Immigration Enforcement and Hispanic Identity

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Abstract

Ethnic identity is typically treated as an immutable demographic attribute in most economic analysis. Motivated by recent work on ethnic attrition, we estimate the causal effect of immigration enforcement on the self-identification of Hispanic children. Exploiting the staggered rollout of Secure Communities, we find that immigration enforcement reduces self-reported Hispanic identity. This average effect masks a notable divergence across generations defined by the strength of their family ties to their Hispanic heritage or ancestry. While first- and third-generation families retreat from their Hispanic identity, second-generation families increase identification. We also find larger reductions among college-educated families and no differential effects by sanctuary city. Our results indicate that ethnic identity is not immune to policy, suggesting that policy evaluations should account for endogenous ethnic identification to avoid conflating policy effects with compositional changes in the target population.

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1 Introduction

Recent literature documents that Hispanics by heritage increasingly self-identify as non-Hispanics over time, a phenomenon known as "ethnic attrition" (Duncan and Trejo 2007, 2009, 2011b, 2017).[1] Understanding these identity dynamics is particularly important given that Hispanics now represent the largest minority group in the United States.[2] Racial and ethnic attitudes (e.g. local prejudice) significantly influence the formation of Hispanic identity (Hadah 2024).[3] The underlying causes of changes in self-reported ethnic identity are not well understood. A better understanding of how people choose Hispanic identity is crucial for studies examining differences in outcomes between Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations, including educational attainment (Antman and Cortes 2023), health outcomes (Antman, Duncan, and Trejo 2016a; Antman, Duncan, and Trejo 2020), and labor market performance (Antman, Duncan, and Trejo 2023).

One promising avenue for understanding the dynamics of ethnic self-identity is studying the causal link between policies that may disproportionately impact Hispanic and racial minority groups. This paper estimates the causal effect of immigration enforcement on the self-reporting of children's Hispanic identity using variation from the Secure Communities (SC) program.[4] The SC program, implemented between 2008 and 2013, represents the largest expansion of local jurisdictions' involvement in immigration enforcement in U.S. history (Miles and Cox 2014). The program operated through coordination between federal authorities and local law enforcement agencies, increasing information sharing to facilitate the detection and removal of undocumented immigrants. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) rolled out SC on a county-by-county basis, creating substantial geographic and temporal variation in enforcement intensity. While the direct legal impacts of immigration enforcement fall on those who may be in violation of immigration laws, a growing literature documents substantial "spillover effects" on key outcomes of the broader Hispanic community, including participation in the safety net, poverty, and engagement with local institutions (Watson 2014; Amuedo-Dorantes, Arenas-Arroyo, and Sevilla 2018; Dee and Murphy 2020; Alsan and Yang 2024). We extend this literature by examining whether immigration enforcement alters ethnic self-identification itself.

Our conceptual framework draws inspiration from Akerlof and Kranton (2000), in

1. Similar ethnic attrition has been documented in China (Francis-Tan and Mu 2022).

2. The 2020 Census counted 62 million Hispanics (19 percent of the population), which is triple the number of Hispanics counted three decades earlier (Flood et al. 2021). The Hispanic population numbers are based on the authors' calculations from the Current Population Survey and US Census data.

3. Hadah (2025b) shows that having a Spanish-sounding surname reduces earnings by 5 percentage points compared to having a White surname among children of inter-ethnic marriages. In addition, Bertoli, Laouénan, and Valette (2023) find that an increase in the salience of Hispanic identity leads Hispanics to receive significantly longer sentences compared to non-Hispanic citizens.

4. Throughout the paper, we use self-reporting and self-identification interchangeably.

which identity enters the utility function alongside the payoffs from actions, and individuals choose actions and self-categorizations within socially constructed categories. In our setting, ethnic self-identification is itself a salient action. Individuals of Hispanic heritage choose whether to publicly report Hispanic identity, and this choice may carry psychological and social costs as well as institutional consequences. Secure Communities provides a policy shock that changes the local enforcement environment and the expected consequences of being treated as Hispanic. This can generate an *attrition* incentive if individuals respond by distancing from Hispanic identification to reduce perceived exposure, but it can also generate a *reactive identity* response if heightened threat increases the value of in-group attachment and solidarity.[5] The net effect of Secure Communities on Hispanic identity is therefore theoretically ambiguous.

Using the Current Population Survey, we leverage the staggered rollout of Secure Communities and the imputation estimator of Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024). This approach addresses well-documented biases that arise when using conventional two-way fixed effects estimators in settings with staggered treatment adoption (Goodman-Bacon 2021; Sun and Abraham 2021; De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille 2020; Roth et al. 2023; De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille 2023).

The primary contribution of this paper is to provide new causal evidence that non-economic policy interventions can significantly impact ethnic self-identification. Most previous studies either present theoretical examinations of identity choice or provide non-causal evidence of the drivers of ethnic attrition (Darity Jr, Mason, and Stewart 2006; Duncan and Trejo 2011a; Hadah 2024). A notable exception is Antman and Duncan (2015), which examines how state-level affirmative action bans impact racial self-identification, finding that multiracial individuals are 30% less likely to identify with their minority group after affirmative action bans. We advance this literature by demonstrating how immigration enforcement creates incentives that alter Hispanic self-identification.

As a secondary contribution, our results have important methodological implications for the extensive literature examining Secure Communities, which implicitly assumes that ethnic identification is stable over time. In our framework, self-reported Hispanic identity is a choice object that can respond endogenously to enforcement environments. Specifically, studies that rely on self-reported Hispanic identity as a regressor in difference-in-differences designs or to define their analytic samples introduce endogenous measurement error that threatens internal validity. Given our findings that Hispanic identity may be a function of the treatment (Secure Communi-

5. The reactive identity response draws from the idea of "reactive ethnicity" from the sociological literature, which posits that a hostile context of reception can prompt second-generation immigrants to assert their ethnic identity rather than assimilate (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut 2008). Similarly, other studies suggest that xenophobic rhetoric can mobilize racial solidarity among those with the legal security to respond (Pérez 2015).

ties), research designs comparing Hispanic to non-Hispanic outcomes are susceptible to biases from using a "bad control" (Angrist and Pischke 2009; Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018). If immigration enforcement systematically changes how individuals self-identify ethnically, studies that condition on Hispanic identity may conflate direct policy effects with compositional changes in who identifies as Hispanic. Consequently, the previous literature may have mask the true economic and health costs of policies such as Secure Communities by not addressing this composition bias (Wang and Kaushal 2019; Alsan and Yang 2024; Vu 2024).

Our analysis yields several key findings and uncovers substantial heterogeneity in how Secure Communities impacts the self-reporting of Hispanic identity across different generations. We find that SC implementation led to an overall reduction in Hispanic identity of 5.9 percentage points (6.4%). However, this average effect masks substantial generational differences. On the one hand, first-generation Hispanic children (the sample with children and their parents born in Spanish-speaking countries) experienced the largest reduction in Hispanic identity of 22.9 percentage points (23.7%). In addition, third-generation children showed moderate reductions in Hispanic identity.

On the other hand, second-generation children (U.S.-born with at least one parent born in a Spanish-speaking country) increased their Hispanic identity self-reporting by 6.9 percentage points on average (7.5%). The finding for second-generation Hispanic families is consistent with enforcement policies triggering a reactive identity response, increasing their self-identification with Hispanic identity. Notably, the positive effects among second-generation children are entirely driven by children with Hispanic fathers and non-Hispanic White mothers, suggesting that family structure plays a crucial role in identity responses to enforcement. This finding is consistent with recent evidence that forced assimilation policies can reverse integration and strengthen minority identity (Fouka 2020). In addition, our results align with Antman and Duncan (2024), who document a similar divergence in response to California's Proposition 187, where vulnerable populations with stronger ties to the minority conceal their identity while those with weaker observable ties affirm it. Finally, we also document significant heterogeneity by parental education, with college-educated Hispanic families more likely to reduce Hispanic identification. However, sanctuary city policies do not appear to meaningfully moderate these effects.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the institutional context of Secure Communities. Section 3 discusses a simple conceptual model. Section 4 presents our data sources and the measurement of Hispanic identity. Section 5 outlines our empirical framework and identification strategy. Section 6 presents and discusses the empirical results. Section 7 examines robustness of our results. Section 8 concludes.

