Article

The immigrant labeling effect: The role of immigrant group labels in prejudice against noncitizens

Julian M. Rucker,[1] Mary C. Murphy[2,3]
and Victor D. Quintanilla[3,4]

Abstract

Five experiments ($N = 2{,}251$) and a meta-analysis examine how group labels shape Americans' levels of prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences toward immigrants living in the US without authorization. These studies extend research documenting how the perceived negativity of group labels (e.g., those describing gay people) affects people's downstream attitudes. To this end, Study 1 examines the perceived negativity of the five most commonly used labels to describe unauthorized immigrants. Study 2 found that relatively negative (vs. neutral) labels (e.g., illegal aliens vs. noncitizens) engendered more prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and greater support for punitive policies. Study 3 replicates these effects and examines the role of familiarity. People who personally knew members of the group were more positive towards them overall, but were nevertheless susceptible to the labels' influence. Studies 4 and 5 provide additional replications and explore prejudice as a mediator of behavioral intentions and policy preferences.

> If you don't want America to be overrun by masses of illegal immigrants and massive caravans, you better vote Republican.
>
> Donald Trump (cited in Shear & Davis, 2018)

While America has long been lauded as a nation of immigrants (Kennedy, 1964), the language used to refer to immigrants who live in the US without authorization is highly debated. Proponents of historically popular terms, like "illegal alien,"

[1]Yale University, USA
[2]Indiana University, USA
[3]Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University
[4]Center for Law, Society & Culture, Indiana University Maurer School of Law

Corresponding authors:
Julian M. Rucker, Department of Psychology, Yale University, 2 Hillhouse Ave., New Haven, CT 06520, USA.
Email: julian.rucker@yale.edu

Victor D. Quintanilla, IU Maurer School of Law, 211 S. Indiana Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA.
Email: vdq@indiana.edu

defend their use based upon stylistic preferences and legal precedent (e.g., Cunningham-Parmeter, 2011; National Public Radio [NPR], 2010), whereas opponents argue that such labels may be pejorative and dehumanizing (e.g., Bazar & Brown, 2009; Soderlund, 2007).

Most recently, widespread domestic and international discord about illegal immigration (Pew Research Center, 2016; Wike, Stokes, & Simmons, 2016) has thrown the debate about the language used to describe unauthorized immigrants into stark relief (e.g., Hiltner, 2017). Citing a potentially prejudicial impact, influential media outlets (e.g., *USA Today, The New York Times*, AP) have either cautioned against labels like "illegal immigrant" and "illegal alien" or removed such terms from their style guides altogether—though no guides offer alternative recommendations (Colford, 2013; Haughney, 2013; Romenesko, 2013). Citing similar concerns about imprecision and potentially prejudicial impact, many legal scholars of immigration have rejected the terms "alien" and "illegal" in casebooks (Aleinikoff, Martin, Motomura, & Fullerton, 2008; Legomsky, 2005) and in their scholarship more generally (Johnson, 1996; Neuman, 1995; Romero, 1997), preferring alternatives, such as "noncitizen," accompanied by language that makes clear the group's legal status.

In short, there is little agreement about how to appropriately refer to immigrants living in the US without authorization. Although some sociolegal research theorizes that these labels may influence attitudes toward immigrants (Cunningham-Parmeter, 2011; Johnson, 1996; Nunez, 2014), little empirical work has examined the psychological effects of immigrant group labels on subsequent attitudes and behaviors toward immigrant groups.

Negatively Connoted Labels May Engender Greater Prejudice

Language can catalyze intergroup bias (Housley, Claypool, Garcia-Marques, & Mackie, 2010; Maass, 1999). Indeed, previous research reveals that group labels meaningfully shape stereotype activation and application—influencing perceptions of stigmatized groups (e.g., Carnaghi et al., 2008; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Walton & Banaji, 2004). Specifically, labels that are perceived to be more negative (e.g., fag)—compared to more neutral group labels (e.g., gay)—can engender affective responses, such as prejudice, by heightening negative associations with the referenced group and inhibiting positively valenced information (e.g., Carnaghi & Maass, 2007).

Based on this research, it is important to examine the perceived negativity of group labels. Terms that are perceived more negatively (e.g., illegal alien) may increase hostility toward the labeled group. In contrast, labels perceived as more neutral in valence (e.g., noncitizen) may generate less hostility. This research investigates these questions in the context of immigrant labeling by first examining the perceived negativity of the five most commonly used immigrant group labels in English print media (Study 1) and second, by examining how these labels influence downstream cognitive and affective responses toward the labeled group (Studies 2–5). Finally, given the considerable body of research demonstrating that negative attitudes can shape subsequent behavioral intentions (e.g., Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986), we explored whether the effects of immigrant group labels on behavioral intentions and policy preferences may be explained by the levels of prejudice they elicit (Studies 2–5).

Familiarity May Shape Responses Toward Labeled Groups

In addition to the perceived negativity of group labels (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), there is evidence to suggest that another factor is likely to influence subsequent attitudes and behaviors toward groups: familiarity with group members. Previous research has long theorized and demonstrated that familiarity breeds liking (Allport, 1954; Zajonc, 1968). The idea that familiarity fosters positive thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward stigmatized groups is also consistent with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) that theorizes that intergroup contact, under appropriate conditions, is an effective way

to reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups. Indeed, several empirical studies and meta-analyses have shown that when individuals personally know people from a stigmatized group, they exhibit lower levels of prejudice toward that group (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2006). Thus, people's personal familiarity with members of the labeled group may influence their levels of prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy support overall.

In the domain of immigrant labeling, for example, Ommundsen, van der Veer, Larsen, and Eilertsen (2014) observed a main effect whereby participants whose parents were immigrants were more likely to report positive attitudes toward unauthorized immigration. Similarly, Sanchez, Vargas, Walker, and Ybarra (2015) reported that Latinx voters who knew undocumented immigrants were more likely to support action on immigration policy. Taken together, this research suggests that familiarity with members of the referenced group may shape prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences regarding the group.

Previous Immigrant Labeling Studies

Three previous studies explored the effects of a few, idiosyncratically selected immigrant labels (illegal immigrant, undocumented Mexican, undocumented immigrant: Knoll, Redlawsk, & Sanborn, 2011; illegal alien, illegal immigrant, undocumented immigrant: Ommundsen et al., 2014; undocumented worker, illegal alien: Pearson, 2010) on subsequent attitudes and policy preferences; these studies yielded inconsistent results. Indeed, more comprehensive research is needed to investigate the extent to which the most commonly used immigrant group labels influence prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences—as well as the potential processes that motivate these effects. After documenting the perceived negativity of the labels most commonly used to characterize unauthorized immigrants (Study 1), four experiments and

a meta-analysis examine how these labels, as well as familiarity with members of these groups, shape perceivers' subsequent attitudes, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences. Considering contemporary global debates surrounding immigrants and unauthorized immigration, these studies provide the most comprehensive research to date on the psychological effects of immigrant labels and offer evidence-based recommendations to assist in selection among competing terms. This knowledge is critical, as the prejudicial effects of labels may affect the viability of comprehensive immigration reform (Lakoff, 2009) and the American public's treatment of immigrant groups.

