

Fleeing For Their Lives: Reconsidering How Americans View Immigrants’ Reasons for Migrating

October 13, 2022

This document reports the initial findings from the pilot study (N=202) of this experiment. The project has received additional funding (\$3500) to replicate and extend the study on a large, nationwide sample.

1 Project Description

By the end of 2019, nearly 80 million individuals had been forcibly displaced from their home country because of persecution, violence, or other events “seriously disturbing public order” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). As people across the globe continue to flee from their home countries at accelerating rates, it is increasingly important to understand how and why natives react and respond to arriving migrant flows. Considering these ongoing crises, politicians and media outlets often emphasize distinctions between “real refugees” fleeing their home country for reasons linked to persecution and “economic migrants” leaving their home country to pursue financial opportunity. These types of distinctions are widely believed to influence how natives respond to incoming migrants—with natives strongly penalizing migrants who are perceived as exploiting economic opportunity (Arias and Blair 2021; Bansak, et al. 2016; Verkuyten, et al. 2018). However, the studies on which this conclusion has been based have not suggested equivalent consequences from economic deprivation versus persecution.

Under what conditions are Americans more sympathetic to economic justifications for migrating to the US? In this project, I challenge a commonly held assumption by scholars, policymakers, and media elites and argue that Americans are *not* fundamentally opposed to economic motivations for migration. Economic reasons for migrating are only viewed less favorably by natives *if the conditions in the migrant’s home country are not equivalent to the risks associated with persecution and violence in the home country*. When dire economic circumstances and forces beyond a migrant’s control affect migration decisions, natives express more favorable immigration attitudes, perceive migration decisions as involuntary, and assign external attributions of responsibility to a migrant’s current predicament.

To understand why certain motives for migration evoke greater support from natives, I designed a pilot experiment and embedded it in a demographically representative online public opinion survey administered throughout the country (N=202). In a 2 by 2 factorial design, respondents read a fictional news article discussing American immigration and then answered a series of immigration-related questions. I designed the hypothetical story to resemble real world news stories.¹ The article began by briefly noting that the number of

¹For example, see, Eileen Sullivan and Miriam Jordan. 2021. “Illegal Border Crossings, Driven by Pandemic and Natural Disasters, Soar to Record High” *The New York Times*

border crossings in the United States has dramatically increased in recent months. Then, the article reports a brief interview with a family of ostensible migrants and describes why the family travelled to the United States. In the article, however, I manipulated two features related to the families' reason for migrating to the United States: presence of economic threat in the migrant's home country and presence of persecution threat in the migrant's home country. The factorial design is displayed below in Table 1.

Table 1: 2x2 Factorial Design

	No Persecution Threat	Persecution Threat
No Starvation Threat		
Starvation Threat		

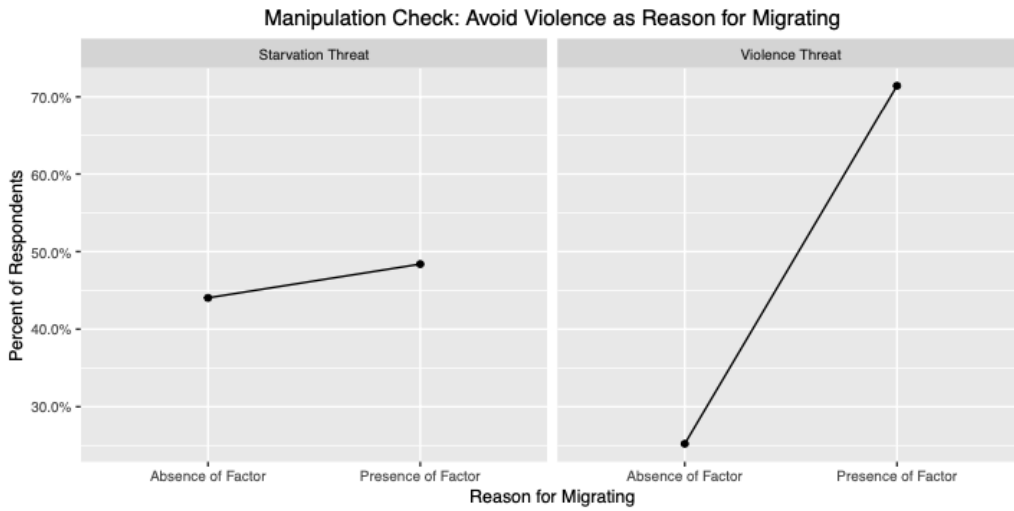
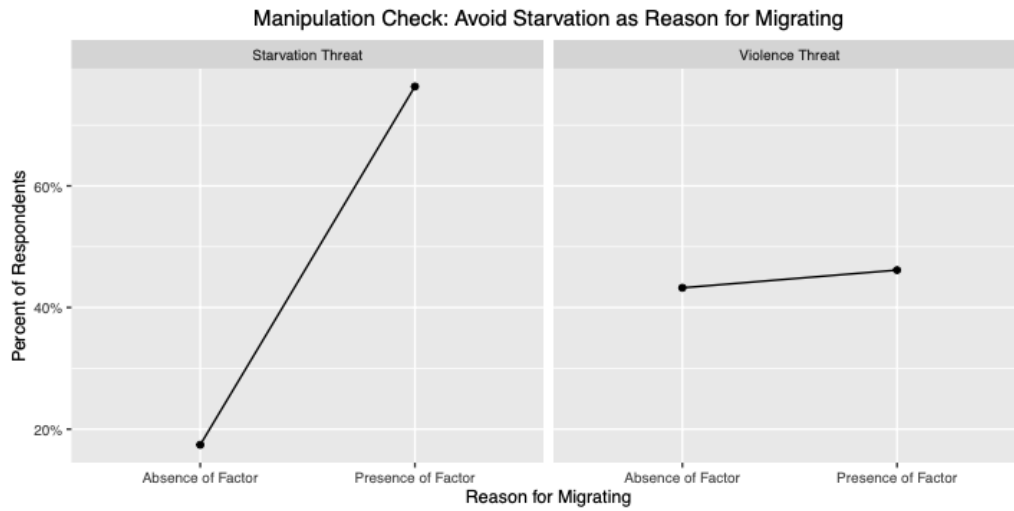
As the above table shows, respondents read a news article with either a persecution threat, a starvation threat, both threats, or neither threat. The second paragraph in the news article includes the treatment information.