2 Overview of Secure Communities

This section presents a brief overview of the Secure Communities program, drawing heavily on previous studies (Miles and Cox 2014; Alsan and Yang 2024; Ali, Brown, and Herbst 2024). Secure Communities was a federal immigration enforcement program administered by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) designed to identify and remove non-citizens in local police custody who may have potentially violated immigration laws, thereby making them at risk of deportation. Launched in October 2008, the program established automatic data sharing between the biometric databases of local law enforcement and federal immigration authorities. The program's stated objective was to enhance public safety through prioritizing the removal of high-risk criminal aliens such as those convicted of violent offenses or major drug crimes.[6]

Prior to the SC program, identifying non-citizens that may be subject to deportation procedures relied on manual methods, such as the Criminal Alien Program (CAP) or 287(g) agreements (Miles and Cox 2014). These earlier programs required federal officers to physically interview inmates or deputized local officers to screen arrested individuals. In contrast, SC automated this process, granting ICE a "remote presence" in local jails without requiring direct officer involvement at the time of booking. The automated sharing of biometric data was the main novelty of the SC program. When local police arrested an individual and submitted their fingerprints to the Federal Bureau of Investigation for a routine criminal background check, the data was automatically forwarded to DHS to be checked against the Automated Biometric Identification System. If an arrested person's fingerprints matched a record in the DHS database, ICE officials reviewed the individual's immigration status. If a violation was identified, ICE could issue a "detainer," asking the local jail to hold the individual for up to 48 hours to facilitate transfer into federal custody.

SC was implemented on a staggered, county-by-county basis between 2008 and 2013. The rollout began with 14 counties in late 2008 and expanded rapidly, achieving full nationwide coverage by January 2013. Figure 1 presents the share of counties with active Secure Communities (left axis) and the number of nationwide monthly removals or deportations (right axis) from 2008 through 2013. This figure shows that the share of counties activating SC increased over time in a staggered fashion and reached nationwide adoption by the end of 2013. The timing of a county's activation was determined by federal authorities and was correlated with proximity to the Mexican border

6. ICE categorized deportable individuals into three levels based on the severity of their criminal history to guide enforcement priorities. Level 1 individuals are those convicted of "aggravated felonies" (e.g., murder, rape, kidnapping) or two or more felonies (Miles and Cox 2014). Level 2 individuals are persons convicted of any other felony or three or more misdemeanors and Level 3 individuals are convicted of misdemeanor offenses (Miles and Cox 2014).

and the size of the local Hispanic population (Miles and Cox 2014). Although ICE initially solicited participation through memoranda of agreement (MOA), the agency later clarified that SC was mandatory (Alsan and Yang 2024). By 2011, ICE terminated all MOAs and stated that local jurisdictions could not opt out of the biometric information sharing (Miles and Cox 2014). Between its inception and 2014, the program resulted in more than 46 million fingerprint submissions, 2.3 million removable alien identifications, and approximately 440,000 deportations. More than 90% of those deported were men, and the program disproportionately affected Hispanic communities (Alsan and Yang 2024; Ali, Brown, and Herbst 2024). A growing literature has emerged examining the effects of SC on a host of economic and health outcomes (Miles and Cox 2014; Wang and Kaushal 2019; Amuedo-Dorantes, Churchill, and Song 2022; Alsan and Yang 2024; Vu 2024).

3 Conceptual Framework

This paper builds on the theoretical framework developed in Hadah (2024), which incorporates prejudice into the identity model of Akerlof and Kranton (2000). The central idea is that individuals belong to (ethnic) groups, and their actions can either affirm or distance themselves from those groups. Deviations from group-associated behavioral norms impose utility costs.

Consider an individual i with underlying Hispanic heritage $h_i \in \{H, NH\}$, representing Hispanic and non-Hispanic status respectively. Utility depends on the individual's actions and the degree to which those actions align with their identity I_i:

$$U_i = U_i(\mathbf{a_i}, \mathbf{a_{-i}}, I_i). \tag{1}$$

Identity itself is endogenous, shaped by one's own actions, the actions of others, and the behavioral norms associated with one's ethnic group:

$$I_i = I_i(\mathbf{a_i}, \mathbf{a_{-i}}; \mathbf{B}_{h_i}). \tag{2}$$

Here, $\mathbf{a_i}$ represents individual i's actions. In our context, a key action is an individual's *reported* ethnic identity in survey data or other public-facing contexts, $r_i \in \{H, NH\}$. Also, $\mathbf{a_{-i}}$ captures the actions of others that affect individual i's identity. The actions of others may include discriminatory behavior (prejudice), institutional treatment, and the broader social/economic environment. Importantly, since identity is socially embedded, others' responses to the individual and how others perceive the individual's category enter both utility and identity through $\mathbf{a_{-i}}$. Following the concept of "prescriptions" in Akerlof and Kranton (2000), the term $\mathbf{B}_{h_i}$ denotes the

behavioral norms that society associates with heritage category h_i.

Utility maximization with respect to action $\mathbf{a_i}$, given the heritage category h_i, prescribed behaviors $\mathbf{B}_{h_i}$, and others' actions $\mathbf{a_{-i}}$, yields the first-order condition:

$$\frac{\partial U_i}{\partial a_i} + \frac{\partial U_i}{\partial I_i} \cdot \frac{dI_i}{da_i} = 0. \tag{3}$$

Let $a_i^\star$ denote the optimal action, generating utility $U_i^\star$. Suppose that one component of $\mathbf{a_i}$, the individual's reported ethnicity (r_i), can change at cost (c_i). Such costs may include psychological dissonance, social costs within the family, or the cost of departing from a long-held self-concept. For an individual with Hispanic heritage ($h_i = H$), reported identity switching from $r_i = H$ to $r_i = NH$ occurs when

$$\tilde{U}_i^\star \geqslant U_i^\star + c_i, \tag{4}$$

where $\tilde{U}_i^\star$ is the utility associated with the counterfactual reporting choice (and corresponding optimal actions). Identity switching therefore occurs when the net benefit $\tilde{U}_i^\star - U_i^\star$ exceeds the switching cost c_i. Importantly, these net benefits are non-zero only when both $\frac{dI_i}{da_i} \neq 0$ and $\frac{\partial U_i}{\partial I_i} \neq 0$. In our context, r_i is a salient action, so changes in reported identity can affect utility directly (through institutional responses) and indirectly through identity (via self-concept and prescriptions).

We note the following remark regarding the measurement and interpretation of identity in our study. Our outcome is self-reported Hispanic identity in survey data. A change in reported identity among individuals with Hispanic heritage does not necessarily imply misreporting in a narrow "mismeasurement" sense. Our view is that ethnic categories can be context-dependent, suggesting that individuals may update their self-concept as the social meaning of categories change. They may also strategically adjust public self-presentation (misreporting) in response to institutional incentives or they may interpret survey categories differently as political and policy environments shift.

Empirically, survey data alone cannot distinguish between these mechanisms. We treat reported ethnic identity as an endogenous choice that can respond to policy, regardless of whether the underlying mechanism is contextual reporting, identity updating, or shifts in category interpretation. The key implication for our analysis is that self-identification may itself be affected by Secure Communities. Specifically, the adoption of Secure Communities represents a shift in $\mathbf{a_{-i}}$ by increasing the salience of being treated as Hispanic in institutional settings (i.e. the expected consequences or penalties associated with Hispanic visibility). This shift may generate either an attrition incentive or a reactive (group-affirming) identity response. Conceptually, we can capture these channels in multiple ways.

First, an increase in the expected penalty associated with being *treated as* Hispanic can be represented as an added cost in the utility function, which may be larger for individuals in mixed-status families or those with greater perceived Hispanic visibility. This increases the relative attractiveness of reporting $r_i = NH$ for some individuals via the attrition channel.

