

(When) Race Matters: The Effect of Immigrant Race and Place on Support for Anti-Immigration Laws *

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Abstract

Does racial threat motivate support for anti-immigration laws? I answer this question by manipulating the skin-tone and geographical proximity to American citizens of a fictional undocumented Mexican immigrant. I find that when respondents are exposed to a non-Caucasian immigrant, support for anti-immigration laws increases relative to an otherwise identical Caucasian immigrant. These reactions to the immigrant's skin-tone are observed only when respondents believe that the immigrant resides in their city and state, suggesting that geographical proximity triggers racial threat.

1 Introduction

In 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the most controversial part of Arizona's anti-immigration law, S.B. 1070, which obligates state and local police to check the immigration status of individuals believed to be in the United States illegally. Since this ruling, many states and municipalities enacted similar laws in response to the groundswell of public support for the Arizona law. Proponents of these laws argue that they are meant to assist in the enforcement of pre-existing Federal immigration laws while opponents charge that they encourage racial profiling of Hispanics. Racial threat theory, which was originally

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developed to explain white opposition to policies favorable to blacks in the Deep South (Key 1949), lends some tentative support to claims made by the law's opponents.

In studies of counties in the Deep South, Key (1949) noticed that white support for policies which benefitted blacks was negatively correlated with the county's proportion black. He argued that this could be explained by threats of inter-group political competition posed by the presence of blacks. In the decades following Key's work, two schools of thought emerged to explain the causes of racial threat: *symbolic prejudice* and *realistic group conflict*. Realistic group conflict claims that threatened responses to minority out-groups stems from fears about economic and/or political competition (Bobo 1983; Levine and Campbell 1972; Citrin, Reingold and Green 1990; Citrin et al. 1997; Oliver and Mendelberg 2000) while symbolic prejudice contends that more abstract prejudicial biases rooted in early adulthood socialization can better explain racial threat (Kinder and Sears 1981; Huddy and Sears 1995). Both have been evaluated using observational studies within a variety of contexts and geographical locations.

Applied to immigration, racial threat suggests that white support for anti-immigration policies will vary with perceptions about the size of the non-white immigrant population in the surrounding community. Assessing the relevance of racial threat to immigration policy opinion, however, presents serious empirical challenges. After quotas were loosened by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, immigration to the U.S. has been mostly from Latin American nations. Mexico in particular has sent more immigrants to the U.S. than any other nation since that time. Since immigrants from Latin America share a similar language, have a darker skin-tone and are generally poorer and less educated than the average American citizen, it is difficult to determine the extent to which interactions between perceptions about immigrant presence and immigrant characteristics, which together are necessary to provoke a threatened response, affect exclusionary attitudes.

For example, imagine an ideal observational study in which a researcher has estimates of the Mexican immigrant population and a measure of support for an anti-immigrant law for every Census tract in the United States over a ten-year period. Furthermore, assume that the researcher has a valid instrument for one year changes in the Mexican immigrant population, thus eliminating concerns about selection and omitted variable biases. If the researcher in this hypothetical scenario finds that the instrumented change in the Mexican immigrant population is significantly related an increase in support for the anti-immigration law, she still cannot deduce from this that the causal relationship between changes in the population of Mexican immigrants and increases in white support for anti-immigration laws are rooted in racial threat. Indeed, this relationship may be due simply to a distaste among natives for foreigners in general, a dislike of the Spanish language, a distaste for low-skilled workers or any other number of other factors inextricably tied to increases in the population of Mexican immigrants. Indeed, determining whether racial threat motivates anti-immigrant attitudes requires comparing reactions by natives to a racially distinct but otherwise similar counterfactual group of Mexican immigrants.

While even an ideal observational study cannot identify the effect of racial threat on support for anti-immigration laws, recent efforts using survey and field experiments have enabled researchers to explore the various roles that immigrant characteristics and even contact play in effecting attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Enos (2013) randomized commuter contact with Spanish-speaking immigrants on the Boston MBTA and found that contact strengthened anti-immigrant attitudes. Hopkins (2013) randomized skin-tone and language ability of an undocumented Mexican immigrant and found that while skin-tone did not affect anti-immigrant attitudes, poor English speaking ability elicited pro-immigrant attitudes. Brader, Valentino and Suhay (2008) manipulated immigrant national origin and found that news about the costs of immigration boosted white

opposition to immigration more when Latino versus European immigrants were presented. No experimental research on immigration, however, has evaluated the interaction between perceptions of immigrant presence and immigrant racial characteristics which are both necessary to provoke racial threat.

