

## Activated Knowledge/Ignorance or Inert Information

### —case of immigration, sample 1

Border security is one of the most politically divisive topics in many parts of the world right now. With the presence of humanitarian crises and volatile economies across the globe, hope for a better life often begins at the border to a new country. While some people encourage migrants to seek a better life and welcome them with open arms, others claim that they will bring crime and disease and instead choose to lockdown borders and put up walls. For the sake of our country and the lives of so many migrants seeking safety and prosperity, we must face this issue using critical thinking.

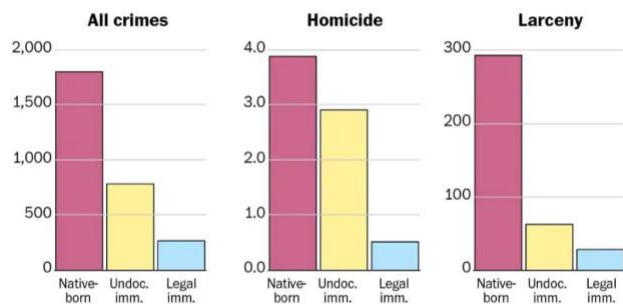
My immediate response to this issue is that the government should be much more open to asylum seekers and immigrants. I don't believe that they bring crime, or that they weaken our economy. I think that migrants probably act like most other American citizens and work to provide for themselves and their family when they get to a new country. Most people that are lazy or that will be a burden to the government don't travel thousands of miles with only the clothes on their back. I don't think completely open borders are a smart idea, but I think we should accept many more refugees and migrants into our country. I believe that people from different countries make America great, and by turning them away we are not only acting immorally but also denying ourselves the gift of diversity.

To investigate these claims first I did a simple google search of the question “do

#### Undocumented immigrants commit less crime than native-born citizens

Criminal conviction rates in Texas, per 100,000 population, 2015

Native-born Undocumented immigrants Legal immigrants



Source: Cato Institute, 2018

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Figure 1. Crime rates with respect to immigration status.

immigrants commit more crimes than Americans”. An article from the Washington Post, citing an analysis from the conservative CATO institute, showed the following graph, using data from the Texas Department of Public Safety (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 shows that in Texas both documented and undocumented immigrants committed crimes at lower rates than native born citizens in 2015. While Texas is only one state in the United States, the trend holds nationwide, as reported in the journal *Criminology*.<sup>8</sup> I have

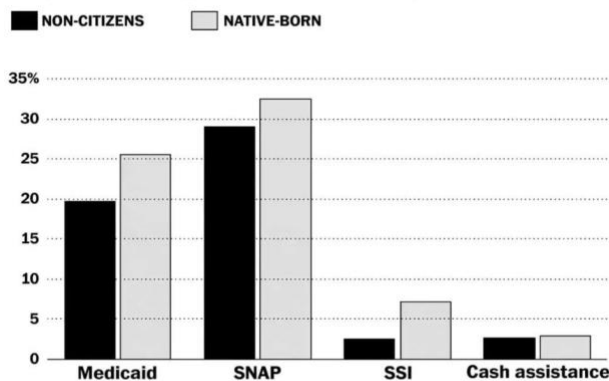
judged this analysis to be correct because it does not rely on shaky estimates or theorization, but rather raw data collected from the Texas Department of Public Safety. One could argue that the data would be incorrect if crimes committed by immigrants were under reported, thus artificially lowering their calculated crime rates. This is a

legitimate concern as Theodore et. al. have shown that 70% of undocumented immigrants express hesitance in reporting crimes.<sup>9</sup> This possible reporting bias is difficult to control for and makes it nearly impossible to achieve completely accurate data. I therefore accept the conclusion reported by the Post, but with reservations.

To judge immigrants' effects on the economy I searched google for "immigrants effect on economy". A study from the Pew Research Center, using US census data, concluded that 71% of undocumented immigrants were part of the workforce compared to only 49% of native born Americans.<sup>10</sup> As Pew is an unbiased research institute, and census data is rigorously controlled, I accept this conclusion. This data supports the conclusion that undocumented immigrants contribute to the economy and are less likely to be unemployed than native-born Americans. However, critics might argue that while immigrants may work more, perhaps they also use more public assistance programs, which drain government funds. However, research from the CATO institute shows that poor immigrants use medicaid, SSI, SNAP, and cash assistance less often than poor native-born citizens (Figure 2).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, when they do use these programs, the

### Immigrants less likely to use public assistance

% of poor adults receiving various means-tested services, 2012



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SOURCE: Ku and Bruen, Cato Institute

**Figure 2.** Use of government assistance programs with respect to immigration status.

average benefits they receive are less than for native born citizens.<sup>11</sup> This isn't to say that immigrants in general use the programs less, but rather that poor immigrants use them less than poor native born citizens. Based on this research I conclude that immigrants are indeed hard workers that do their best to enter the workforce and, when in need, try not to exploit social programs.