Second, we can view the same shift in $\mathbf{a_{-i}}$ as altering the identity payoffs from group attachment, which may change both the marginal utility of identity $\left(\frac{\partial U_i}{\partial I_i}\right)$ and the sensitivity of identity to identity-affirming actions $\left(\frac{dI_i}{da_i}\right)$. In this case, it is theoretically ambiguous which channel dominates. On one hand, for some Hispanic individuals, Secure Communities may reduce the relative payoff to Hispanic identification and increase the relative attractiveness of identifying as non-Hispanic. In the notation above, this can be represented as changes in $\frac{\partial U_i}{\partial I_i}$ and/or $\frac{dI_i}{da_i}$ that raise $\tilde{U}_i^\star$ relative to $U_i^\star$, making identity switching more appealing. For these individuals, the net benefit of switching to $r_i = NH$ increases, leading to greater attrition.

On the other hand, policies that generate perceived hostility toward a group can increase the psychological return to affirming group membership. For some Hispanic individuals, this external threat could strengthen in-group attachment, making deviations from Hispanic identity norms more psychologically costly. For these individuals, the net benefit of switching identities $\tilde{U}_i^\star - U_i^\star$ decreases, as the utility under Hispanic identification $U_i^\star$ now incorporates a stronger identity component that would be forfeited upon switching.[7]

Overall, the net effect of Secure Communities on Hispanic vs non-Hispanic reporting is theoretically ambiguous and likely heterogeneous. When the attrition channel dominates, the model predicts increased ethnic attrition (a shift from $r_i = H$ to $r_i = NH$). When the reactive identity channel dominates, the model predicts stable or increased Hispanic reporting.

Our conceptual framework motivates several empirical considerations for our paper. First, the analysis should examine individual characteristics such as immigrant generation, parental intermarriage, or surname exposure that generate different payoffs and/or different switching costs under alternative reported identities. Second, contextual factors such as local enforcement intensity may differentially affect outcomes under different reports. Third, we focus our primary analytic sample on White families with a Hispanic heritage because the cost of reporting as non-Hispanic is lower for them and passing as non-Hispanic is more feasible. This ensures that observed changes in reported identity are empirically plausible. By restricting the sample to White individuals, we also mitigate confounding via racial factors.

7. Fouka (2020) documents a related defensive identity response, where German Americans strengthened cultural attachment in response to state-level bans on German-language instruction during World War I.

4 DATA

4.1 DATA SOURCES

We use the Current Population Survey (CPS) set to study the effect of Secure Communities on the ethnic identity of children of Hispanic immigrants. The CPS is a monthly household survey conducted jointly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, covering approximately 60,000 households. The CPS contains detailed demographic information including self-reported Hispanic origin, race, and ancestry, as well as parental birthplace for individuals residing with their parents. By linking children under 18 who live with their families to their parents, we can identify those with at least one foreign-born Hispanic parent and compare their subjective ethnic identification (self-reported Hispanic identity) with a heritage-based measure derived from parental nativity and ancestry. As discussed in greater detail in the next subsection, focusing on children allows us to classify Hispanic ancestry across multiple generations using the CPS's birthplace information on parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.

We construct our analytic sample from 2003 to 2013 with several key restrictions. The sample is limited to White children under 18 years of age who are living with their parents. The sample only includes those who with non-missing information on age, gender, and birthplace information necessary to construct our heritage-based measures of Hispanic identity. We present the summary statistics of the overall sample and by Hispanic immigrant generation in Table 1.

Although the CPS measures children's ethnic identity through the responses of parents and other caregivers, this form of proxy reporting likely aligns closely with children's true identities, given the central role parents play in shaping identity formation. Consistent with this view, Antman, Duncan, and Trejo (2020) argue that parental reporting tends to understate rather than exaggerate ethnic attrition, since individuals may be more prone to abandon ethnic identifiers after forming independent households in adulthood. They further document that observed rates of Mexican identification among children do not differ systematically depending on which household member responds to the survey. Extending this evidence, Hadah (2024) and Hadah (2025a) show that proxy reporting does not meaningfully affect measured racial or ethnic identification for either Hispanic or Asian children.

4.2 MEASURING GENERATIONAL HISPANIC HERITAGE GROUPS

To study the effect of SC on self-reported Hispanic identity, we distinguish between ancestry-based Hispanic identity and self-reported Hispanic identity when defining our analytic samples. Using ancestry and birthplace information, we construct a heritage-

based measure of Hispanic background and classify individuals into generational groups based on their genealogical closeness to Hispanic ancestry (Flood et al. 2021). Specifically, we use the CPS to construct a heritage-based measure of the Hispanic identity of minors under the age 17 who live with their parents between 1994 and 2019 based on information on their place of birth, both parents' place of birth, and the place of birth of their four grandparents (Antman, Duncan, and Trejo 2016b; Antman, Duncan, and Trejo 2020). Using this information, we construct a sample of first-, second-, third-generation, and fourth Hispanic immigrants.[8] We reiterate that this heritage-based measure is not meant to be a benchmark for the "correctness" or "truthfulness" of self-identification. Rather, it provides a consistent way to identify individuals with Hispanic roots and to study how reported identity varies with policy exposure across generations.

The data allow us to identify four generations of Hispanic families.[9] First-generation children are those born in a Spanish-speaking country with both parents also being born in a Spanish-speaking country. Second-generation children are native-born citizens to at least one parent that was born in a Spanish-speaking country. Since we can identify different types of parents and grandparents using the place of birth of parents, we also divide parents of second-generation children into three types, i.e., heritage-based Hispanic-father-Hispanic-mother, Hispanic-father-White-mother, and White-father-Hispanic-mother.

Third-generation children are native-born citizens to two native-born parents and at least one grandparent that was born in a Spanish-speaking country. Fourth-generation+ Hispanic families are native-born citizens to two native-born parents, have all grandparents being native, and have at least one parent self-reported Hispanic identity. To facilitate a placebo analysis, we further partition Fourth-generation+ Hispanic families based on their self-reported race—fourth-generation+ White families (both parents self-reported that their race was White identity) and fourth-generation+ Black families (both parents self-reported that their race was Black).

5 Empirical Strategy

In this paper, we estimate the dynamic effects of Secure Communities on Hispanic identity using the imputation estimator developed by Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024). This approach addresses the biases that arise when using conventional two-way fixed effects (TWFE) estimators in settings with staggered adoption difference-in-

8. For the purposes of this analysis, Spanish-speaking countries are defined as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Equatorial Guinea, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

9. Our sample does not include naturally born US citizens that were born abroad to US parents.

differences designs (Goodman-Bacon 2021; Sun and Abraham 2021; De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille 2020; Roth et al. 2023; De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille 2023). We now discuss the model, identification assumptions, and estimation approach.

Let Y_{icst} denote the measure of Hispanic identity for individual i in county c, state s, and year t. Following Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024), we specify the following event study model that allows for unrestricted treatment effect heterogeneity:

$$Y_{icst} = \lambda_c + \gamma_t + X'_{icst}\delta + D_{icst}\tau_{icst} + \varepsilon_{icst} \tag{5}$$

where λ_c represents county fixed effects, γ_t are time fixed effects, and X_{icst} is a vector of individual controls (sex and parental education). D_{cst} is an indicator equal to one if Secure Communities is active in county c at time t, and τ_{icst} represents the fully heterogeneous treatment effect for county c at time t. In equation (5), for each county, the data contains an activation date, E_c, when D_{icst} switches from 0 to 1. This specification allows treatment effects to vary arbitrarily across counties and time periods without imposing parametric restrictions.