Racial threat applied to undocumented immigration, the most pressing and polarizing immigration issue in the U.S. over the past decade, presents even greater empirical challenges. Determining whether racial threat influences attitudes about undocumented immigrants depends upon interactions between local perceptions of the undocumented immigrant population AND undocumented immigrant race. The very fact that undocumented immigrants are not recorded by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement or standard bureaucratic instruments such as the Census means that reasonably accurate estimates of the undocumented immigrant population are very difficult, if not impossible, to come by. Owing to this lack of objective information and other factors such as neighborhood and workplace segregation, native perceptions of the local undocumented immigrant population will most likely depend upon the frequency and type of coverage that local news sources devote to the topic which further confounds the relationship between policy attitudes and the undocumented immigrant population.

In this paper, I designed an experiment which allows me to directly assess the effect of racial threat on support for an anti-immigration law similar to Arizona's S.B. 1070. This was accomplished by experimentally manipulating native perceptions of an undocumented immigrant's geographical proximity and race to induce threat. I find that when respondents are exposed to a darker, non-Caucasian immigrant they are more likely to favor the anti-immigration law only when the immigrant is geographically proximate, a hallmark of the threatened response.

2 Experimental Design and Setup

Treatment	Caucasian	Non-Caucasian
Control	No Location/Light	No Location/Dark
Threat	R’s City/Light	R’s City/Dark

Table 1: Experiment Treatment Groups

Determining the effect of racial threat on exclusionary attitudes toward undocumented immigrants requires understanding how racial characteristics and threat induced by the presence of undocumented immigrants interact to affect support for anti-immigration policies. Specifically, this requires: 1) comparing reactions to two “types” of undocumented immigrants that are otherwise identical except for features which signal racial differences (skin-tone) and; 2) assessing whether reactions to these differences vary within a threatened vs. a non-threatened context.

2.1 Treatments

To address these issues, I designed a survey experiment in which the skin-tone and proximity to respondents of a fictional undocumented Mexican immigrant named “Miguel” were randomly manipulated in the context of a fabricated “immigrant profiles” news story excerpt. The skin-tone treatments used to signal racial differences were “Caucasian” (light skin-tone) and “Non-Caucasian” (dark skin-tone) and the proximity treatments used to provoke threat were “Control” and “Threat,” yielding the four treatments shown in Table 1.

The *Caucasian* and *Non-Caucasian* treatments were created using a Gaussian blur to obscure the face of a Hispanic individual and then adjusting the tint of this image to make the individual appear darker and thus less likely to be Caucasian, or lighter and more likely to be Caucasian. While the vast majority of Mexican nationals are of

Mestizo or mixed European and Native American origin, a sizable minority of the Mexican population is considered white only. Thus, it is entirely plausible for an undocumented Mexican immigrant to be primarily of Caucasian or European decent. That skin tone signals the extent to which an individual is Caucasian is commonly understood in the United States, Mexico and elsewhere in the world (Gould 1996; Baum 2006; Eigen 2006; Hunter, Blumenbach and Marx 2010). These photos were then embedded within the news excerpt portion of the stimulus. Threat was induced by manipulating the respondent's perceived geographic proximity to the fictional immigrant using text within the instructions and excerpt portions of stimulus.

