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