Our identification strategy leverages the staggered roll-out of Secure Communities across counties between 2008 and 2013. The model in equation (5) is generated from three main assumptions on potential outcomes and causal effects. First, the parallel trends assumption requires that in the absence of Secure Communities, Hispanic identity would have evolved similarly between counties. Second, we assume no anticipation effects—that Secure Communities did not affect Hispanic identity before the program's actual implementation in each county. Finally, we impose a model of unrestricted causal effects, referred to as the "null model" in Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024). In this case, the target estimand (parameter of interest) is the dynamic average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) h periods (horizons) since the treatment for a given $h \geqslant 0$:

$$\tau_h = \sum_{\{i,c,s,t\}:K_{cst}=h} w_{icst}\tau_{icst} \tag{6}$$

where weight is given by $w_{icst} = \frac{\mathbb{1}(K_{cst}=h)}{|\{i,c,s,t\}:K_{cst}=h|}$ and sums to one within each event time h. Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024) proposes an imputation estimator that uses untreated observations to predict what would have happened to treated units in the absence of treatment.

The estimator proceeds in three steps:

1. Using only the untreated units only (i.e., observations with $D_{cst} = 0$) and ordinary least squares (OLS), we obtain $\hat{\lambda}_c$, $\hat{\gamma}_t$, and $\hat{\delta}$ from

$$Y_{icst} = \lambda_c + \gamma_t + X'_{icst}\delta + \varepsilon_{icst}.$$

2. For each treated observation $\{i, c, s, t\}$ with $D_{icst} = 1$, we construct untreated potential outcome (counterfactual outcome) as $\hat{Y}_{icst}(0) = \hat{\lambda}_c + \hat{\gamma}_t + X'_{icst}\hat{\delta}$ and estimate the individual-specific treatment effect as $\hat{\tau}_{icst} = Y_{icst} - \hat{Y}_{icst}(0)$.

3. Estimate the event-time coefficients as weighted averages: $\hat{\tau}_h = \sum_{\{i,c,s,t\}:K_{cst}=h} w_{icst}\hat{\tau}_{icst}$.

We cluster standard errors at the county level to account for potential serial correlation within counties over time that are robust to arbitrary forms of heteroskedasticity. Although the maintained assumptions of the differences-in-differences design is untestable in the post-treatment period, we can perform a robust test of the identifying assumptions in the pre-treatment period (pre-trends test). Unlike the conventional pre-trends test using standard event studies, the imputation-based method affords the opportunity to test for parallel pre-trends and no-anticipation assumptions using only the untreated observations.

To conduct the pre-trends test, one needs to choose an alternative model for the outcome Y_{icst} for the untreated observations. Specifically, for an observable vector W_{icst}, the alternative model may be written as $Y_{icst} = \lambda_c + \gamma_t + X'_{icst}\delta + W_{icst}\theta + \varepsilon_{icst}$, where W_{icst} may represent a set of binary indicators for $1, \ldots, k$ periods prior to the start of the treatment for some chosen k. Next, using the untreated observations only, obtain the OLS estimate of θ and test the hypothesis $\theta = 0$. We present all our main results using graphically, combining these pre-trend estimates with the horizon-specific ATTs from equation (6). As discussed in Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024), this robust OLS-based pre-trends test avoids the pre-testing concerns in Roth (2022). Specifically, regression-based tests use the full sample, including the treated observations, thereby imposing restrictions on treatment effect heterogeneity. Moreover, conducting inference using the imputation estimates of the ATT remains valid even if we condition on passing the pre-trends, avoiding the issue of inflated variances and overly conservative inference that often arises with standard pre-trend tests Roth (2022).

6 Results and Discussion

6.1 Main Effects of Secure Communities on Self-reporting of Hispanic Identity

We begin by presenting our main findings on the effects of Secure Communities on children's Hispanic identity. Figure 2 displays the dynamic treatment effects estimated using the imputation estimator described in Section 5. We find a consistent pattern of reduced self-reporting of Hispanic identity following Secure Communities implementation.

For the full sample in Panel (a), our estimates indicate that Secure Communities led to a statistically significant reduction in the self-reporting of Hispanic identity among Hispanic children. The overall ATT estimate is 5.9 percentage points reduction, representing a 6.4% decline in self-identification relative to the pre-treatment level of Hispanic identification. The dynamic pattern shows that effects occur within the first year of implementation, with point estimates remaining relatively stable across event-time horizons.

The pre-trend coefficients provide reassuring evidence for our identification strategy. As shown in Panel (a), the lead coefficients are small in magnitude and statistically indistinguishable from zero, supporting the parallel trends assumption underlying our analysis.

6.2 Heterogeneous Effects by Generational Hispanic Heritage Groups

The aggregate results mask substantial heterogeneity across Hispanic families by generational proximity to Hispanic ancestry. As discussed in Section 4.2 and following prior work, we create generations of Hispanic heritage using the countries of birth of the respondent child, their parents, and grandparents, which provides a consistent, ancestry-based measure of Hispanic background (Duncan and Trejo 2011b). We hypothesize that different generations of Hispanic heritage differ in their underlying likelihood of self-reporting Hispanic identity, which may produce heterogeneous effects of Secure Communities (Duncan and Trejo 2011b; Hadah 2024).

Panels (b) through (d) of Figure 2 presents our estimates separately for first-, second-, and third-generation Hispanic children, showing striking differences in how Secure Communities affected Hispanic identity across these groups. First, Panel (b) of Figure 2 shows that the negative effects on Hispanic identity are most pronounced among first-generation Hispanic children. These children, who were born in Spanish-speaking countries with both parents also born in Spanish-speaking countries, experience a substantial reduction in Hispanic identity self-reporting following Secure Communities implementation. The overall ATT estimate for this group is 22.9 percentage points reduction, nearly four times larger than the estimated effect for the full sample.

Again, the dynamic pattern for first-generation children shows effects that emerge immediately upon program implementation and remain persistent throughout the rest of the sample period. The magnitude of these effects is economically meaningful, representing approximately a 23.7% reduction in Hispanic identity relative to the pre-treatment period.

Second, in contrast to first-generation children, Panel (c) of Figure 2 reveals that Secure Communities increased the Hispanic identity self-reporting of second-generation

Hispanic children—those who are U.S.-born with at least one parent born in a Spanish-speaking country. The overall ATT estimate for this group is 6.9 percentage points, with effects becoming more pronounced after two years of exposure to the program.

By construction, because first- and second-generation Hispanic families are the closest ties to Hispanic ancestry, the opposite finding for these groups appears counter-intuitive at first glance. Recall that our conceptual framework in Section 3 clarifies how the same enforcement shock can generate either identity distancing (attrition) or group-affirming responses (reactive identity), depending on switching costs and perceived exposure. Moreover, the mixed-ethnicity nature of second-generation families may produce a more complex behavioral response to immigration enforcement. Following Hadah (2025b), we further examine heterogeneity of the second-generation results by parental racial and ethnic composition.

Figure 3 presents estimates for second-generation children stratified by parental background, revealing important insights into the mechanisms driving the second-generation results. The results suggest that the positive effects of Secure Communities on Hispanic identity among second-generation children are entirely driven by children with Hispanic fathers and non-Hispanic White mothers. For this specific type of family, Secure Communities led to a substantial increase in Hispanic identity. In contrast, children from other parental combinations—those with Hispanic mothers and non-Hispanic White fathers, or those with two Hispanic parents—show either null effects or slight reductions in Hispanic identity. This pattern suggests that the identity responses to immigration enforcement may depend crucially on family structure and the specific pathways through which Hispanic identity is transmitted across generations.

Finally, Panel (d) of Figure 2 shows that third-generation Hispanic children (i.e., those who are U.S.-born with U.S.-born parents but with grandparents born in Spanish-speaking countries) also experienced reduced Hispanic identity self-reporting, though the effects are more modest than those observed for first-generation children. The overall ATT estimate is 9.3 percentage points reduction, representing a 11.7% decline. The results for third-generation children suggests that even families with more distant immigration histories (i.e., weaker ties to their Hispanic heritage) were affected by Secure Communities.

6.3 Heterogeneous Effects by Parental Education

We next examine how the effects of Secure Communities vary by parental education, as measured by whether at least one parent has completed college. Figure 4 shows differential effects across education levels that provide additional insights into the potential mechanisms underlying our main findings.

