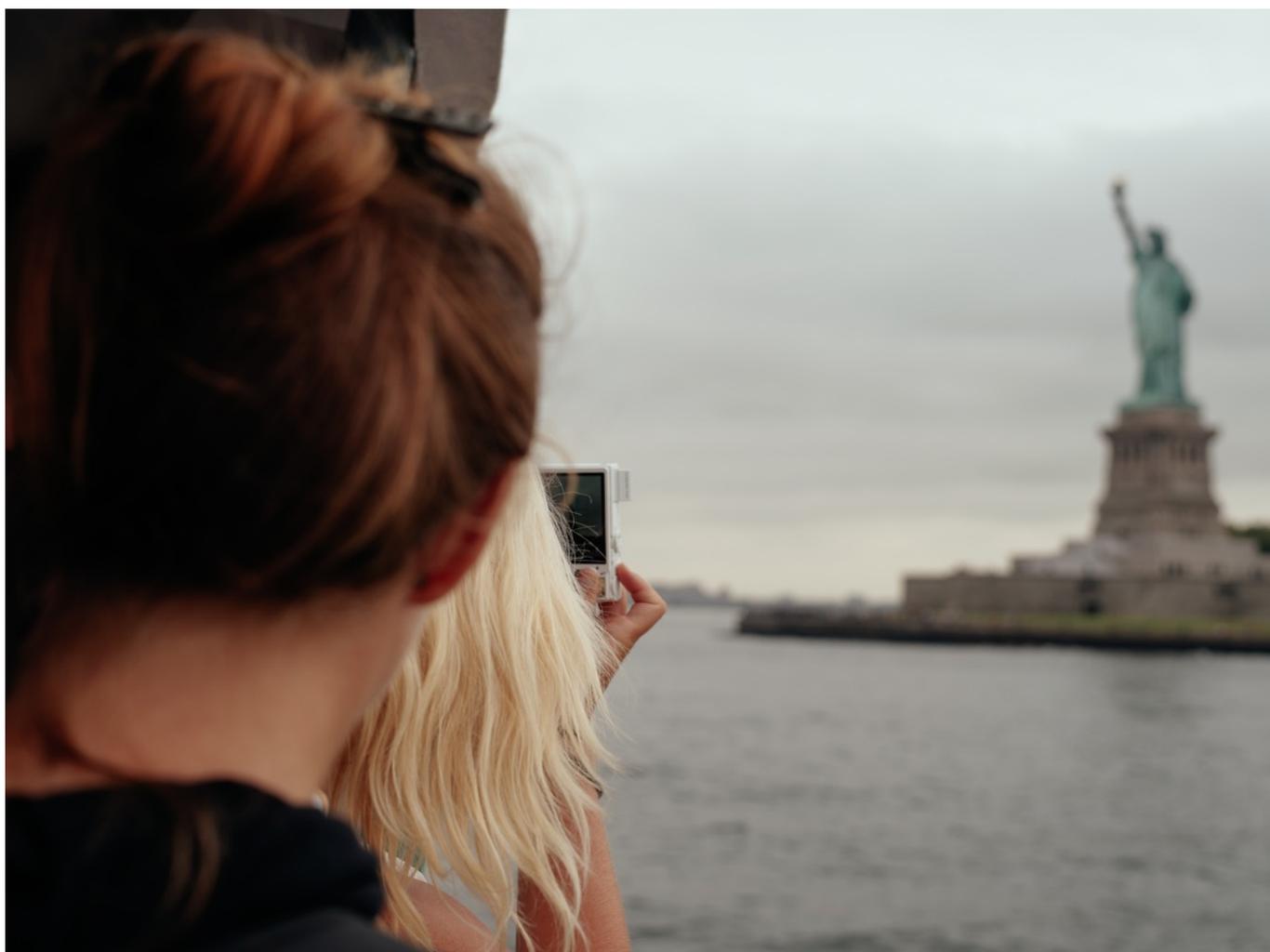


PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC ALBANIANS IN NEW YORK CITY AND THE ROLE OF STEREOTYPES IN FOSTERING SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND CRIMINALITY

If I awake to look out my window, walk out my front door and to my right, left and for as far as my eyes can see, my once tranquil city is plagued with carnage, bloodshed, strife and civil war would I not seek a safer life just over the mountains or across the sea? The idea of migration being a human right is far too often overlooked in the domains of international security organizations, as domestic governments and global policy makers attempt to fortify parts of the world to populations they have deemed undesirable. In the literature, it is suggested by sociologists that migrants tend to follow a pattern of South-North movement trajectories, abandoning a life of fear for a sense of freedom, democracy and sustained peace which is otherwise foreign to them. Once the person has transitioned from a third to first world country, often times they are the subject of unjust stigmatization and discrimination due to their ethnic origins.