The Present Research

The present research provides a comprehensive comparative examination of the impact of labels used to describe immigrants living in the US without authorization. Study 1 examines differences in the perceived negativity of the five labels most commonly used in English-language print publications to characterize this group. Study 2 examines the impact of relatively negative (e.g., illegal alien, illegal immigrant) and neutral labels (e.g., undocumented immigrant, noncitizen) on people's levels of prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences toward the referenced group. Study 3 examines whether these responses differ when perceivers are personally familiar (vs. unfamiliar) with members of the labeled group, regardless of the specific label used, and explores whether group labels similarly influence perceivers' responses when they personally know (vs. don't know) members of the labeled group. Studies 4 and 5 replicate labeling effects and Studies 2–5 explore whether the behavioral intention and policy preference effects are mediated by the prejudice engendered by the group label. Finally, a meta-analysis across studies 2–5 ($n = 1,911$) provides more precise estimates of the labeling effects.

Following previous research (e.g., Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), we expected that in the context of unauthorized immigration, group labels
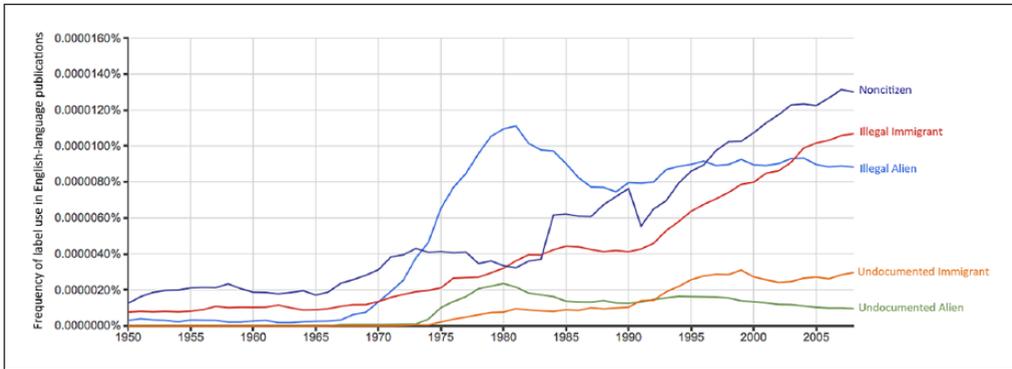
Figure 1. Google N-gram of frequencies used to refer to immigrants in the US without authorization within English print publications from 1950 to 2010.

perceived to be more negative would increase respondents' levels of prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and support for more punitive policies toward the group. Based on intergroup contact theory, we expected that perceivers personally familiar (vs. unfamiliar) with a referenced group member would express more positive attitudes toward the group overall and may be less influenced by group labels. Finally, we expected that the level of prejudice engendered by the labels would mediate the effects of label on people's behavioral intentions and policy preferences.

Study 1

Study 1 explores people's perceptions of group labels used to describe unauthorized immigrants. To increase external validity and relevance to today's sociocultural context, we investigated the effects of the five group labels most widely used in English-language print publications: illegal aliens, illegal immigrants, undocumented aliens, undocumented immigrants, and noncitizens (see Figure 1). We hypothesized that labels that explicitly highlight the deviant behavior of the group (e.g., illegal) and/or those that reference the group in dehumanizing terms (e.g., aliens) would be perceived more negatively than labels that do not reference the group with these relatively stigmatizing terms (e.g., undocumented immigrant, noncitizen).

Method

Participants. We recruited 356 adults living in the United States from Amazon Mechanical Turk (165 female; 72% Caucasian/White).

Procedure

After consenting to participate in an online survey about public policy, participants read the following prompt: "The following questions deal with your thoughts about the term "[group label]." As you know, the issue of [group label] in the United States is hotly debated right now."

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the labels:[1] illegal aliens, illegal immigrants, undocumented aliens, undocumented immigrants, or noncitizens. Noncitizens were additionally described as "those who have come to the United States without documentation or visas" to clarify their (il)legal status. Participants then completed a brief survey of their positive and negative perceptions of the label. The online supplement contains all materials and measures for all studies in this report.

Measures

Perceived negativity. A two-item measure assessed the perceived negativity of the label (e.g., "How negative/positive is the term [label]?"; 1 = *not at all*, 6 = *extremely*). The positivity item was

reverse-coded and responses were then averaged to create a perceived negativity composite ($r = .56$); higher scores indicate greater perceived negativity.

Perceived illegality. Finally, to ensure that all groups referenced by the labels were perceived as engaging in unlawful behavior, participants completed a single item in which they responded "Yes" or "No" to the question: "In the United States, have [label] who enter the U.S. violated immigration law?"

Results

Perceived negativity. An initial omnibus ANOVA revealed that the group labels significantly differed in perceived negativity, $F(4, 351) = 8.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Pairwise comparisons explored the labels in relation to one another. Table 1 features all label means, standard deviations, and Tukey HSD multiple comparison tests. Overall, the labels "illegal immigrant," "illegal alien," and "undocumented alien" were perceived to connote more negativity than the labels "noncitizen" and "undocumented immigrant." Consistent with these findings, we separated the labels into two groups: relatively negative labels, which included "illegal immigrant," "illegal alien," and "undocumented alien"; and relatively neutral labels, which included "undocumented immigrant" and "noncitizen."

A *t* test examining the perceived negativity of these composites revealed that respondents perceived the negative labels as connoting significantly more negativity relative to the neutral labels ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.07$ vs. $M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.20$), $t(351) = -5.26$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-2.62, -1.94]$.

Perceived illegality. A chi-square test examined the relationship between the relatively negative versus neutral group labels and the perceived illegality of the group's behavior. Results revealed that the negative and neutral group labels did not differ on perceived illegality—both groups were perceived to have violated immigration law, $\chi^2(356) = 0.67$, $p = .41$.

Table 1. Study 1: Means, standard deviations, 95% CIs for negativity, and frequencies of perceived illegality.

Dependent measure	Illegal aliens		Illegal immigrants		Undocumented aliens		Undocumented immigrants		Noncitizens		Immigrants	
	n = 72		n = 71		n = 70		n = 71		n = 72		n = 72	
	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI
Negativity	5.25 (0.86)$_a$	[4.98, 5.52]	4.94 (1.11)$_a$	[4.68, 5.21]	4.74 (1.18)$_{a,b}$	[4.47, 5.01]	4.37 (1.20)$_b$	[4.10, 4.64]	4.32 (1.22)$_b$	[4.05, 4.59]	3.44 (1.31)$_c$	[3.18, 3.71]
	n of illegal (%)		n of illegal (%)		n of illegal (%)		n of illegal (%)		n of illegal (%)		n of illegal (%)	
Perceived illegality	71 (99%)		69 (97%)		65 (93%)		68 (96%)		67 (93%)		70 (97%)	

Note. Means on the same row with differing subscripts differ at $p < .05$ level, according to the Tukey HSD procedure; n of illegal = number of participants who viewed members of the labeled group as violating the law.

Discussion

Study 1 provides evidence that the American public perceives the five group labels most frequently used to describe unauthorized immigrants to differ in the extent to which they connote negativity. "Illegal immigrant," "illegal alien," and "undocumented alien" were perceived as connoting more negativity than "noncitizen" and "undocumented immigrant," even though the referenced groups were all perceived to have violated U.S. immigration law. Studies 2–5 organize the group labels based on these findings and examine how relatively negative (vs. neutral) labels influence people's attitudes, behavioral intentions, and policy support. However, pairwise comparisons between each label are summarized in each study (and fully reported in the supplemental material) for readers interested in the effects of certain individual labels relative to others.