Panel (a) of Figure 4 shows results for the full sample of Hispanic children. Among children with college-educated parents, Secure Communities reduced the self-reporting of Hispanic identity, consistent with our main findings. However, among children whose parents lack college education, we observe the opposite effect, where Secure Communities increased self-reporting of Hispanic identity.

This education-based heterogeneity suggests that responses to immigration enforcement depend on families' socioeconomic resources and integration into mainstream American society. Based on our conceptual framework, education may shift both the feasibility and incentives for changing reported identity by lowering switching costs and increasing the ability to "pass" as non-Hispanic, or by changing perceived exposure to being treated as Hispanic in institutional settings. Consistent with this interpretation, prior work finds that more educated Hispanic families are more likely to attrit, suggesting that these families may have greater ability to pass and may view reduced ethnic identification as a protective strategy (Duncan and Trejo 2011b).

The effect heterogeneity by education persists when we examine each generational group separately. For first-generation children, Secure Communities reduced self-reporting of Hispanic identity regardless of parental education, though the effects are somewhat larger for children with college-educated parents.

For second-generation children, the positive effects on Hispanic identity are stronger among children whose parents lack a college education. This pattern is consistent with a stronger reactive-identity response among families of lower socioeconomic status, for whom the enforcement environment may increase the salience and payoff of group attachment relative to the incentive to distance. Consequently, the positive effect may reflect increased ethnic solidarity or identity salience in response to perceived threats to the Hispanic community, which may be more pronounced among lower-socioeconomic-status second-generation families (Fouka 2020; Antman and Duncan 2024).

For third-generation children, the negative effects of Secure Communities are concentrated among those with college-educated parents, while children whose parents lack college education show smaller responses. This pattern mirrors the full-sample results and reinforces the interpretation that education provides both the means and incentives for identity switching among families with more distant immigration histories.

6.4 Heterogeneous Effects by Sanctuary City Status

We also examine whether local immigration policy environments moderate the effects of Secure Communities by estimating separate effects for counties with and without sanctuary city policies. Figure 5 presents these results, showing limited evidence

of systematic differences across sanctuary jurisdictions. Overall, we do not find substantial evidence that sanctuary city policies significantly moderate the effects of Secure Communities on Hispanic identity self-reporting. The point estimates are similar across sanctuary and non-sanctuary jurisdictions for all generations.

7 Robustness Checks and Placebo Regressions

7.1 Placebo Analysis: Fourth-Generation Black Children

We conduct a placebo analysis to provide empirical support for our research design and mitigate concerns regarding spurious effects. Specifically, we estimate placebo effects using a population that should be unaffected by Secure Communities: fourth-generation Black children. This group consists of Black children aged 17 and below with U.S.-born parents and grandparents, where both parents self-identify as Black.

Figure 6 presents the placebo results, which show no systematic relationship between Secure Communities and the self-reporting of Hispanic identity among fourth-generation Black children. These null results provide reassuring evidence that our main findings reflect credible causal effects of immigration enforcement.

7.2 Alternative Sample and Methods

We also estimate the model excluding southern border counties and counties in New York, Massachusetts, and Illinois, following Alsan and Yang (2024). Excluding southern border counties addresses potential selection into treatment by ICE, while excluding New York, Massachusetts, and Illinois accounts for these states' legal challenges to the Secure Communities program, which delayed implementation. Figure 7 presents the results of this specification for first-, second-, and third-generation Hispanic immigrants, as well as all generations pooled. The results do not differ from our main specification, strengthening our confidence that the main findings are not driven by these potentially problematic counties.

To demonstrate robustness to our choice of the Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024) imputation estimator, we compare our main estimates against other difference-in-differences estimators proposed in the recent econometrics literature. Figure 8 presents event study estimates from five approaches: standard two-way fixed effects (TWFE), Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021), Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024), De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille (2020), and Gardner (2022). Although we refer the reader to those papers for technical details, each of these estimators addresses potential bias from staggered treatment timing through different methodological approaches to avoid the "forbidden comparisons" that can contaminate conventional TWFE estimates. Across

all four panels, the estimates from the alternative robust estimators closely align with the Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024) method in both sign and magnitude. This consistency across methodologies demonstrates that our findings are not an artifact of any particular estimation approach.[10]

8 Conclusion

This paper provides causal evidence that Hispanic ethnic self-identity responds to non-economic policy shocks. We find that the expansion of local immigration enforcement through Secure Communities significantly altered the composition of the self-identified Hispanic population in the United States.

We also find substantial heterogeneous effects of the impacts of Secure Communities. Although first- and third-generation immigrants retreat from Hispanic identity, we find evidence of a "reactive ethnicity" response among second-generation families, who increase their self-identification with the group. This divergence suggests that enforcement policies potentially operate through dual channels, raising the cost of identification for the vulnerable while simultaneously encouraging identity assertion among other groups. Notably, we find that these effects are not moderated by sanctuary city policies.

Our findings also have methodological implications for the economics of immigration. Our results demonstrate that Hispanic identity may be a "bad control" in evaluations of immigration enforcement policy. Because the decision to self-identify is endogenous to the treatment (i.e. immigration enforcement), studies that condition on Hispanic identity or define samples based on ethnicity risk introducing significant selection bias. Consequently, prior literature may systematically bias the negative economic and health impacts of immigration enforcement.

Finally, our results point to a profound social cost of immigration enforcement. Beyond the direct economic effects, immigration enforcement exerts a psychological tax on the broader Hispanic community, causing individuals to erase their heritage to signal assimilation. Future research evaluating the effects of immigration policy must account for these endogenous identity changes to fully capture the scope of the policy impacts on the target population.

10. The differences between the estimators, especially compared with Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021), could be due to multiple factors, including the choice of weights in aggregating group-time effects into over ATT estimates; see for e.g., Deb et al. (2025).

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A TABLES

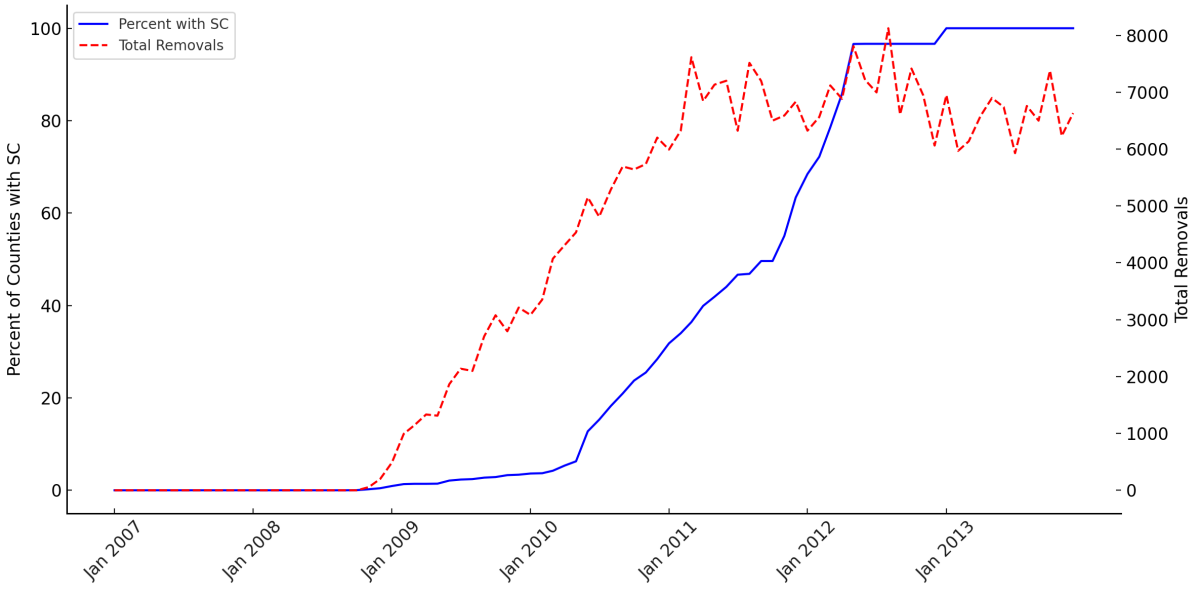
Table 1: Summary Statistics by Generation Type