“The Lina family, pictured above, told reporters that they were coming to the United States in pursuit of a better life. [The economy/Public safety/Both the economy and public safety] in their home country has completely collapsed due to forces beyond the Lina family's control, so there is no way for them to [feed their family/feel safe/feed their family and no way to feel safe]. In their home country, they and their children were in danger of [starving to death/being killed by a rival ethnic group/being killed by a rival ethnic group and at risk of starving to death]. Their youngest son already died [from malnutrition/at the hands of this group/their oldest son already died at the hands of this group and their youngest son died from malnutrition] earlier this year. There are many other families like this one waiting at the border.”

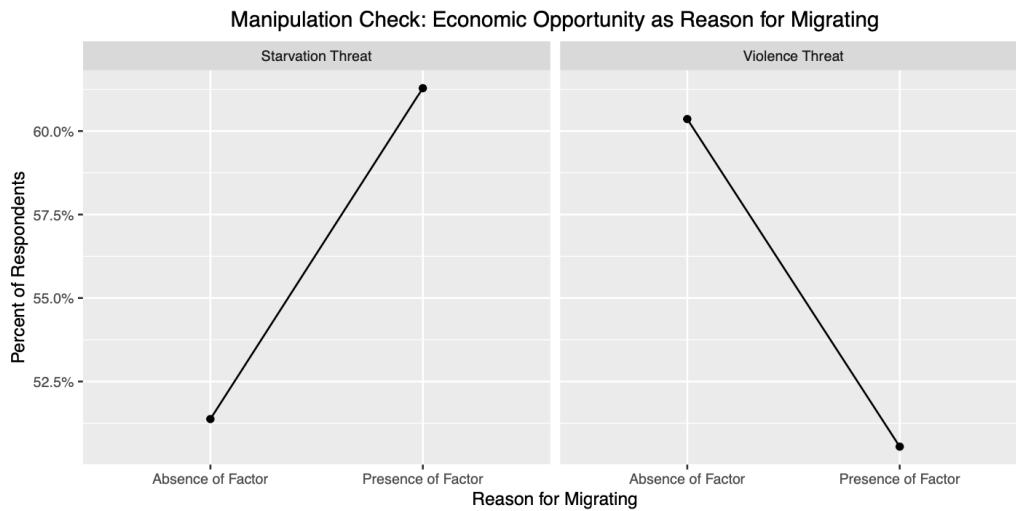
To equalize the severity of consequences associated with economic and persecution threats, both factors include (a) structural conditions beyond the migrant family's control and (b) risks that can plausibly lead to death.

Manipulation checks were included at the end of the survey to assess whether threat in the migrant's home country was successfully manipulated. After the survey, respondents were asked why the fictional migrant family tried to come to the United States. Respondents were encouraged to select all options that applied, and the options ranged from (a) economic opportunity, (b) avoid starvation, (c) avoid persecution and violence, and (d) unsure.

The first below plot shows the percentage of respondents who selected that the fictional migrant family traveled to the United States to “avoid starvation” for each of the factors. In this plot, the main effect of the starvation threat factor is highly significant ($F = 106.55$, $p = < .0001$) and the violence threat factor is not significant. The second plot shows the percentage of respondents who selected that the fictional migrant family traveled to the United States to “avoid persecution and violence” for each of the factors. In this plot, the main effect of the violence threat factor is highly significant ($F = 53.05$, $p = < .0001$) and the starvation threat factor is not significant.