Study 2

Study 2 examines the impact of relatively negative (vs. neutral) labels on prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences. We hypothesized that, relative to the more neutral labels (undocumented immigrants and noncitizens), exposure to the negative labels (illegal aliens, illegal immigrants, undocumented aliens) would increase prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and support for more punitive policies toward the referenced group.

Method

Participants. We recruited 422 adults living in the United States from Amazon Mechanical Turk (172 female; 79% Caucasian/White).[2]

Procedure

While the procedure was similar to that of Study 1, Study 2's dependent measures assessed people's levels of prejudice, social distance, behavioral intentions, and support for more punitive immigration policies toward the referenced group. Participants read Study 1's introductory prompt and were randomly assigned to view one of the five labels: illegal aliens, illegal immigrants, undocumented aliens, undocumented immigrants, or noncitizens. As in Study 1, noncitizens were additionally described as "those who have come to the United States without documentation or visas" to clarify their (il)legal status. Participants then completed the dependent measures, where the same randomly assigned label appeared in the text of each measure.

Measures

Prejudice. A feeling thermometer (e.g., Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993) assessed the extent to which participants felt warmth/coldness toward referenced group members. Responses were provided using a 100-point sliding scale (0 = *extremely cold*, 100 = *extremely warm*) with a midpoint of 50 (*neither warm, nor cold*). Ratings were reverse-scored so that higher scores indicate more prejudice.

Social distance. A four-item measure, adapted from Bogardus (1967), assessed the extent to which participants desired distance from referenced group members (e.g., "I would feel ok if [label] were to move onto my street"). Responses (1 = *strongly agree*, 6 = *strongly disagree*) were averaged to create a social distance composite (α = .97); higher scores indicate greater desired social distance.

Negative treatment. A six-item measure (1 = *strongly agree*, 6 = *strongly disagree*) assessed behavioral intentions toward referenced group members (e.g., "I would be likely to turn in/report an [label]"). Negatively worded responses were reverse-coded and items were then averaged to create a negative treatment composite (α = .87); higher scores indicate more punitive behavioral intentions.

Policy preferences. Two items assessed the extent to which participants supported deportation/clemency for referenced group members (e.g., "[Label]

should be deported from the United States"). Responses to the clemency item were reverse-scored and averaged to create a policy preference composite (α = .81); higher scores indicate greater support for punitive policy positions.

Perceived illegality. Finally, participants completed a single-item manipulation check in which they responded "Yes" or "No" to the question: "In the United States, have [label] who enter the U.S. violated immigration law?"[3]

Results

Analytic strategy. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to examine whether our measures could be reduced to a smaller number of factors.[4] After creating composites of the dependent measures based on the EFA results, we conducted initial omnibus ANOVAs to investigate whether there were differences among the five labels. Next, a *t* test compared the effects of the negative immigrant group labels (illegal aliens, illegal immigrants, and undocumented aliens; coded as 1) relative to the more neutral immigrant labels (undocumented immigrants and noncitizens; coded as 0). Label means and standard deviations are reported in Table 2.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

We first explored whether the measures were, indeed, reducible. All items across all the scales were standardized and submitted to an EFA with an oblique rotation to allow for correlated factors. All items and their factor loadings can be found in Table S1. The analysis yielded two factors explaining 72.33% of the variance. The first factor reflected respondents' prejudice toward the labeled group (rotation sums of squares loading = 6.49) and was comprised of the prejudice and social distance items. The second factor reflected respondents' personal behavioral intentions (rotation sums of squares loading = 5.51) and was comprised of the treatment items (e.g., "I would be likely to turn in/report an [label]"). Based on these results, we created a prejudice

Table 2. Study 2: Means, standard deviations, and 95% CIs for measures of immigrant group labels.

Dependent measure	Illegal aliens		Illegal immigrants		Undocumented aliens		Undocumented immigrants		Noncitizens	
	n = 86		n = 83		n = 85		n = 84		n = 84	
	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI
Prejudice	0.16 (0.93)$_a$	[−0.04, 0.36]	0.11 (0.94)$_a$	[−0.09, 0.32]	0.01 (0.94)$_{a,b,c}$	[−0.19, 0.21]	0.03 (0.83)$_{a,b,c}$	[−0.15, 0.21]	−0.32 (0.84)$_{b,c}$	[−0.50, −0.13]
Intended behavior	3.07 (1.20)$_{a,b}$	[2.82, 3.33]	3.27 (1.30)$_a$	[2.99, 3.56]	3.14 (1.24)$_{a,b}$	[2.87, 3.40]	3.10 (1.12)$_{a,b}$	[2.86, 3.35]	2.68 (1.14)$_b$	[2.43, 2.93]
Policy preferences	3.83 (1.45)$_a$	[3.52, 4.14]	3.72 (1.54)$_{a,b}$	[3.39, 4.06]	3.74 (1.43)$_a$	[3.43, 4.04]	3.60 (1.26)$_{a,b}$	[3.33, 3.88]	3.13 (1.39)$_b$	[2.83, 3.43]

Note. Means on the same row with differing subscripts differ at $p < .05$ level, according to the Tukey HSD procedure.

composite ($\alpha = .95$) and an intended behavior composite ($\alpha = .90$).[5] The two policy preference items (e.g., support for deportation/clemency) inconsistently loaded on the factors; thus, they were examined separately from prejudice and behavioral intentions.

Prejudice. An omnibus ANOVA revealed that group label significantly affected prejudice, $F(4, 417) = 3.60$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. The planned comparison revealed that participants reported significantly more prejudice toward immigrants referenced with negative labels ($M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.94$) compared to neutral labels ($M = -0.14$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(417) = 2.65$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [0.22, 1.23].

Intended behavior. An omnibus ANOVA revealed that group label significantly affected punitive behavioral intentions, $F(4, 417) = 2.87$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. The planned comparison revealed that participants reported significantly more punitive behavioral intentions toward immigrants referenced with negative labels ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.24$) compared to neutral labels ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(417) = 2.25$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [0.10, 1.51].

Policy preferences. An omnibus ANOVA revealed that group label significantly affected public policy support, $F(4, 417) = 3.23$, $p = .013$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. The planned comparison revealed that participants supported more punitive policies toward immigrants referenced with negative labels (e.g., illegal aliens; $M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.47$) than with neutral labels (e.g., noncitizens; $M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.34$), $t(417) = 2.82$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [0.36, 2.02].

Pairwise comparisons of labels. A series of Tukey HSD pairwise comparisons (to account for multiple tests) examined whether each label significantly differed from the others on prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences. We found that immigrants labeled as "noncitizens" elicited significantly less prejudice, relative to "illegal aliens" and "illegal immigrants" ($ps < .05$); less punitive behavioral intentions, relative

to "undocumented aliens" ($p < .05$); and less punitive policy preferences, relative to "illegal aliens" and "undocumented aliens" ($ps < .05$). No other labels differed from each other. These pairwise comparisons by label are reported in Table 2.

Mediation of behavioral intentions and policy preferences. We explored whether the behavioral intention effect was mediated by the level of prejudice engendered by the labels. PROCESS for SPSS (10,000 bootstrapped resamples; Model 4; Hayes, 2013) was used to conduct the mediation analysis that revealed that negative (vs. neutral) labels elicited more prejudice, which in turn predicted more punitive behavioral intentions toward the group (e.g., reporting them/turning them in); indirect effect = .24 (.09), 95% CI [0.06, 0.42] (see Figure 2).