	All Sample (N=465,480)		First Generation (N=55,239)		Second Generation (N=317,032)		Third Generation (N=93,209)	
Variable	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Panel A: Outcome Variable								
Hispanic Identity	0.920	0.271	0.969	0.173	0.940	0.238	0.825	0.380
Panel B: Demographics								
Female	0.485	0.500	0.486	0.500	0.484	0.500	0.485	0.500
Age	8.467	5.092	11.580	4.257	8.141	5.058	7.728	5.005
Panel C: Family Characteristics								
Hispanic Mother	0.897	0.304	0.958	0.200	0.926	0.261	0.766	0.423
Hispanic Father	0.884	0.320	0.944	0.231	0.916	0.277	0.749	0.434
Family Income (1999 $)	39161.442	45803.142	30276.232	34643.387	36413.384	43133.061	53794.853	56139.725
Panel D: Geographic Variables								
Fraction Hispanic in County	0.332	0.211	0.303	0.201	0.339	0.206	0.328	0.233
Southern Border State	0.554	0.497	0.447	0.497	0.577	0.494	0.540	0.498

Note: Sample includes first, second, and third generation Hispanic children ages 17 and below from the Current Population Survey (2003-2013). First generation: born in Spanish-speaking country. Second generation: born in US with at least one parent born in Spanish-speaking country. Third generation: native-born with native-born parents and at least one grandparent born in Spanish-speaking country. Binary variables are expressed as proportions (0-1). Family income is deflated to 1999 dollars using the IPUMS CPI99 factor.
Data source is the 2003-2013 Current Population Survey.

B FIGURES

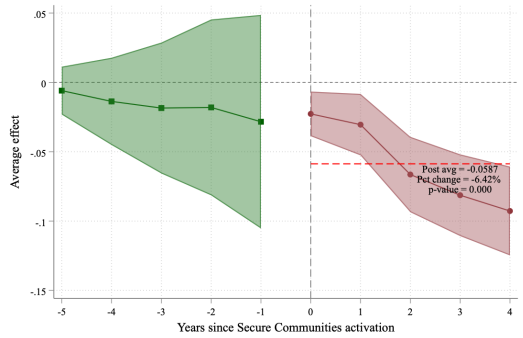
Figure 1: Staggered Adoption of Secure Communities Over Time



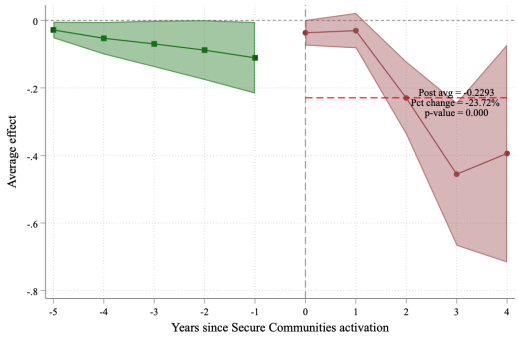
This figure shows the share of counties with Secure Communities and the Monthly Number of Removals (2008-2013).

Figure 2: Secure Communities and Self-Reported Hispanic Identity (By Generation)

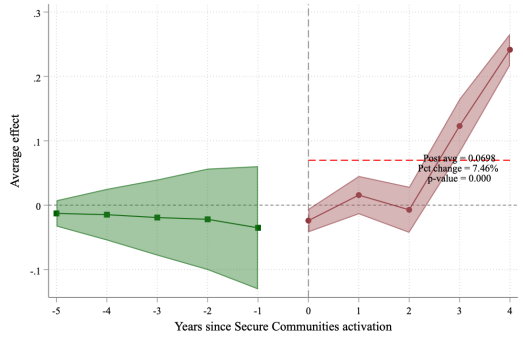
(a) All Generations



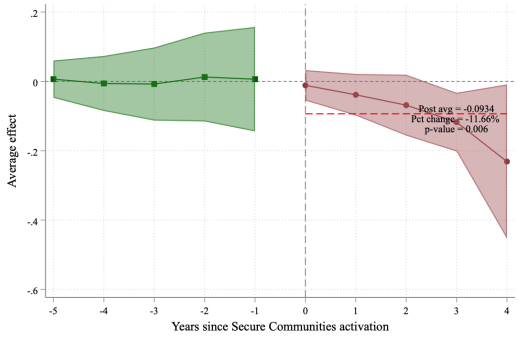
(b) First Generation



(c) Second Generation



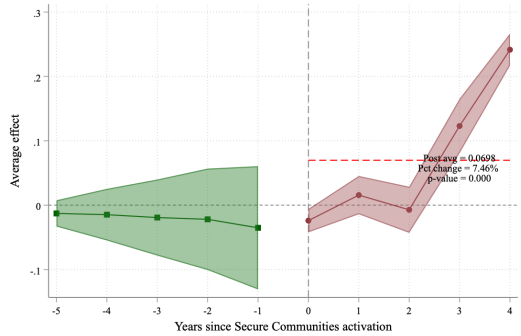
(d) Third Generation



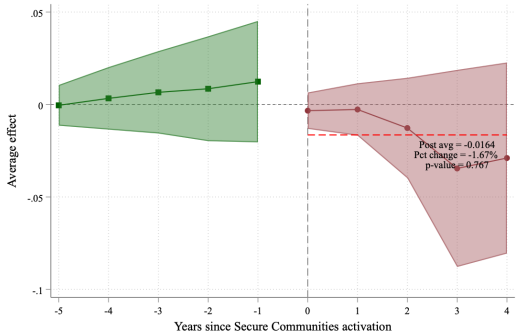
This figure shows four panels of estimating equation (5). The dependent variable is self-reported Hispanic identity. Each panel estimates the same regression model on different samples that are divided by generation. Standard errors are clustered on the state level. The samples include first-, second-, and third-generation Hispanic children, and the three generations pooled that are racially White, ages 17 and below who live in intact families. First-generation Hispanic immigrants are children that were born in a Spanish-speaking country. Native-born second-generation Hispanic immigrants are children with at least one parent born in a Spanish-speaking country. Native-born third-generation Hispanic immigrants are children with native-born parents and at least one grandparent born in a Spanish-speaking country.

Figure 3: Secure Communities and Self-Reported Hispanic Identity Second-Generation (By Parents' Type)

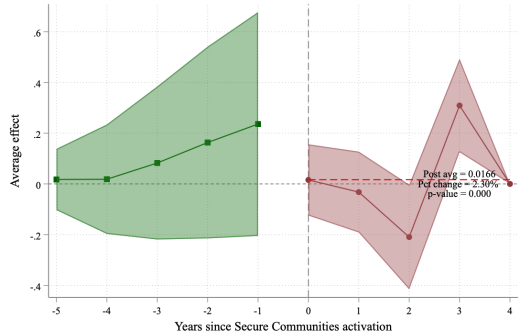
(a) Second Generation



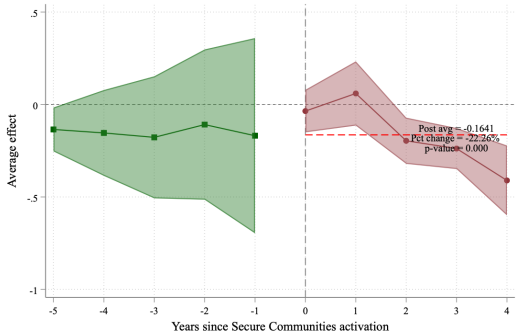
(b) Second Generation Hispanic Father Hispanic Mother



(c) Hispanic Father White Mother



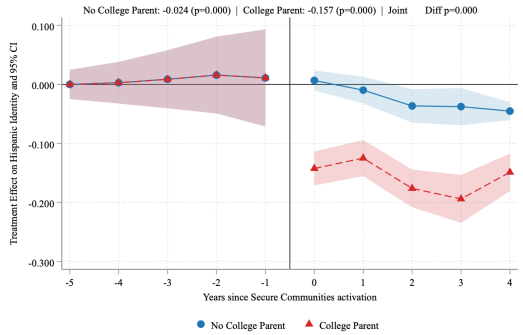
(d) White Father Hispanic Mother



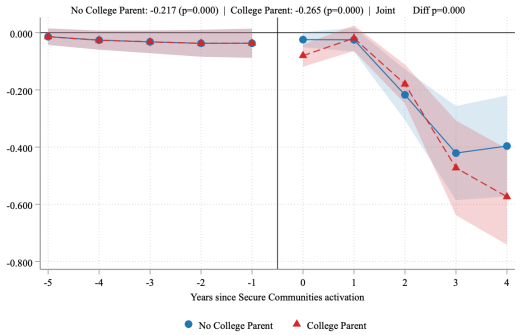
This figure shows four panels of estimating equation (5). The dependent variable is self-reported Hispanic identity. Each panel estimates the same regression model on different samples that are divided by the race and ethnicity of the parents. Standard errors are clustered on the state level. The samples include second-generation Hispanic children that are racially White, ages 17 and below who live in intact families. Parents can be endogamous, i.e. Hispanic father and Hispanic mother, or interethnic parents.

