



Population, Education, and Health Seminar Series

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“Who are the ‘illegals’?: The Social Construction of Undocumented Status in the U.S.

**October 5, 12:30–1:30 pm
Student Center—Room 1209**

Lacking formal legal status has significant, negative consequences for immigrants in the U.S., as well as their (often U.S.-born) children. Nevertheless, “legality” is often an ambiguous state. Immigration laws are complex and even immigration authorities are often uncertain about immigrants’ statuses. Given the ambiguity surrounding ‘illegality,’ how do immigration officers, employers, landlords, and people in general identify people they believe to be ‘illegal’? We use a novel conjoint survey experiment to examine how individual attributes like national origin, social class, and criminal record shape perceived undocumented status among the American public. Preliminary results suggest that national origin and criminality are powerful determinants of perceived illegality, and having lower levels of English fluency, less education, and lower occupational status increase perceptions of illegality. The fact that the most vulnerable individuals are suspected to be undocumented suggests that perceived illegality may deepen long-standing inequalities by adding one more dimension to the compounding effects of race, class, and legal status. In addition, the link between criminal behaviors and perceived illegality not only reveals the hardening of public opinion towards immigrants, but also hints at the erection of a moral boundary around them. Exploring the social construction of illegality will increase our theoretical understanding of the social processes through which legal boundaries are constructed around minority populations.



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For more information about this biweekly seminar series, please contact Stephanie Potochnick at potochnicks@missouri.edu