We also examined whether the effect of group labels on punitive policy preferences was mediated by the prejudice elicited by the labels. Again, PROCESS for SPSS (10,000 bootstrapped resamples; Model 4; Hayes, 2013) was used and the analysis revealed that the level of prejudice elicited by the group labels also predicted greater support for more punitive immigration policies; indirect effect = .31 (.12), 95% CI [0.09, 0.54] (see Figure 3).

Discussion

Study 2 offers preliminary evidence that group labels significantly influence the way that people feel and intend to behave toward unauthorized immigrants. Consistent with our predictions, negative (vs. neutral) immigrant labels elicited more prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and support for more punitive policies. Moreover, the labeling effects on intended behavior and policy preferences were mediated by the levels of prejudice elicited by the negative (vs. neutral) labels. Finally, pairwise comparisons revealed that the "noncitizen" label elicited significantly less prejudice, less punitive behavioral intentions, and less punitive policy preferences, compared to other immigrant labels.
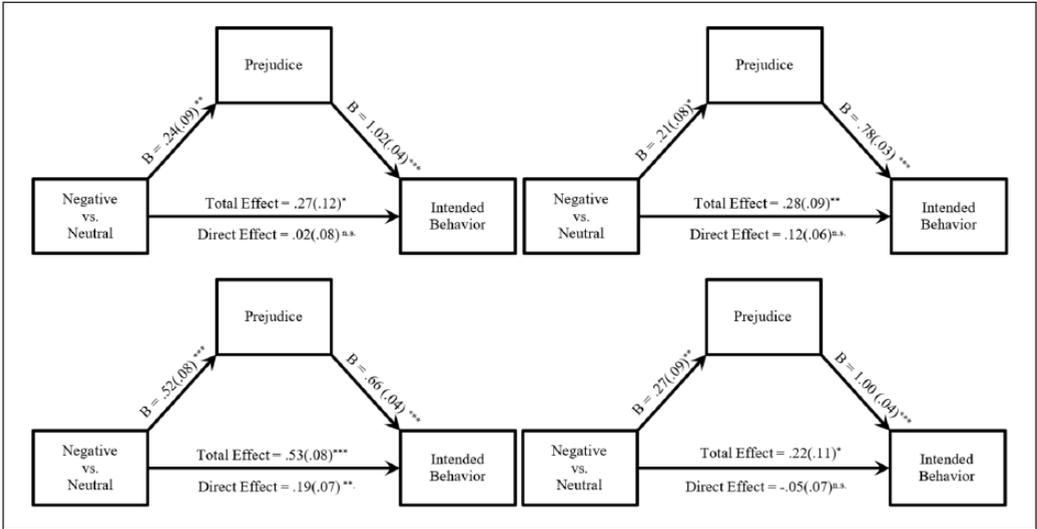
Figure 2. Mediation models depicting the effects of immigrant group labels on hostile behavioral intentions through prejudice. Top left: Mediation results from Study 2. Top right: Mediation results from Study 3. Bottom left: Mediation results from Study 4. Bottom right: Mediation results from Study 5.
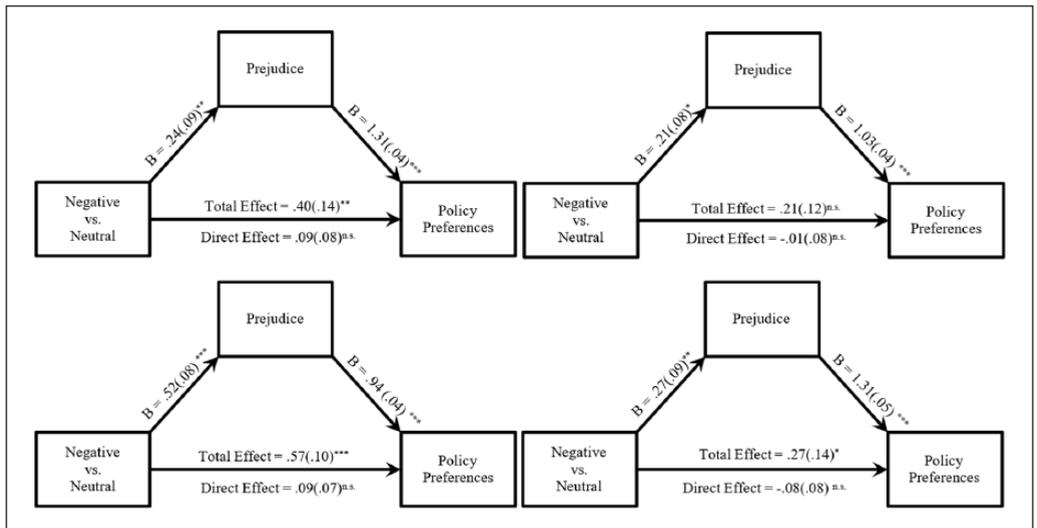*Note.* *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Figure 3. Mediation models depicting the effects of immigrant group labels on punitive policy preferences through prejudice. Top left: Mediation results from Study 2. Top right: Mediation results from Study 3. Bottom left: Mediation results from Study 4. Bottom right: Mediation results from Study 5.
Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

These findings provide initial support for our hypotheses. Study 3 aimed to replicate and extend Study 2 by examining how familiarity with the labeled group influences people's responses to the label. Based on intergroup contact theory (e.g., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2006), we expected that respondents who personally knew members of the group would respond more positively toward the group overall. We also explored whether group labels would influence familiar (vs. unfamiliar) respondents in similar ways, or whether previous contact with members of the referenced immigrant group might insulate respondents from the labels' effects.

Study 3

A large body of literature suggests that familiarity with members of stigmatized groups can foster more positive attitudes and behaviors toward them (e.g., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2006). Thus, familiarity with the referenced group may shape the way that perceivers respond to the group overall.

Consistent with this literature, we hypothesized a main effect of familiarity such that—regardless of group label—respondents who personally knew an immigrant living in the US without authorization would report more positive attitudes and behavior toward the group. Moreover, we explored the Familiarity x Label interactions to examine whether those who were familiar with members of the referenced group would be similarly affected by group labels as those without familiarity. Given that familiar respondents have previous contact, it is possible that this familiarity (and the more positive attitudes that contact may elicit) might negate the labels' effects. If this hypothesis is supported, we would expect *unfamiliar* respondents to show more prejudice, more punitive behavioral intentions, and more support for punitive policies in the context of negative (vs. neutral) group labels, but *familiar* respondents to show no such effects. On the other hand, it is possible that group labels influence both familiar and unfamiliar respondents to a similar extent such that only a main effect of group label (and no interaction) is observed.

Method

Participants. We recruited 515 undergraduates (298 female; M_{age} = 19.11 years, SD = 1.71) from a large, urban, Midwestern university in the United States in which racial and ethnic minorities comprise the majority of the student body. The sample reflected this racial/ethnic diversity (37% White, 22% Asian/Asian American, 23% Hispanic, 6% Black, 12% Other). We aimed to recruit all students participating in the university's Introductory Psychology course's mass testing survey.