Figure 4: Secure Communities and Self-Reported Hispanic Identity Heterogeneous Effect (By Parental Education)

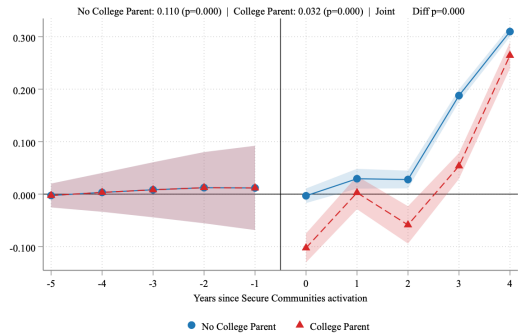
(a) All Generations



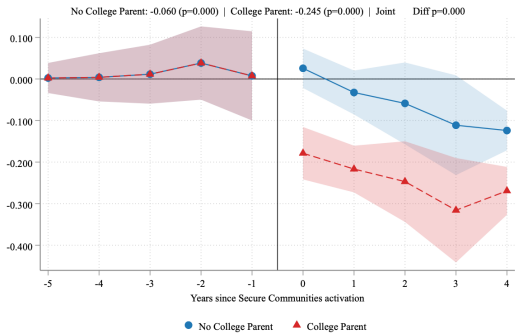
(b) First Generation



(c) Second Generation



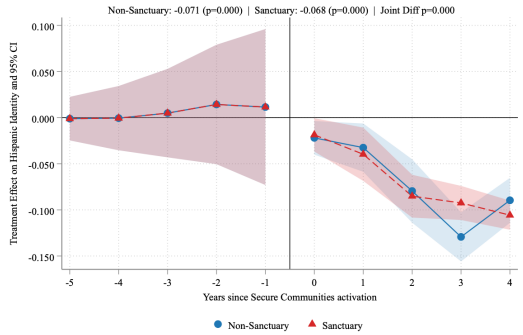
(d) Third Generation



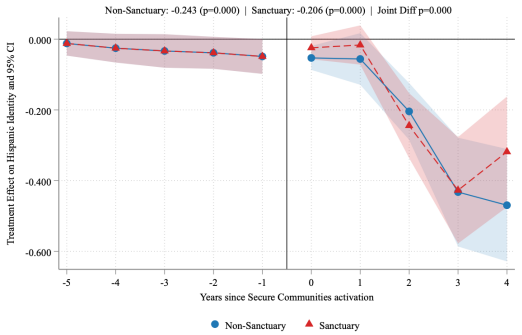
This figure shows four panels of estimating equation (5) by parental education. The dependent variable is self-reported Hispanic identity. Each panel estimates the same regression model on different samples that are divided by generation. Standard errors are clustered on the state level. The samples include first-, second-, and third-generation Hispanic children that are racially White, ages 17 and below who live in intact families. First-generation Hispanic immigrants are children that were born in a Spanish-speaking country. Native-born second-generation Hispanic immigrants are children with at least one parent born in a Spanish-speaking country. Native-born third-generation Hispanic immigrants are children with native-born parents and at least one grandparent born in a Spanish-speaking country.

Figure 5: Secure Communities and Self-Reported Hispanic Identity Heterogeneous Effect (By Sanctuary City Status)

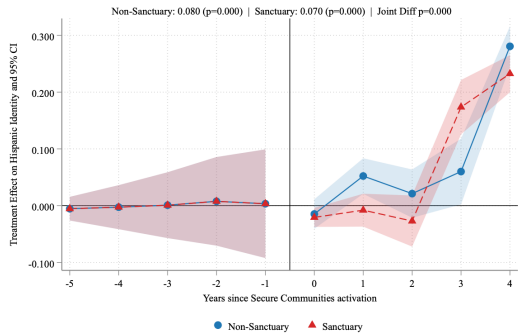
(a) All Generations



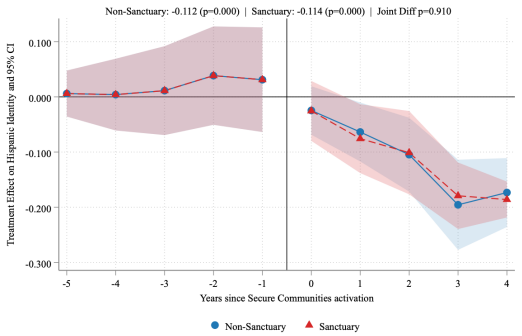
(b) First Generation



(c) Second Generation

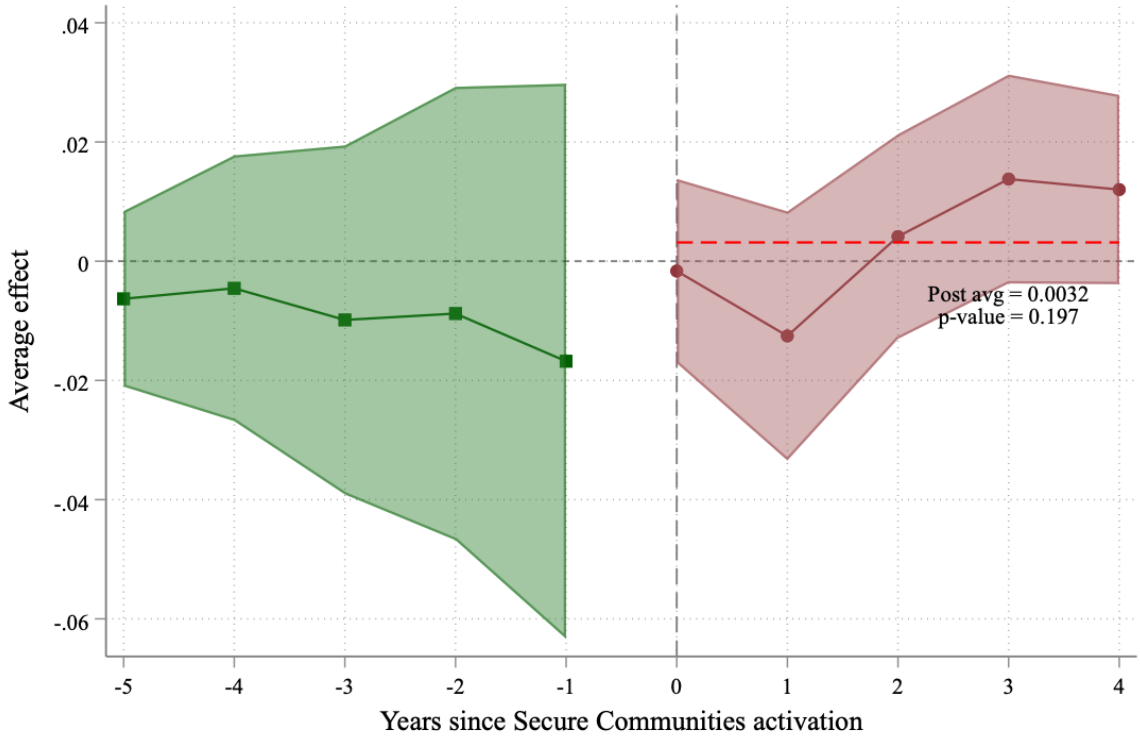


(d) Third Generation



This figure shows four panels of estimating equation (5) by sanctuary local ordinance. Sanctuary ordinances were passed at local levels to limit a municipality's cooperation with federal immigration enforcement agencies and typically represent policies where local jurisdictions do not honor Immigration and ICE detainer requests or otherwise limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities. The dependent variable is self-reported Hispanic identity. Each panel estimates the same regression model on different samples that are divided by generation. Standard errors are clustered on the state level. The samples include first-, second-, and third-generation Hispanic children that are racially White, ages 17 and below who live in intact families. First-generation Hispanic immigrants are children that were born in a Spanish-speaking country. Native-born second-generation Hispanic immigrants are children with at least one parent born in a Spanish-speaking country. Native-born third-generation Hispanic immigrants are children with native-born parents and at least one grandparent born in a Spanish-speaking country.