Given the state of anarchy faced by the population and rampant absence for the establishment of law and order for the period following the fall of communism in 1991, Albania saw a mass-exodus of refugees fleeing to nearby Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom and eventually the United States. Soon after their European arrival this group was often labeled as barbaric and ruthless mafia men. Research collected during this study proved that the infamy surrounding the great migration out of Albania spawned increased episodes of ethnic based criminality, as the community suffered from reduced economic opportunities because of their media inflated categorization as inherently violent beings.



The scope of this study was to understand the nascent criminalizing effects of migratory stigmatization, in achieving this end we set out to determine the sources which encourage prejudice against certain alien groups. 1 We intended to examine if the prominence of these factors creates xenophobic attitudes and hinder the newcomers' ability to access critical social spheres, therefore increasing the discouraged migrant to gravitate towards developing innovative coping strategies by engaging in illegal means to survive within United States society.

The objective of the research funded by the Department of Justice was to examine whether New York's media coverage has the potential to trigger a process of social isolation and deviancy amongst the Albanian migrant population by contributing to their labeling as criminals and if this curbs their smooth social integration to the same degree in which it does in many European states. The conclusions you will read below are based on the analysis on how Albanians were depicted in New York newspapers in the period 1990-2014; interviews with non-Albanian population in New York City (N=85) and interviews with ethnic Albanian immigrants, including offenders in New York City (N=88).

The research first examined general scholarly literature on media, stigmatizations and crime, looking at existing studies on the portrayal of Albanian people in European countries such as Greece, Italy, and the UK. The next literature review was targeted to an analysis of U.S. language newspapers containing both positive and negative depictions of ethnic Albanians. Our selection mainly included newspapers such as The New York Times, The New York Post and The New York Daily News. The second phase of our study was based on short survey interviews conducted on the streets of two New York City boroughs: The Belmont area of the Bronx and the Ridgewood area of Queens-zone known to host a high Albanian community. The areas were also

identified as 'hot spots' for Albanian organized crime activity by the New York City Police (NYPD, 2006). Finally, we conducted face-to-face interviews with the Albanian Diaspora 2 including documented and undocumented migrants as well as offenders. The sample was composed of 62.5% males and 37.5% females. More than half of the participants fell between the age range of 18-35 years old, and 34% of interviewees held a high school diploma, 89% were foreign-born. The results of these statistics were interpreted using SPSS. 3

The academic literature demonstrated that negative depiction of immigrants can lead to stereotypical public opinion towards foreigners. For example, research showed that newspaper readers consistently exposed to stories about ethnic criminality were more likely to perceive immigrants as a threat to national security than those reading less about ethnic crime cases. We also found a psychological explanation for the influence news media can exhibit on the formation of racially charged stereotypes.

Priming occurs when mass media observers are unable to evade messages that are omnipresent with mainstream news and entertainment channels that reinforce the image of the out-group member as criminal.

Research explained that the hegemonic immigrant shaming cycle is especially corrosive because of how challenging it is for an individual to regress and reconstruct their attitudes to include favorable perceptions of ethnic groups after the priming process has already been mentally anchored. Individually speaking, our literature review also showed us that the decay of group stigma is difficult to overcome because stigmatized individuals embody the deviant self-concept and assume the role that media has assigned them as they start to comport themselves as a criminal. The subconscious acceptance of the adverse social image impairs the person's successful social inclusion. Furthermore, these persons consciously refrain from placing themselves in situations where they would have direct interaction with other ethnic groups for fear that they will face peer rejection.

Shortly after the Albanians migrated their land and sea borders to Greece and Italy during their civic catastrophe in 1991 and 1992, popular opinion of the refugees shifted from deserving political migrants to greedy economic gangsters. In their research, King and Mai (2004) state that Albanians were quickly one of the most excluded groups in the European Union. Italian newspapers released a slew of news articles negatively portraying Albanians as virulent criminals. In Greece, journalists went so far as to publish data from state law enforcement officials to use describe them as a dangerousness reference point. We noticed from over three qualitative studies that Albanians are occluded entrance to key social sectors such as housing and labor markets because of the noxious perceptions created by the national media. In summary, the literature is suggestive of the theory that since Albanian immigrants in Europe were forced to occupy the lowest tiers of the social echelon system (because image garnered from media channels) they often shifted towards pursuing goals of materialistic success via illicit means as they became increasingly frustrated by repeated encounters of goal blockage, a process known to stimulate social deviancy.