Measures, procedure, design. The procedure and measures for Study 3 were nearly identical to those of Study 2, except that Study 3 included a new dichotomous question assessing participants' familiarity with a member of the referenced group (i.e., "Do you personally know a(n) [group label]?"). A majority of participants (55%) reported being familiar with a referenced group member. Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for all measures by label.

Results

Factor analysis. A factor analysis with oblique rotation produced a similar two-factor solution as in Study 2 (i.e., a prejudice factor: rotation sums of squares loading = 6.13; and a behavioral intentions factor: rotation sums of squares loading = 4.83; factor loadings are provided in the online supplemental material). Composites assessing prejudice (α = .95), behavioral intentions (α = .88), and policy preferences (α = .66) were created.

Prejudice. A 2 (negative vs. neutral labels) x 2 (familiarity: yes vs. no) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of group label, $F(1, 508)$ = 5.55, p = .02, η_p^2 = .01. Consistent with Study 2, participants reported significantly more prejudice toward immigrants described by negative (M = 0.09, SD = 0.94) versus neutral labels (M = −0.13,

Table 3. Study 3: Means, standard deviations, and 95% CIs for measures of immigrant group labels.

Dependent measure	Illegal aliens			Illegal immigrants			Undocumented aliens			Undocumented immigrants			Noncitizens		
	n	M (SD)	95% CI	n	M (SD)	95% CI	n	M (SD)	95% CI	n	M (SD)	95% CI	n	M (SD)	95% CI
Prejudice															
No familiarity	49	0.27 (0.94)$_{a,b}$	[−0.00, 0.54]	42	0.54 (0.80)$_{a,b}$	[0.29, 0.79]	52	0.65 (0.92)$_a$	[0.41, 0.92]	56	0.42 (0.86)$_{a,b}$	[0.19, 0.65]	31	0.03 (0.87)$_b$	[−0.29, 0.35]
Familiarity	54	−0.27 (0.80)$_a$	[−0.48, −0.05]	58	−0.23 (0.91)$_a$	[−0.47, 0.01]	48	−0.31 (0.80)$_a$	[−0.54, −0.07]	51	−0.37 (0.72)$_a$	[−0.58, −0.17]	71	−0.45 (0.70)$_a$	[−0.61, −0.28]
Intended behavior															
No familiarity	49	2.85 (0.93)$_a$	[2.58, 3.11]	43	3.20 (1.18)$_{a,b}$	[2.86, 3.59]	51	3.18 (0.98)$_a$	[2.90, 3.45]	56	2.90 (0.92)$_a$	[2.65, 3.14]	31	2.28 (0.87)$_a$	[1.97, 2.60]
Familiarity	54	2.09 (0.67)$_a$	[1.91, 2.28]	58	2.22 (0.96)$_a$	[1.97, 2.42]	48	2.14 (0.83)$_a$	[1.89, 2.38]	51	2.08 (0.80)$_a$	[1.85, 2.30]	71	2.00 (0.95)$_a$	[1.77, 2.22]
Policy preferences															
No familiarity	49	3.37 (1.17)$_a$	[3.03, 3.70]	42	3.79 (1.30)$_a$	[3.38, 4.19]	52	3.53 (1.26)$_a$	[3.18, 3.90]	56	3.47 (1.40)$_a$	[3.10, 3.85]	31	3.13 (1.34)$_a$	[2.64, 3.62]
Familiarity	54	2.73 (1.29)$_a$	[2.38, 3.08]	58	2.78 (1.18)$_a$	[2.47, 3.08]	48	2.84 (1.08)$_a$	[2.53, 3.16]	51	2.83 (1.12)$_a$	[2.52, 3.15]	71	2.49 (1.28)$_a$	[2.18, 2.79]

Note. Means on the same row with differing subscripts differ at $p < .05$ level, according to the Tukey HSD procedure.

$SD = 0.85$). Consistent with the contact hypothesis, a main effect of familiarity also emerged, $F(1, 508) = 91.27, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$, such that those familiar with a member of the referenced group reported significantly less prejudice toward the group overall ($M = −0.33, SD = 0.79$ vs. $M = 0.41, SD = 0.90$). The two-way interaction was not significant, indicating that the group labels influenced familiar and unfamiliar respondents to a similar extent, $F(1, 508) = 0.11, p = .74, \eta_p^2 < .01$.

Intended behavior. A 2 (negative vs. neutral labels) x 2 (familiarity: yes vs. no) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of group label, $F(1, 508) = 9.40, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Consistent with Study 2, participants reported significantly greater punitive behavioral intentions toward immigrants (e.g., report them/turn them in) when they were referenced with negative ($M = 2.59, SD = 1.04$) versus neutral labels ($M = 2.30, SD = 0.96$). A main effect of familiarity also emerged, $F(1, 508) = 87.55, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$, such that those familiar with a referenced group member reported significantly lower punitive behavioral intentions toward the group overall ($M = 2.10, SD = 0.86$ vs. $M = 2.92, SD = 1.02$). The two-way interaction was not significant, indicating that the effect of group labels on punitive behavioral intentions was similar for familiar and unfamiliar respondents, $F(1, 508) = 2.54, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .01$ (see Figure 4).

Policy preferences. Finally, a 2 (negative vs. neutral labels) x 2 (familiarity: yes vs. no) ANOVA revealed a nonsignificant main effect of group label, $F(1, 508) = 2.38, p = .12, \eta_p^2 = .01$, and a main effect of familiarity, $F(1, 508) = 43.38, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$, such that participants familiar with a referenced group member were less supportive of punitive immigration policies relative to those unfamiliar ($M = 2.72, SD = 1.20$ vs. $M = 3.47, SD = 1.30$). The interaction was not statistically significant, $F(1, 508) = 0.05, p = .83, \eta_p^2 < .01$.

Pairwise comparisons of labels. Again, a series of pairwise comparisons examined whether each
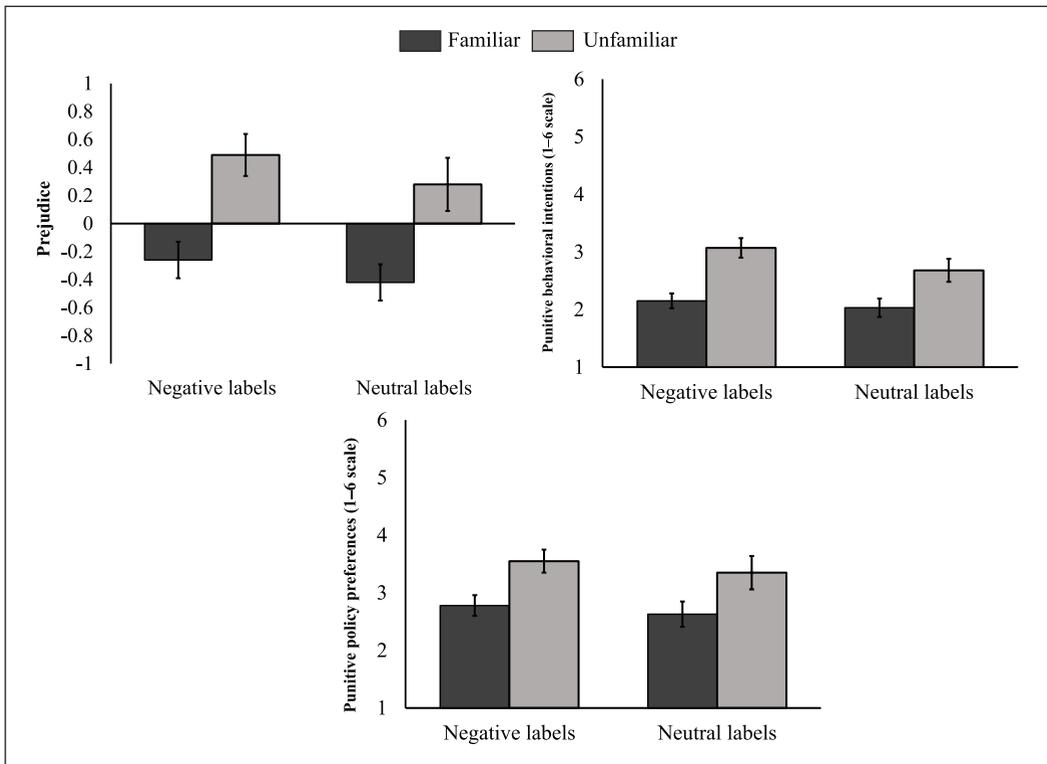
Figure 4. Top left: Prejudice Toward Referenced Group x Personal Familiarity With Referenced Group. Top right: Punitive Behavioral Intentions Toward Referenced Group x Personal Familiarity With Referenced Group. Bottom: Punitive Immigration Policy Support x Personal Familiarity With Referenced Group.
Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