After briefly reviewing the research I have concluded that my initial beliefs were correct, and that immigration does not have negative impact on our economy or crime

statistics. Immigrants as a whole do not have any of the negative characteristics that they are portrayed to have in certain political and social circles. Before researching this topic I believe that my knowledge was most aligned with inert information. I had read certain ideas about the myth of the immigration crisis, but I could not speak intelligently about the concept, and I had only memorized certain facts; I couldn't fit the pieces together. I believe my knowledge now is closer to activated knowledge as I have a small base of knowledge that has lead me to new questions, ideas, and interests in the

immigration debate. While I am by no means an expert, the small amount of knowledge I have is activated, because I am thinking critically about it, and not accepting talking points blindly.

Another conclusion I reached while researching this topic is that critical thinking alone cannot lead one to make good decisions; a strong moral compass is necessary as well. For example, suppose that immigrants had slightly higher crime rates than native residents. This might lead us to the conclusion that accepting less immigrants is a good idea, however this would be forgetting the humanitarian crises that these immigrants flee from, as well as the majority of law abiding immigrants. I realized this as the thought crossed my mind “no matter what these statistics say, I cannot in good conscious support turning families away at the border”. It is important to remember that good data and proper analysis cannot make good decisions for us, but rather can only inform our reasoning.

### References

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# Communicating about Immigration-sample 1

## Introduction

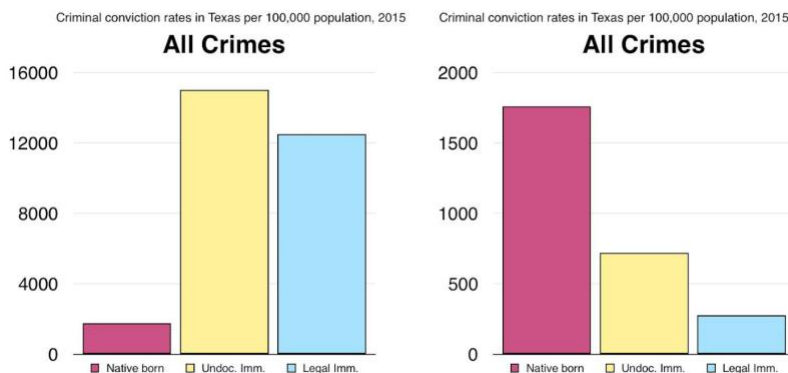
After conducting my own research on immigration and its effects on the United States, I wanted to test my peers' knowledge. What opinions did they hold, and were they thinking critically? Immigration is a very contentious topic in this political climate, and even more importantly, it is an issue of life or death for many people fleeing dangerous situations. By designing a survey and collecting answers I planned to judge if people viewed themselves as critical thinkers and how they interacted with such a complex topic as immigration. In doing so I hoped to learn how to effectively promote changing public perception of the so called "immigration crisis". Using my knowledge from PHIL-150 I confronted two survey subjects and tried to help them refine their thinking. While I know that opinions are not changed in one day, I hoped that by intervening and suggesting critical thinking techniques to my subjects, I could begin the slow process of change.

## Methods

I sent out a Google form to 5 friends and collected their responses. The questions asked on the form were:

- Do you view yourself as a critical thinker? Why?
- Do you view yourself as more open minded, or more set in your beliefs?
- What do you know about immigration and immigrants effects on the U.S.?
- Is immigration an important topic in public discourse?

After collecting responses I chose 2 of the most striking responses and met with the



**Figure 3.** Falsified graph (left) and correct graph (right) showing immigrant and native-born criminal conviction rates in Texas

subjects to discuss their thinking. To help them become aware of their own biases I created a completely falsified graph about immigrant criminal conviction, suggesting that immigrants

committed crimes at higher rates than native-born citizens, and asked them if they thought it was true (left, Figure 3). I then presented them with the correct graph which I had created using the data from the Texas Department of Public Safety (right, Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> I assumed they would accept the falsified data, which aligned with their beliefs, and reject the correct data. I wanted to prove to them that if one has a preconceived notion of something, they are more likely to accept data that confirms this notion; this is what is called confirmation bias. I hoped that by showing them their own confirmation bias in action, I could lead them to be more introspective about their thinking.