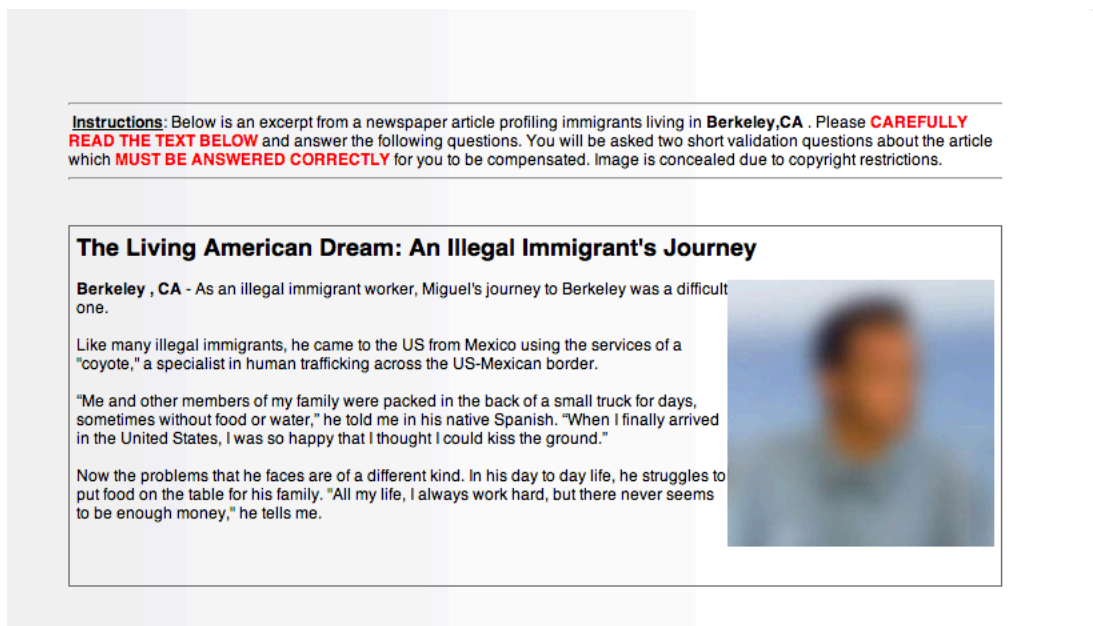


Figure 1: Sample Stimulus Presented to Respondents: Threat/Non-Caucasian Treatment

In the *Control* treatment, respondents were told that the excerpt was taken from a “national newspaper” and no location information about the immigrant was provided. In the *Threat* treatment, the respondent's Internet Protocol address was read by *Qualtrics* software to determine their city and state of residence and then displayed to them in three

strategic locations within the stimulus to imply that the undocumented immigrant was currently residing in their community. The first instance was in the instructions, the next was in the excerpt heading and the third was in the first sentence of the excerpt.

The first sentence of the instructions for respondents receiving the *Threat* treatment reads: “Below is an excerpt from a newspaper article profiling immigrants living in [*R’s City, R’s State*].” For respondents assigned to the *Control*, the first sentence of the instructions reads: “Below is an excerpt from a national newspaper article profiling immigrants.” An example of a full stimulus exactly as it was presented to respondents in the *Threat/Non-Caucasian* treatment is shown in Figure 1.

Next, beneath the article title and before the beginning of the excerpt, respondents receiving the *Threat* treatment saw their city and state presented to them in bold, suggesting that the report originated from their current location. In the *Control*, no location information was provided. Finally, the first sentence of the passage in the *Threat* treatment reads “As an illegal immigrant worker, Miguel’s journey to [*R’s City*] was a difficult one.” while the first sentence of the *Control* reads “As an illegal immigrant worker, Miguel’s journey to the United States was a difficult one.” All four stimuli exactly as they were presented to respondents are included in the Appendix.

Since many internet users connect using use proxy servers and mask their IP addresses, to ensure that respondents assigned to the *Threat* treatment were exposed to the treatment as specified, an additional validation question was presented only to them. The validation question asks “Do you live in or near [*R’s City, R’s State*].” Respondents answering “No” to this question were removed from the analyses.

As I show below, the *Threat* treatment effectively induced threat regardless of the respondent’s pre-treatment perceptions about the population of undocumented immigrants residing in their community. Indeed, even if respondents already believed that undoc-

umented immigrants were living near them, for all intents and purposes they generally cannot know the legal status of the immigrants that they suspect of being undocumented. By implicitly stating that an undocumented immigrant lives in their city and state, the *Threat* treatment turns uncertainty about the presence of undocumented immigrants into a certainty.

Finally, all respondents were required to read the following excerpt portion of the stimulus:

As an illegal immigrant worker, Miguel’s journey to the [*United States/R’s City*] was a difficult one.