label differed from the others. We found that the "noncitizens" label elicited significantly less prejudice, relative to "undocumented aliens," "undocumented immigrants," and "illegal immigrants" (ps < .05). "Noncitizens" also elicited significantly less punitive behavioral intentions, relative to all other labels (ps < .05), and significantly less punitive policy preferences, relative to all labels except "illegal aliens" (ps < .05). No other labels significantly differed from each other. Tukey HSD tests for pairwise comparisons by label are reported in Table 3.

Mediation of behavioral intentions and policy preferences. Following Study 2, we used PROCESS for SPSS (10,000 bootstrapped resamples; Model 4; Hayes, 2013) to investigate whether the level of prejudice engendered by the group label (dummy

coded: 0 = neutral labels, 1 = negative labels) mediated respondents' intended behavior. Results revealed that negative labels elicited greater prejudice, which in turn predicted people's intended behavior toward the labeled group; indirect effect = .17 (.06), 95% CI [0.04, 0.29].

We also examined whether policy preferences were mediated by prejudice. Again, there was mediation; indirect effect = .22 (.08), 95% CI [0.06, 0.38], such that negative labels elicited greater prejudice toward the labeled group, which predicted greater support for punitive policies.

Discussion

Study 3 replicated the immigrant labeling effects such that negative (vs. neutral) labels significantly increased prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions,

and support for more punitive immigration policies. Pairwise comparisons suggested that the "noncitizen" label elicited significantly less prejudice, less punitive behavioral intentions, and less punitive policy preferences, relative to more negatively valenced labels (e.g., "illegal immigrants"). Also consistent with Study 2, the labeling effects on intended behavior and policy preferences were mediated by the level of prejudice elicited by the group labels.

New to this study, and consistent with intergroup contact theory (e.g., Allport, 1954), main effects of familiarity emerged across the dependent variables such that people who personally knew (vs. did not know) a member of the referenced group reported lower prejudice, less punitive behavioral intentions, and less support for punitive immigration policies. No evidence of moderation by familiarity was obtained, suggesting that the group labels similarly influenced the prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences of familiar and unfamiliar respondents.

Study 4

Taken together, Studies 2 and 3 reveal that more neutral labels, such as "undocumented immigrant" and "noncitizen," elicit more positive affective and behavioral responses compared to negative labels (e.g., illegal alien, illegal immigrant). Study 4 sought to replicate and extend the previous studies by examining the effects of another relatively neutral label used by immigration legal scholars, "immigrant"—additionally described as people residing in the US unlawfully. We hypothesized that "immigrant" would show similar effects to those of "undocumented immigrant" and "noncitizen" and would differ from the more negative labels that we previously examined. Again, Study 4 examined prejudice as a mediator of intended behavior and policy support.

Method

Participants. We recruited 536 undergraduates (349 female; $M_{age} = 19.38$, $SD = 1.63$) from a different large, public, Midwestern university in the United States. Consistent with the broader student body at this university, the sample was relatively racially homogeneous (78% White). While the majority of Study 3's participants reported knowing an unauthorized immigrant (55%), the majority of participants in this study reported very little familiarity (70% were unfamiliar). As in Study 3, the survey was provided to all students participating in the university's Introductory Psychology course's mass survey.

Measures and procedure. The procedure and measures for Study 4 were nearly identical to the previous studies except for the inclusion of the additional, randomly assigned group label: immigrants. As with "noncitizens" in Studies 2–3, the "immigrants" label was accompanied in the study prompt by the additional description: "who have come to the United States without documentation" to clarify their legal status. Due to the relative lack of familiarity with the group, there was insufficient power to examine the effects of familiarity.[6] Means and standard deviations for all dependent variables by label are reported in Table 4.

Results

Factor analysis. Again, a factor analysis with oblique rotation confirmed a two-factor solution (i.e., a prejudice factor: rotation sums of squares loading = 5.61; and a behavioral intentions factor: rotation sums of squares loading = 3.88; factor loadings are reported in the supplemental material). Prejudice ($\alpha = .94$), behavioral intentions ($\alpha = .86$), and policy support ($\alpha = .63$) composites were created.

Prejudice. As in the previous studies, an omnibus ANOVA revealed that group label significantly affected prejudice, $F(5, 529) = 10.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. The planned comparison revealed that participants reported significantly more prejudice toward immigrants referenced with negative labels ($M = 0.26$, $SD = 0.87$) compared to neutral labels ($M = -0.26$, $SD = 0.86$), $t(529) = 6.97$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.12, 2.00].

Table 4. Study 4: Means, standard deviations, and 95% CIs for measures of immigrant group labels.

Dependent measure	Illegal aliens		Illegal immigrants		Undocumented aliens		Undocumented immigrants		Noncitizens		Immigrants	
	$n = 87$		$n = 89$		$n = 92$		$n = 88$		$n = 91$		$n = 88$	
	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI	M (SD)	95% CI
Prejudice	$0.29 (0.95)_a$	[0.08, 0.49]	$0.27 (0.85)_a$	[0.09, 0.45]	$0.23 (0.82)_a$	[0.06, 0.40]	$-0.08 (0.89)_{a,b}$	[−0.27, 0.11]	$-0.30 (0.85)_b$	[−0.48, −0.13]	$-0.39 (0.82)_b$	[−0.56, −0.21]
Intended behavior	$3.20 (1.03)_a$	[2.97, 3.41]	$3.03 (0.97)_{a,b}$	[2.82, 3.23]	$3.07 (1.01)_{a,b}$	[2.86, 3.28]	$2.73 (0.84)_{b,c}$	[2.55, 2.91]	$2.44 (0.84)_c$	[2.26, 2.61]	$2.53 (0.91)_c$	[2.33, 2.72]
Policy preferences	$3.65 (1.16)_a$	[3.40, 3.89]	$3.62 (1.10)_a$	[3.39, 3.85]	$3.67 (1.08)_a$	[3.45, 3.89]	$3.28 (1.08)_{a,b}$	[3.06, 3.51]	$3.02 (1.22)_b$	[2.76, 3.27]	$2.92 (1.21)_b$	[2.66, 3.18]

Note. Means on the same row with differing subscripts differ at $p < .05$ level, according to the Tukey HSD procedure.