## **Results and Observations**

### Subject 1: Junior, Georgetown University, Finance major

Subject 1 viewed themselves as a critical thinker because they watch “a lot of news” from different sources and like to argue. They viewed themselves as open minded, but believed that they generally have the right ideas and don’t change their mind frequently. Their opinion on immigration was that it is an important topic because our country is in danger due to weak border security and high immigrant crime rates. Subject 1 was afraid that immigrants coming here illegally were generally coming for bad reasons and that if they were law abiding people, they would choose to come here legally. Subject 1 did not cite any references, but was confident in their opinion.

When presented with the graph on the left in Figure 3 and asked their opinion Subject 1 said “I don’t know if it’s exactly right, but I bet it’s pretty close”. When presented with the graph on the right in Figure 3 and told that it is actually the correct data from the Texas Department of Public Safety, Subject 1 was surprised but accepted that they had been initially incorrect. I asked Subject 1 if this exercise had changed their view on immigration or critical thinking in general. They responded that they still supported stronger border security because they believed that laws must be followed, but they conceded that in the future they should be more selective with what information they accept. They also admitted that their confirmation bias was probably “pretty strong” and that they would try to be aware of this cognitive bias in the future.

### Subject 2: Sophomore, Georgetown University, International economics major

Subject 2 did not view themselves as a critical thinker and remarked that critical thinking is not important because they “know who to trust and who not to trust”. In this sense they stated that they were not open minded and did not plan to be. They viewed immigration as a crucial political issue and wanted completely closed borders because “immigrants destroy American exceptionalism”. They stated that not only did immigrants bring drugs and crime, but also their cultures are not in agreement with “western ideals”. Subject 2 believed that immigrants should, instead of fleeing to safety, stay in their home countries and work to improve them.

When I presented Subject 2 with the graph on the left of Figure 3 they claimed that it was “definitely close” and thought that nationwide immigrant crime rates “are probably even greater”. When I showed Subject 2 the correct graph (right, Figure 3) they rejected it immediately. When I told them that it was using data directly from the Texas Department of Public Safety they started questioning everything about it: how was it collected, where was it published, who owns the research institute that compiled it, why is this only a graph for Texas, etc. I asked them if they thought it was interesting that when the graph with incorrect data agreed with their beliefs they accepted it very easily, but when the graph challenged them, even though the data was actually correct, they denied it. They chose not to respond and changed the subject to point out that the actual numbers don’t matter because they don’t like immigrants changing American culture or politics in general; the crime rates weren’t all that important to them. This concluded our conversation.

## **Discussion**

My interaction with Subject 1 was successful and it was exciting to see that someone could be encouraged into critically thinking when presented with their own cognitive biases. This has been my experience as well, so I was happy to see that I could share it with other people. I believe that for Subject 1 to actually create meaningful changes to their thought process they must continue to be checked in with to see if they are following through. In my experience one good conversation is not enough to create lifelong changes, so I hope to keep in touch with Subject 1 and encourage their critical thinking. I encouraged them to read Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking Fast and Slow* for an introduction into some aspects of critical thinking, and they were receptive to this suggestion.

Subject 2 was much more resistant and I do not think they have the capacity to change without intensive intervention. Based on their forceful questioning of the correct graph I believe that they have the tools to critically assess data, but they must completely change their worldview to be able to apply this criticality to all data, not just that which challenges them. However, I think Subject 2 raised a fair point at the end of our discussion: the numbers don’t matter to them because they have already solidified their core moral beliefs that white American culture is supreme and should not be changed by accepting immigrants. Similarly, I have solidified my beliefs that immigrants need to be accepted and supported. Numbers will not change either of our minds. In this sense, I think that even if Subject 2 were to confront their cognitive biases they would not end up changing their opinion on this subject.

## **Conclusion**

This exercise has lead me to the conclusion that critical thinking has its limits. In some sense critical thinking is of great importance and can lead to intelligent discussion on issues otherwise clouded by misinformation and illusion. However, critical thinking does not lead to compassion, at least not directly. In the case of Subject 2, I do not think critical thinking would have lead them to change their mind about immigration reform.

However this does not mean critical thinking is without merit. While injustice can occur even when people think critically, I think that by constantly demanding facts and rebuking bias and stereotypes we can lessen the persistence of this injustice. In conclusion, I believe that in order to achieve a just world critical thinking and ethics must work hand in hand.