Like many illegal immigrants, he came to the US from Mexico using the services of a “coyote,” a specialist in human trafficking across the US-Mexican border.

“Me and other members of my family were packed in the back of a small truck for days, sometimes without food or water,” he told me in his native Spanish. “When I finally arrived in the United States, I was so happy that I thought I could kiss the ground.”

Now the problems that he faces are of a different kind. In his day to day life, he struggles to put food on the table for his family. “All my life I always work hard, but there never seems to be enough money,” he tells me.

The excerpt establishes that Miguel is economically disadvantaged, has limited English-language ability, is hard-working and grateful to be in the United States. The undocumented immigrant was portrayed in this light in order to prevent respondents from making post-treatment inferences on the basis of skin-tone and location but unrelated to them. For example, if respondents received either *Caucasian* treatments (*Control/Caucasian* or *Threat/Caucasian*), they might assume, absent further information, that the immigrant is a high-skilled worker or is economically better off than respondents receiving the non-Caucasian, dark skin-tone immigrant.

To ensure that respondents read the passage, two validation questions based on the content of the excerpt in the stimulus were asked at the end of the survey¹. If the respondent

¹In the validation questions, respondents were asked to correctly select the name and country of origin of the undocumented immigrant. The first question asked “What was the name of the illegal immigrant in the article you just read?” and the respondent was asked to choose among four Spanish-origin Christian

did not answer both questions correctly, their responses were discarded.

2.2 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is a question asking respondents whether they favored or opposed a law similar to Arizona’s S.B. 1070 in their state:

In 2010, Arizona passed an immigration law that requires people to show documents proving their immigration status if government officials have reasonable cause to ask for them and allows police to detain anyone who cannot prove their immigration status.

If [R’s State] adopted a similar law would you favor or oppose this law²?

Options presented to respondents were “Favor,” “Oppose” and “Don’t Know.”

3 Results

3.1 Sample and Demographics

The survey experiment described above was created using Qualtrics³ survey technology and responses were collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk. The sample was restricted to individuals currently residing in the United States over the age of 18.

A total of 880 responses were collected. After removing respondents that did not meet the validation criteria mentioned above, 652 respondents remained. The Mechanical Turk Human Intelligence Task (HIT) advertisement (see Appendix) was presented in a way that was meant to attract as broad a group of Americans as possible. As a result, respondents were geographically diverse, with at least one respondent from each of 48 U.S.

first names which included “Mateo,” “Juan,” “Miguel,” and “Marco.” The second question asks “What country was the illegal immigrant mentioned in the article you just read from?” Responses include “Spain,” “Mexico,” “Colombia” and “Nicaragua.”

²Respondents in Arizona were asked whether they favor or oppose the law.

³The IP reading technology and survey experiment conducted in this paper was created using the Qualtrics Research Suite, Copyright © 2013 Qualtrics. Qualtrics and all other Qualtrics product or service names are registered trademarks or trademarks of Qualtrics, Provo, UT, USA. <http://www.qualtrics.com>

State	# of Respondents
California	86
New York	49
Florida	46
Texas	44
Pennsylvania	35
Illinois	26
North Carolina	25
Michigan	23
Ohio	22
Massachusetts	21
Georgia	20

Table 2: Respondent Counts by State of Residence ($N \geq 20$)

Variable	Percent/Mean	95% CI
White	76.4%	73.2%, 79.7%
College	86.8%	84.2%, 89.4%
Unemployed	1.5%	0.5%, 2.5%
Age	34.4	33.4, 35.4
Republican	13.2%	10.6%, 15.9%
Democrat	44.5%	40.7%, 48.4%
Independent	34.4%	30.7%, 38.0%

Table 3: Respondent Demographics

states. As Table 2 shows, while most respondents came from population heavy states, they are regionally diverse and include Americans from Western, Northeastern, Southern and Midwestern states.

Table 3 contains other respondent demographics. As is typical of Mechanical Turk samples, respondents are mostly white, college educated, employed and identify as Democrats or Independents (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012). They have an average age of 34 and range in ages between 19 to 93.