Intended behavior. An omnibus ANOVA revealed that group label significantly affected punitive behavioral intentions, $F(5, 529) = 9.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. The planned comparison revealed that participants reported significantly more punitive behavioral intentions toward immigrants referenced with negative labels ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.00$) compared to neutral labels ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 0.87$), $t(529) = 6.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.12, 2.07].

Policy preferences. An ANOVA also revealed that group label significantly affected policy preferences, $F(5, 527) = 7.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Participants endorsed more punitive policies toward immigrants characterized by negative labels ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.11$) versus neutral labels ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(527) = 5.79$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.14, 2.30].

Pairwise comparisons of labels. A series of pairwise comparisons examined whether each label significantly differed from the others. The "noncitizen" and "immigrant" labels elicited significantly less prejudice, relative to the "illegal alien," "undocumented alien," and "illegal immigrant" labels (ps < .05). The "noncitizen" and "immigrant" labels also elicited significantly less punitive behavioral intentions, relative to the "illegal alien" and "undocumented alien" labels (ps < .05), as well as less punitive policy preferences relative to the "illegal alien," "undocumented alien," and "illegal immigrant" labels (ps < .05). No other labels significantly differed from each other (Tukey HSD tests for pairwise comparisons by label are reported in Table 4).

Mediation of behavioral intentions and policy preferences. Using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (10,000 bootstrapped resamples; Model 4; Hayes, 2013), we examined whether immigrant label (dummy coded: 0 = neutral labels, 1 = negative labels) predicted behavioral intentions through the prejudice elicited by the labels. Again, the indirect effect = .34 (.06), 95% CI [0.23, 0.46] was significant, indicating mediation.

Similarly, PROCESS for SPSS (10,000 bootstrapped resamples; Model 4; Hayes, 2013) was

used to conduct mediation analysis that revealed that prejudice mediated the effect of group labels on support for more punitive immigration policies; indirect effect = .49 (.08), 95% CI [0.34, 0.65].

Discussion

Consistent with the previous studies, Study 4 demonstrated that negative labels—relative to more neutral labels (now including the "immigrant" label preferred by many immigration scholars)—elevated prejudice, as well as more punitive behavioral intentions and more support for punitive policies. Once again, the labeling effects on behavioral intentions and policy support were mediated by the level of prejudice elicited by the labels. Finally, pairwise comparisons suggested that immigrants labeled as "noncitizens" or "immigrants" elicited less prejudice, less punitive behavioral intentions, and less punitive policy preferences, relative to more negatively valenced immigrant labels (e.g., "illegal aliens").

Study 5

Studies 2–4 reveal that relatively neutral labels (e.g., undocumented immigrant, noncitizen, immigrant) garner more positive affective responses, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences compared to more negative labels (e.g., illegal alien). However, is this difference a function of the way we asked the question? Because "noncitizen" and "immigrant" could conceivably refer to larger groups (e.g., green card holders) than the group to which the other labels referred (i.e., immigrants living in the US without authorization), we added clarifying information to connote the group's legal status. For example, in Studies 2–4 participants were asked about "noncitizens who have come to the United States without documentation." We argue that, conceptually, it is essential to couple this status-clarifying information with these neutral labels to ensure that respondents perceived the narrow, specific group to which we referred. However, methodologically, it means that more information (i.e., the phrase "who have come to the United States

without documentation") was provided for these neutral labels but *not* for the negative labels. Therefore, it is possible that the labeling effects we have observed thus far are due to this discrepancy in the amount of information provided with some of the neutral versus negative labels. Study 5 examines this possibility directly by adding the language that clarifies the legal status of the group (i.e., "who have come to the United States without documentation") to *all* labels to equate them in the amount of information provided.

Method

Participants. We recruited 438 adults living in the United States from Amazon Mechanical Turk (194 female; 75.3% White).

Measures and procedure. The procedure and measures for Study 5 were nearly identical to those of Studies 2–4 except that the introductory study prompt accompanying each label included the additional description: "The following questions deal with your thoughts about [label] who have come to the United States without documentation," to clarify every group's legal status. Means and standard deviations for all dependent variables by label are reported in Table 5.

Results

Factor analysis. A factor analysis with oblique rotation confirmed a two-factor solution (i.e., a prejudice factor: rotation sums of squares loading = 6.94; and a behavioral intentions factor: rotation sums of squares loading = 5.52; all factor loadings are provided in the supplemental material). Prejudice (α = .96), behavioral intentions (α = .91), and policy support (α = .83) composites were created.

Prejudice. Again, an omnibus ANOVA revealed that group label significantly affected prejudice toward the group, $F(5, 432) = 5.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. The planned comparison revealed that participants reported significantly more prejudice toward immigrants referenced with negative

labels (*M* = 0.13, *SD* = 0.88) compared to neutral labels (*M* = −0.14, *SD* = 0.96), *t*(432) = 3.14, *p* = .002, 95% CI [0.31, 1.33].

Intended behavior. An omnibus ANOVA revealed that group label marginally affected behavioral intentions, *F*(5, 432) = 1.99, *p* = .08, η_p^2 = .02. The planned comparison revealed that participants reported significantly more punitive behavioral intentions toward immigrants referenced with negative labels (*M* = 2.83, *SD* = 1.10) compared to neutral labels (*M* = 2.60, *SD* = 1.24), *t*(432) = 2.04, *p* = .04, 95% CI [0.03, 1.35].

Policy preferences. An omnibus ANOVA also revealed that group label significantly affected policy preferences, *F*(5, 432) = 3.13, *p* = .009, η_p^2 = .04. Participants endorsed more punitive immigration policies when the group was characterized by negative labels (*M* = 3.40, *SD* = 1.38) versus neutral labels (*M* = 3.13, *SD* = 1.53), *t*(432) = 2.02, *p* = .04, 95% CI [0.02, 1.64].

Pairwise comparisons of labels. A series of pairwise comparisons examined whether each label significantly differed from the others. We found that the "immigrant" label elicited significantly less prejudice, relative to all other labels (*p*s < .05) except "noncitizen"; the relatively neutral "immigrant" and "noncitizen" labels did not differ on any outcome (*p*s > .05). No other labels significantly differed from each other. Tukey HSD tests for pairwise comparisons by label are reported in Table 5.

Mediation of behavioral intentions and policy preferences. Using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (10,000 bootstrapped resamples; Model 4; Hayes, 2013), we examined whether immigrant label (dummy coded: 0 = neutral labels, 1 = negative labels) predicted behavioral intentions through the level of prejudice engendered by the labels. The indirect effect = .27 (.09), 95% CI [0.10, 0.45], was significant, indicating mediation.

Similarly, PROCESS for SPSS (10,000 bootstrapped resamples; Model 4; Hayes, 2013) was used to conduct the analysis that revealed that

Table 5. Study 5: Means, standard deviations, and 95% CIs for measures of immigrant group labels.

