

# Mixing Up Crime and Immigration

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Special to Italy Daily

How will Silvio Berlusconi fulfil his campaign promise to cut crime?

In a pre-election interview with *The Sunday Times*, Mr. Berlusconi described how he believes that illegal immigration has increased crime.

"The immigrants sail here across the Adriatic, or get over the border with Slovenia, and then they disappear in other European Union countries, including Germany and Britain," he said. "And that has meant a rise in crime. What we need to ensure is that any illegal aliens arrested for committing crimes are repatriated immediately, either in ships or planes. They cannot be tolerated."

Many opinion polls in the lead up to the election recorded that voters perceived crime as a high priority and Mr. Berlusconi's comments could encourage a link with immigration in the public opinion. As a result, he may be tempted to think that his pledge to limit illegal immigration should also help allay fears of crime. But nothing could be further from the truth.

As the number of immigrants entering Italy has risen over recent years, the kinds of crimes often associated with immigrants has fallen. Last year, cases of burglary and murder fell by 7 percent and armed robbery by 4.2 percent. Meanwhile, drug-related crimes — mainly dealing and production — fell by 22 percent, according to a study by the Confescentric retailers' association last month.

Rome now has lower crime and murder rates than Paris, London or Berlin.

However, many of those accused of crimes are non-Italians. Some 93,596 foreigners were accused of a crime, 28,067 were arrested and 14,050 were in prison in 1999, according to the Justice Ministry. Those figures indicate that more than two thirds of the charges were unfounded and that many immigrants undergo unnecessary police attention.

This is not because Italians are becoming less tolerant of immigrants. As immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa and China become more integrated, Italians are less likely to make the simplistic link between immigrants and crime.

Report 2000, prepared for the Social Affairs Ministry. Transcultural Institute and the Cecchini Pace Foundation, concluded that intolerance is at relatively low levels in Italy. Only 32.3 percent of Italians consider different religious practices as "threatening," and 83 percent feel that immigrants need not give up their original culture.

School integration is proceeding rapidly in regions like Lombardy, where 24.5 percent of students are from non-Italian backgrounds.

When Italian children are playing with the children of non-Italian families and want to invite them home, keeping up the prejudice that immigrants are all criminals becomes unsustainable.

In addition, May's election outcome showed that virtulent racist voters are increasingly marginal. The parties perceived as

being more overtly anti-immigrant, the Northern League and the National Alliance, experienced significant falls in their share of the vote compared to the 1996 election.

But politicians and prosecutors constantly reinforce the link between immigrants and crime. In particular, immigrants from Albania are depicted as belonging to a new powerful Mafia. Prosecutor Cataldo Motra has stated: "Everything passes through the Albanians. The road for drugs and arms and people, meaning illegal immigrants destined for Europe, is in Albanian hands."

Giuliano Amato, the former prime minister, secured the right of Italian police to operate inside Albania. In addition to the warships patrolling Albanian ports, the last government sent 1,100 Italian military into Albania, the largest contingent of foreign troops in the country.

While this creates an impression of a criminal threat emanating from countries like Albania, it is important to recall that many Italians have been infamous for Mafia criminal activities. And as the Clean Hands investigations of the 1990s demonstrated, it is people in power who have the means to commit lucrative crimes, not the powerless who lack the resources.

Instead of coming to Italy with criminal intentions, most immigrants simply want to earn a decent living. This is illustrated by a recent Carpio Foundation report that found one fourth of all Italian jobs created in 2000 went to foreign workers, up 20 percent on 1999.

Italians themselves have a long tradition of moving to another country to improve their lives. Between 1950 and 1980, 6.5 million left Italy seeking better conditions.

I moved from Britain to Italy for a more prosperous life. Nobody stopped me because I am from a European Union country.

Why shouldn't Eastern European, Chinese or African people have the same right?

Mr. Berlusconi's new government should not restrict immigration for any reason, illegal or otherwise. Believing that such a policy would reduce crime or the fear of crime would be a mistake. Census, a state-funded think tank, has identified a reality gap whereby 76.9 percent of Italians believed that crime rates rose while they fell by 2.2 percent.

This gap is not due to racist Italians reacting to an influx of immigrants. The gap exists because the fear of crime expresses the pervasive climate of fear of other people, not crime itself.

In our atomized times, such fears can become attached to anyone from pedophiles to stalkers. Rebuilding communities based on trust is the only solution to such problems.

If Mr. Berlusconi really wants to reduce crime, my advice is that he leave immigrants alone and focus on addressing his own alleged business irregularities.

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