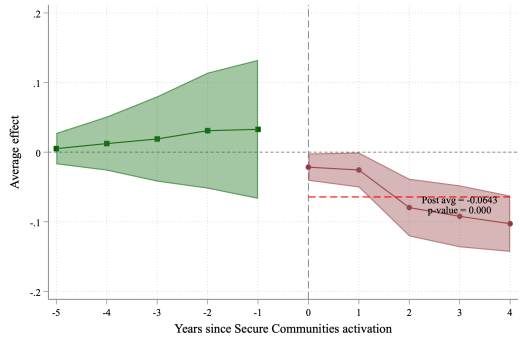
Figure 6: Placebo Results Among Fourth Generation+ Black



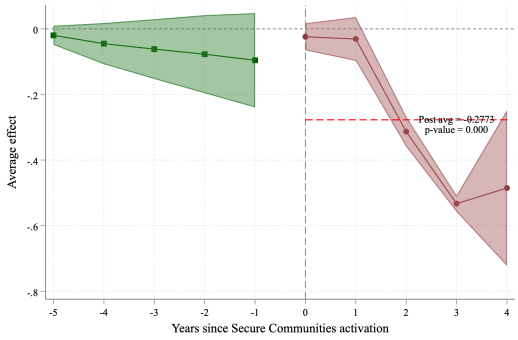
This figure shows four panels of estimating equation (5) on a sample of fourth generation+ Black Americans. The dependent variable is self-reported Hispanic identity. Standard errors are clustered on the state level. The samples include fourth+ Black children, ages 17 and below who live in intact families. Native-born fourth-generation+ Black are children with native-born parents and native-born grandparents and both parents self-reporting Black racial identity.

Figure 7: Non-Southern Border County Results (Robustness Check)

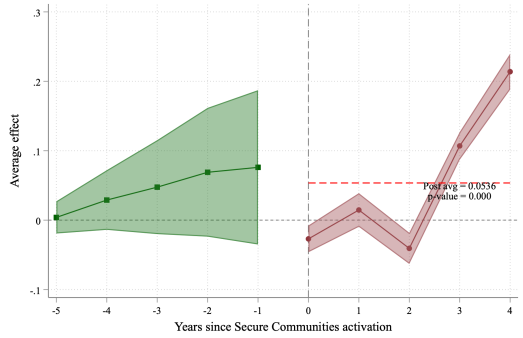
(a) All Generations



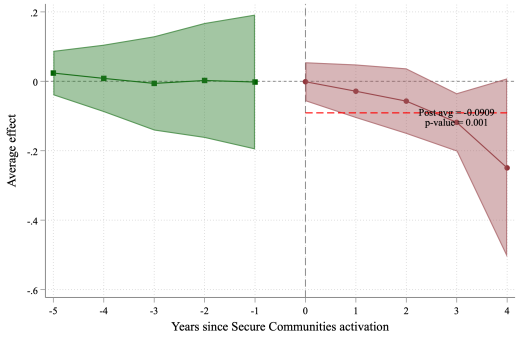
(b) First Generation



(c) Second Generation



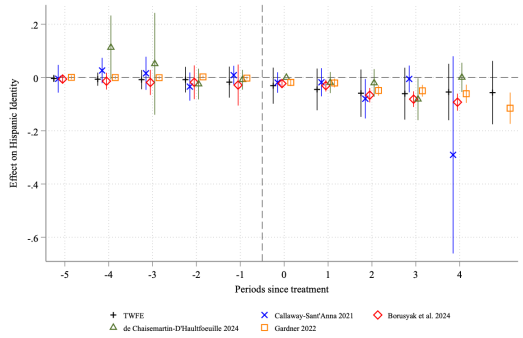
(d) Third Generation



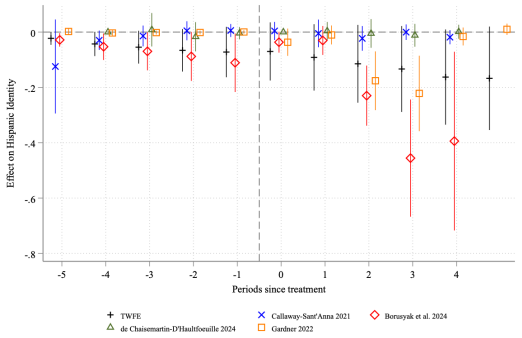
This figure shows four panels of estimating equation (5) excluding southern border counties and counties in New York, Massachusetts, and Illinois, following Alsan and Yang (2024). The dependent variable is self-reported Hispanic identity. Each panel estimates the same regression model on different samples that are divided by generation. Standard errors are clustered on the state level. The samples include first-, second-, and third-generation Hispanic children that are racially White, ages 17 and below who live in intact families, excluding southern border counties and counties in New York, Massachusetts, and Illinois. First-generation Hispanic immigrants are children that were born in a Spanish-speaking country. Native-born second-generation Hispanic immigrants are children with at least one parent born in a Spanish-speaking country. Native-born third-generation Hispanic immigrants are children with native-born parents and at least one grandparent born in a Spanish-speaking country.

Figure 8: Comparison of Staggered Differences-in-Differences Estimators

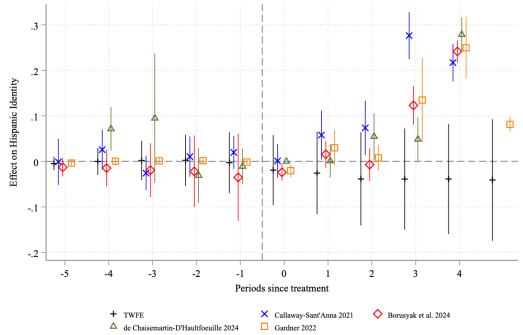
(a) All Generations



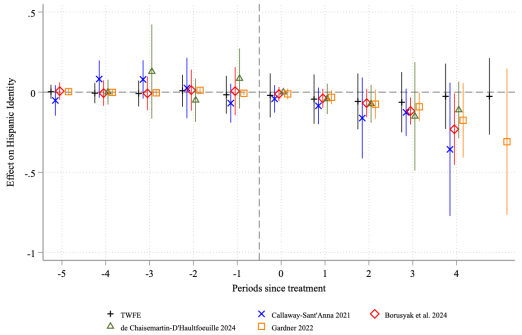
(b) First Generation



(c) Second Generation



(d) Third Generation



This figure compares estimates from five staggered difference-in-differences estimators. Each panel displays event study coefficients from: (1) two-way fixed effects (TWFE), (2) Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021), (3) Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess (2024), (4) De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille (2020), and (5) Gardner (2022). The dependent variable is self-reported Hispanic identity. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. The vertical dashed line indicates the period before treatment ($t = -1$), which serves as the reference period. The horizontal dashed line marks zero effect. The samples include first-, second-, and third-generation Hispanic children who are racially White, ages 17 and below, living in intact families.