3.2 Analysis

As mentioned above, threat in the *Threat* treatment is induced by making respondents aware of an undocumented immigrant living near them. If threat is provoked by the immigrant’s race, the non-Caucasian immigrant should increase white support for the anti-immigration law within the *Threat* treatment (*Threat/Caucasian* v. *Threat/Non-Caucasian*), but not necessarily within the *Control* (*Control/Caucasian* v. *Control/Non-Caucasian*). Also, if the presence of an undocumented immigrant, regardless of race, provokes threat, support for the law should be greater when we compare all responses in the *Threat* treatment with the *Control*.

3.2.1 Racial Threat

To test if racial threat can explain support for the anti-immigration law, I compared reactions to the immigrant’s race within the *Control* and *Threat* treatments using the following logistic regression model:

$$\text{logit}(E[\text{Law}|\text{NonCaucasian}]) = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{NonCaucasian} + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

In Equation 1, the dependent variable is dichotomous and coded 1 if the respondent indicated that they supported the anti-immigration law and 0 otherwise. The independent variable, *NonCaucasian*, is also dichotomous and coded 1 if the respondent was exposed to the non-Caucasian dark skin-tone immigrant and 0 if they were exposed to the Caucasian light skin tone immigrant. Since we are interested in the reaction of white natives vis-a-vis undocumented immigrants, for the purposes of this analysis the sample was further restricted to white respondents born in the United States

If support for the anti-immigration law is motivated simply by prejudice against the non-Caucasian immigrant regardless of threat, I expect that $\beta_1 > 0$ in both the *Control* and

	Control	Local
Prejudice	$\beta_1 > 0$	$\beta_1 > 0$
No prejudice	$\beta_1 = 0$	$\beta_1 = 0$
Racial Threat	$\beta_1 = 0$	$\beta_1 > 0$

Table 4: Theories Corresponding to Predicted Values of β_1

	Control		Threat	
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
NonCaucasian	<i>0.07</i> (0.31)	<i>-0.06</i> (0.37)	<i>0.78**</i> (0.36)	<i>1.29***</i> (0.44)
Pct. Illegal	*	-0.04 (0.14)	*	0.21 (0.15)
Age	*	0.01 (0.02)	*	0.02 (0.02)
Ideology	*	0.67*** (0.13)	*	0.80*** (0.14)
Education	*	-0.42 (0.27)	*	0.11 (0.31)
Unemployed	*	*	*	0.86 (1.62)
N	167	167	132	130
Covariates	No	Yes	No	Yes

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Standard errors are in parentheses.

Table 5: Logistic Regressions of Support for Anti-Immigration Law on Immigrant Race within Control and Threat Treatments, White Native-Born Only

Threat treatments. Similarly, if prejudice against the darker non-Caucasian immigrant is unrelated to support for the law, I expect that $\beta_1 = 0$ in both treatments. If racial threat motivates support for the law, however, race should not affect support in the *Control* ($\beta_1 = 0$), but should affect support in the *Threat* treatment ($\beta_1 > 0$).

Table 5 contains estimates of β_1 from Equation 1 within the Control and Threat treatments. Results with and without covariates, which include a measure of respondent percep-

	Caucasian	Non-Caucasian	Diff.
Control	49.3%	51.1%	1.8%
Threat	42.4%	61.6%	19.2%**

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$
for Two-Sided T-Test, $H_0 : Diff. = 0$

Table 6: Distribution of White Respondents Supporting the Anti-Immigration Law by Treatment Group

tions of the proportion of their city comprised of undocumented immigrants (PctIllegal) show a clear pattern. In the Control, skin-tone has no effect on support for the anti-immigration law. In the Threat treatment, however, immigrant race is strongly related to support for the anti-immigration law among white natives. Odds ratios derived from estimates of β_1 in models (c) and (d) show that the odds that white natives favored the anti-immigration law were 2.2 greater when shown the darker non-Caucasian immigrant before the addition of covariates and 3.6 times greater after the addition of covariates.

A breakdown of the distribution of white native respondents that favored and opposed the law by treatment group strongly reinforces these findings. In the Control treatment, white respondents shown the Non-Caucasian immigrant favored the law by a margin of 1.8% over those shown the Caucasian immigrant, a difference that is not statistically significant. In the Threat treatment, white respondents shown the Non-Caucasian immigrant favored the anti-immigration law by a statistically significant margin of 19.2% over those exposed to the Caucasian immigrant, a 10-fold increase in support for the law based on perceptions of the immigrant’s race compared to Control.