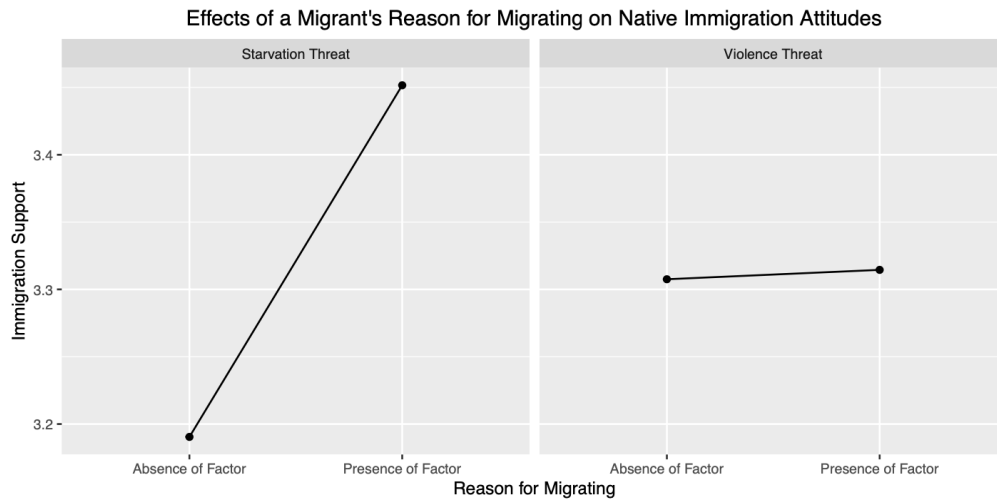


Finally the third below plot shows the percentage of respondents who selected that the fictional migrant family traveled to the United States for “economic opportunity” for each of the factors. As the plot demonstrates, starvation threat caused respondents to say that the migrant family traveled to the US for economic opportunity, whereas violence threat made respondents less likely to say that the family came for economic opportunity. Due to small sample sizes, the main effect of starvation threat on economic opportunity is not significant ($F = 2.55$, $p = .111$) and the main effect of violence threat is also not significant ($F = 2.49$, $p = .115$). Overall, from these three manipulation checks, I conclude that threat in the migrant’s home country was successfully manipulated and that starvation threat is interpreted as an economic motivation for migrating.



By altering the perceived reason for migrants leaving their country, I assess how alternative migration decisions influence American immigration attitudes. The plot below shows the results from the pilot experiment. Native's immigration attitudes are more favorable when migrants are experiencing a clear economic threat in their home country. Including education and partisanship as covariates, a 2 by 2 ANOVA reveals that the mean support for the hypothetical family of migrants was different across the presence and absence of starvation threat as a reason for migration ($F = 3.95$, $p = .048$). Because there are only two levels to the starvation threat factor and subjects reported higher mean support for the Lina family when exposed to starvation threat (3.45) than no starvation threat (3.19), I conclude that starvation threat caused a notable favorable shift in immigration attitudes.

Main Results:



Thus, when the threats and risks associated with staying in one's country are equalized, natives do not penalize migrants who leave their country for economic reasons relative to migrants immigrating due to fear of violence. When the consequences are dire, economic migrants are viewed just as favorably as migrants experiencing violent threats in their home country. In fact, the 2 by 2 ANOVA revealed no significant difference across the presence and absence of violence threat as a reason for migration ($F = .0001$, $p = .994$), which possibly suggests that natives are more sympathetic to starvation as a reason for migrating than violent persecution. Overall, my findings show that public attitudes toward immigration are sensitive to an immigrants' perceived reasons for migrating. Importantly, the results from

my experiment cut against prior research that suggests that economically rooted migration decisions will evoke less supportive immigration attitudes than migration choices driven by persecution.

I plan on extending and replicating this study with funding from the Browne Center. As a whole, I plan on increasing the length of my survey, editing the language of the treatment, and expanding the sample size. First, I intend on making minor edits and improvements to the treatment language. For example, I believe that framing violence threat as a "rival ethnic group" possibly reduced the effectiveness of the violence threat factor. Second, I plan on adding additional immigration questions in order to explicitly connect attitudes toward immigrants to immigration policy more broadly (e.g., "Would you support a policy that admits more migrants suffering from starvation?"). Third, I intend on expanding my sample size in order to increase precision. Moreover, having a larger sample size also allows me to draw inferences about my control group, which is the default native perception about the type of immigrants coming to the country.

2 References

1. Arias, Sabrina B., and Christopher W. Blair. 2021. "Changing Tides: Public Attitudes on Climate Migration." *The Journal of politics*.
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3. Verkuyten, Maykel, Kieran Mepham, and Mathijs Kros. 2018. "Public Attitudes Towards Support for Migrants: The Importance of Perceived Voluntary and Involuntary Migration." *Ethnic and racial studies* 41: 901-18.