Our New York based news media analysis illustrated that the percentage of stories regarding Albanian profit-oriented and involved in violent crime while significant, was not as prominent as in EU media sources. In addition, the most common crimes linked to Albanian immigrants that are frequently mentioned in New York media are related to organized theft, burglaries, and drug trafficking. There was very minimal information available on human trafficking, illegal immigration and prostitution. These illegal activities seem to be more popularly reported when publishing on Albanians in European media. This finding proves that media effect on cultivating attitudes on criminal labeling of ethnic Albanians is overall weaker in the U.S., particularly when compared to some European countries where Albanians are routinely linked to episodes of extremist criminality such as brutal murders and sexual exploitation of minors by press agencies.

Interviews with residents in the Bronx and Queens showed that people tend to exhibit more positive out-group perceptions of Albanians, even without experiencing any direct contact. In other cases, those who did have frequent contact whether in school or at work did not hold positive perceptions towards them. Over 50% of the time, respondents who indicated that they only know of Albanians via indirect contact expressed either positive or neutral perceptions of them. Furthermore, we saw fluctuating attitudes of Albanians for respondents who knew Albanians through mass media observations only (swaying from positive/neutral to negative) as an indicator that media-influenced opinions are wavering instead of being strong. Commonly

cited personality attributes of Albanians being “ambitious” and “hardworking” demonstrate that overall the Albanian community is respected by many American and non-Albanian social counterparts. However, it should be considered that despite the majority of positive opinions, many non-Albanians still perceived this population to be especially cloistered in comparison to other more assimilated cultures living in New York City. A majority of the respondents noted that the Albanian community remains a highly celled ethnicity and complete acculturation and assimilation into the U.S. host country has yet to take place.

Our third group of findings from the Diaspora sample remained relatively consistent. While some participants exhibited opinions that they had confronted inequalities within the US, they did not believe this was the byproduct of the country’s media. Ability to integrate in housing and labor markets was not seen as any more difficult than the typical immigrant experience of other common groups (Hispanics, Italians and Irish). Respondents who mentioned criminality associated to Albanians in the news media did not believe that this imagery created a tainted image of their people or their homeland.

Instead, Diaspora members, many of them being foreign and having lived in Western Europe prior to their move to the U.S. would mention that Albanian’s criminality is much more exacerbated in the dramatic headlines and moral panic norms stirred by Italian, Greek, and English papers abroad. Finally, it is critical to maintain that our study concluded that even if Albanians in the U.S. feel that they are stereotyped or that their co-nationals are shown in print and TV outlets as criminals, this does not appear to stagnate their socio-economic opportunities for betterment.

Results from this study have demonstrated that New York media does not place a salient emphasis on Albanian criminality; host country nationals do not adopt xenophobia toward Albanians, nor do members of the cultural Diaspora feel that a criminal label occludes them from accessing key integration opportunities with this area of the United States. Although the initial hypothesis of this study maintained that media influence, social labeling, and marginalization are conducive forces that led to the rise of U.S. based ethnic Albanian criminality, the data collected was not supportive of this hypothesis. Instead, many non-Albanians found their values of hard-work, ambition, and determination to succeed in this country to be in line with the goals of achieving the American dream and in this regard they were highly respected instead of shamed by the out-group.

The main idea behind our study was to advocate for the social annihilation of malpractices which either intentionally or un-intentionally offset a cataclysmic process of social exclusion and crime. Our theory was that when the shared concept of biases towards foreigners - formed by mass- media outlets - undermines the foundation of a democratic society which should strive to endorse peace, security and protection of human rights for all of its inhabitants, the result can usher in a wave of ethnic based criminality. Although the results did not demonstrate a strong linkage between the effects of media onto crime, it should be restated that further research into the criminalizing effects of media stigmatization and social labeling of immigrant populations is necessary to promote the advancement of international criminal justice policies and universal human rights norms within global society.

Footnotes

1. Department of Justice, NIJ, Du Bois Fellowship 2012, Culture, Migration and Organized Crime: Ethnic Albanian Organized Crime in New York.
2. Diaspora is a group of people who live outside of the area where they or their ancestors once lived.
3. SPSS is a software package used for statistical analysis

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