4 Discussion

The results of this experiment demonstrate that racial threat affects support for exclusionary attitudes towards undocumented immigrants and suggest that opposition to undocu-

mented immigration in the U.S. may not be as strong as it is currently if the undocumented immigrants appeared to be more Caucasian. When presented with a story about an undocumented immigrant with no reference to his location, skin-tone does not affect opinions about the anti-immigration law. When primed to believe that the same undocumented immigrant lives near them, however, racial threat triggers steep increases in support for the anti-immigration law. Results of the manipulations in this experiment also demonstrate how variations in media coverage of immigration can inadvertently affect support for anti-immigration laws. Indeed, this study shows that the same seemingly positive information presented about an immigrant or immigrant group can differentially influence opinions about immigration when paired with different kinds of contextual information.

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6 Appendix

6.1 Treatment Stimuli

Instructions: Below is an excerpt from a **national** newspaper article profiling immigrants. Please **CAREFULLY READ THE TEXT BELOW** and answer the following questions. You will be asked two short validation questions about the article which **MUST BE ANSWERED CORRECTLY** for you to be compensated. Image is concealed due to copyright restrictions.

The Living American Dream: An Illegal Immigrant's Journey

As an illegal immigrant worker, Miguel's journey to the United States was a difficult one.

Like many illegal immigrants, he came to the US from Mexico using the services of a "coyote," a specialist in human trafficking across the US-Mexican border.

"Me and other members of my family were packed in the back of a small truck for days, sometimes without food or water," he told me in his native Spanish. "When I finally arrived in the United States, I was so happy that I thought I could kiss the ground."

Now the problems that he faces are of a different kind. In his day to day life, he struggles to put food on the table for his family. "All my life, I always work hard, but there never seems to be enough money," he tells me.




Figure 2: Control/Caucasian Treatment

Instructions: Below is an excerpt from a **national** newspaper article profiling immigrants. Please **CAREFULLY READ THE TEXT BELOW** and answer the following questions. You will be asked two short validation questions about the article which **MUST BE ANSWERED CORRECTLY** for you to be compensated. Image is concealed due to copyright restrictions.

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Now the problems that he faces are of a different kind. In his day to day life, he struggles to put food on the table for his family. "All my life, I always work hard, but there never seems to be enough money," he tells me.




Figure 3: Control/Non-Caucasian

Instructions: Below is an excerpt from a newspaper article profiling immigrants living in **Berkeley, CA**. Please **CAREFULLY READ THE TEXT BELOW** and answer the following questions. You will be asked two short validation questions about the article which **MUST BE ANSWERED CORRECTLY** for you to be compensated. Image is concealed due to copyright restrictions.

The Living American Dream: An Illegal Immigrant's Journey

Berkeley, CA - As an illegal immigrant worker, Miguel's journey to Berkeley was a difficult one.

Like many illegal immigrants, he came to the US from Mexico using the services of a "coyote," a specialist in human trafficking across the US-Mexican border.

"Me and other members of my family were packed in the back of a small truck for days, sometimes without food or water," he told me in his native Spanish. "When I finally arrived in the United States, I was so happy that I thought I could kiss the ground."

Now the problems that he faces are of a different kind. In his day to day life, he struggles to put food on the table for his family. "All my life, I always work hard, but there never seems to be enough money," he tells me.



Figure 4: Threat/Caucasian

Instructions: Below is an excerpt from a newspaper article profiling immigrants living in **Berkeley, CA**. Please **CAREFULLY READ THE TEXT BELOW** and answer the following questions. You will be asked two short validation questions about the article which **MUST BE ANSWERED CORRECTLY** for you to be compensated. Image is concealed due to copyright restrictions.

The Living American Dream: An Illegal Immigrant's Journey

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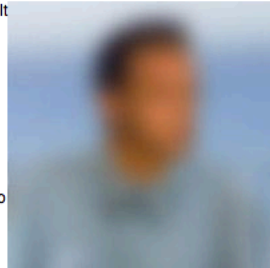


Figure 5: Threat/Non-Caucasian