



Religion and Prosocial Behavior of Immigrants

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Religion and Prosocial Behavior of Immigrants

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Focus on research

Religion and Prosocial Behavior of Immigrants

Ramadan has attracted negative publicity and criticism in Western countries with large Muslim immigrant populations. Are these attitudes justified? Does the behavior of Muslim immigrants negatively affect host populations during this period? We investigate one important dimension of immigrant behavior that is a source of concern: criminal activity. Using Swiss data, we document that during Ramadan, crimes committed by Muslim migrants decline by 11%. We provide evidence that changes in the beliefs and values of immigrants play an essential role in explaining the overall result.

Immigration is a contentious topic in modern politics and societies. While there are some clear benefits to host countries, for example the supply of additional workforce, there can also be downsides. Social cohesion might diminish when integration into host countries is unsuccessful; or negative sentiment towards migrant minority groups are used to form identity politics. One major concern of the host country's population that might spark such negative feeling can be a criminal activity of immigrants.

We use administrative data on all criminal offenses registered from 2009 to 2020 by the Swiss police authorities to study the criminal behavior of immigrants from Muslim countries. We take advantage of the detailed information in the dataset and estimate specifications with a rich set of controls which allows us to rule out various confounding factors. The results show that offenses committed by immigrants born in Muslim countries decrease by about 11% during the month of Ramadan. This result brings some rigorous quantitative evidence that has been missing from the political discourses. We take several steps to understand the mechanism behind this result. One possible explanation is that more intensive religious practice changes individuals' values and perceptions, reducing their propensity to commit crimes. While it is difficult to test this mechanism with the data at hand directly, we consider and rule out several competing behavioral outcomes that could also lead to the observed reduction in criminal activity: frequent family

gatherings that require preparation, a higher likelihood of travel or visits to immigrants' home countries, which implies absence from Switzerland, physical exhaustion, and others. We estimate a number of specifications and show that these channels play a relatively small role.

First, we find that the decline in registered criminal offenses committed by immigrants from Muslim countries is quantitatively considerable in 2020. In 2020, Ramadan took place in May under strict lockdown and travel restrictions imposed by Swiss authorities and many other countries' due to unexpected and exogenous reasons. These policies severely restricted the possibilities of public gathering events, as well as travel opportunities.

Second, we study the dynamics of crime declines over the Ramadan month, to assess the role of declining physical ability. If criminal offenses require significant effort and energy to implement, we should observe larger declines at the end of Ramadan when people are more exhausted from continuous fasting. We do not find evidence supporting such patterns. To shed more light on this issue, we conduct estimations exploiting the duration of fasting hours. If longer fasting hours deteriorate physical ability, then the declines in crime rates should be more significant on days with more daytime light, which determines the daily duration of the fast. Our estimations show no relationship between fasting hours and crime rates beyond the main effect of Ramadan.

Third, we investigate the time period just before and after Ramadan, to understand whether there is evidence for anticipatory or persistent effects. Sha'ban, the month before Ramadan is particularly interesting to analyze, as it is considered a month of individual mental preparation for Ramadan. The distinct pattern of a reduced crime rate starting at the beginning of Sha'ban is our most vital piece of evidence for the results being driven by changes in beliefs and values of individuals, rather than any of the other mechanisms. However, the post-Ramadan pattern is less clear. While the estimates show some persistence in reducing criminal activity after Ramadan, they lack the precision to be statistically significant. We argue that this is due to a highly idiosyncratic pattern of reverting to the "natural" behavior of individuals, which factors such as liquidity constraints can moderate.

Putting together the results of these exercises, we argue that the prime explanation remaining is one of changes in beliefs and values driven by a more intensive practice of religion.

Reference

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