Dependent measure	Illegal aliens		Illegal immigrants		Undocumented aliens		Undocumented immigrants		Noncitizens		Immigrants	
	n = 73		*n* = 72		*n* = 74		*n* = 75		*n* = 71		*n* = 73	
	M (*SD*)	95% CI	*M* (*SD*)	95% CI	*M* (*SD*)	95% CI	*M* (*SD*)	95% CI	*M* (*SD*)	95% CI	*M* (*SD*)	95% CI
Prejudice	0.09 (0.79)$_a$	[−0.10, 0.27]	0.24 (0.93)$_a$	[0.02, 0.45]	0.08 (0.91)$_a$	[−0.13, 0.29]	0.16 (0.90)$_a$	[−0.05, 0.37]	−0.11 (1.05)$_{a,b}$	[−0.36, 0.13]	−0.46 (0.84)$_b$	[−0.66, −0.26]
Intended behavior	2.75 (0.95)$_a$	[2.53, 2.97]	2.94 (1.20)$_a$	[2.66, 3.23]	2.79 (1.15)$_a$	[2.52, 3.06]	2.84 (1.27)$_a$	[2.55, 3.14]	2.50 (1.18)$_a$	[2.22, 2.78]	2.46 (1.25)$_a$	[2.17, 2.75]
Policy preferences	3.36 (1.30)$_{a,b,c}$	[3.05, 3.66]	3.46 (1.39)$_{a,b}$	[3.13, 3.78]	3.39 (1.43)$_{a,b,c}$	[3.06, 3.72]	3.53 (1.50)$_{a,b}$	[3.18, 3.87]	3.12 (1.47)$_{a,b,c}$	[2.77, 3.47]	2.73 (1.53)$_{a,c}$	[2.37, 3.08]

Note. Means on the same row with differing subscripts differ at *p* < .05 level, according to the Tukey HSD procedure.

prejudice mediated the effect of group labels on support for more punitive immigration policies; indirect effect = .35 (.12), 95% CI [0.13, 0.58].

Discussion

Taken together, the results of Study 5 cast doubt on the alternative hypothesis that the previous findings are attributable to differing amounts of information provided with the neutral compared to the negative labels. When the status-clarifying language was added to all labels—equating the amount of information provided—we nevertheless replicated the labeling effects of Studies 2–4. That is, we found that negative (vs. neutral) labels increased respondents' prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and support for more punitive immigration policies. When examining the effects of labels individually, we found that the "immigrants" label elicited significantly less prejudice, relative to each of the more negative labels. Finally, the labeling effects on behavioral intentions and policy preferences were mediated by the level of prejudice elicited by the labels.

Meta-Analyzed Estimates of the Immigrant Labeling Effects

Given some inconsistent findings across the individual studies, a meta-analysis compared the impact of negative (vs. neutral) labels on prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and policy support across Studies 2–5 ($n = 1,911$). Because all conducted studies are included in this report, this unbiased meta-analysis provides more precise estimates of the immigrant labeling effects than any of the single studies.

Analytic Strategy

We employed Exploratory Software for Confidence Intervals (ESCI) Meta-Analysis, Original Two Groups (Cumming, 2011, 2012), and selected fixed effects with a 95% CI. ESCI computes an estimated meta-analytic effect, p value, and confidence intervals around the estimated effect.[7]

Prejudice. The meta-analyzed immigrant labeling effect on prejudice was robust, ME = −0.33, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.41, −0.24]; participants expressed more prejudice towards immigrants described with negative labels (i.e., illegal aliens, illegal immigrants, undocumented aliens) compared to neutral labels (i.e., undocumented immigrants, noncitizens).

Intended behavior. The meta-analyzed immigrant labeling effect on punitive behavioral intentions was also robust, ME = −0.36, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.46, −0.26]; participants endorsed greater punitive behavioral intentions toward immigrants described with negative (vs. neutral) labels.

Policy preferences. The meta-analyzed immigrant labeling effect on support for more punitive immigration policies was also robust, ME = −0.39, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.51, −0.27]; participants supported more punitive immigration policies when immigrants were described with negative (vs. neutral) labels.

Discussion

To summarize, a meta-analysis—across four experiments and over 1,900 participants—demonstrated the robustness of the immigrant labeling effects. Consistent with hypotheses, negative labels increased prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and punitive policy support relative to more neutral labels.

General Discussion

Taken together, five studies and a meta-analysis provide compelling evidence that immigrant labels powerfully shape Americans' subsequent attitudes, behavioral intentions, and policy support. The present research suggests that, while all groups were perceived to have violated the law, relatively negative group labels (e.g., illegal alien, illegal immigrant) elicited greater levels of prejudice, punitive behavioral intentions, and punitive policy preferences toward unauthorized immigrants compared to more neutral labels (e.g.,

undocumented immigrant, noncitizen). Consistent with a well-established literature on the intergroup benefits of positive contact (e.g., Allport, 1954), Study 3 found consistent main effects of familiarity, such that those who personally knew members of the referenced group responded with less prejudice, less punitive behavioral intentions, and less support for punitive immigration policies overall. We did not find evidence for moderation of the labeling effects by familiarity, suggesting that group labels had similar effects among familiar and unfamiliar respondents. Finally, mediation analyses across Studies 2–5 revealed that the effect of negative (vs. neutral) immigrant labels on people's behavioral intentions and policy preferences was mediated by the prejudice that the group labels elicited.

Policy Implications

These findings offer empirical support for concerns raised by sociolegal scholars and media outlets that immigrant labels are likely to bias perceptions and decision-making about immigration laws and policies (e.g., Cunningham-Parmeter, 2011; Johnson, 1996; Nunez, 2014). Returning where we began, there is little agreement in public and legal discourse about how to refer to people who immigrate to the US without authorization (Bazar & Brown, 2009; Vitello, 2006). The present research suggests that negative terms (e.g., illegal alien, illegal immigrant) are more likely to elicit greater prejudice, more punitive behavioral intentions (such as the likelihood of turning in or reporting unauthorized immigrants), and support for more punitive immigration policies (e.g., deportation) than are relatively neutral labels (e.g., noncitizen, undocumented immigrant). Insofar as reducing prejudice and negative treatment of this group are valued aims, shifting public discourse away from negative immigrant labels may foster more positive intergroup relations.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this research demonstrates the robust and powerful effects that negative (vs. neutral)

labels can have on people's levels of prejudice, intended behavior, and policy support, there are limitations that could be addressed by additional research.

First, these results emerged in the American context—and we investigated the effects of the most commonly used labels in English print media. Cross-national studies could be conducted to examine the effects of immigrant labeling in other cultural contexts. Given the rise of immigrant labeling as a political strategy (e.g., Encarnación, 2018; Kranz, 2017), we believe this research is needed.

Second, we found that familiarity with members of the labeled group predicted lower prejudice, more positive behavioral intentions, and less support for punitive immigration policies (Study 3)—effects consistent with intergroup contact theory (e.g., Allport, 1954). However, our familiarity measure did not assess aspects of contact that may moderate this effect, including the quantity, quality, or valence of the contact. It is possible that, for example, some participants were responding to the question with a close family member or friend in mind, whereas others may have been thinking about an acquaintance with whom they have less substantive contact. Future research could use more refined measures to better understand the features of familiarity that may moderate the effects reported here.

Third, although we found robust evidence that the relatively negative labels (e.g., illegal alien, illegal immigrant) that we examined were, in fact, perceived more negatively by the public (Study 1) and elicited more hostile affective and behavioral responses (Studies 2–5) than more neutral labels (e.g., undocumented immigrant, noncitizen), further research is needed to better understand *how* and *why* some labels are initially perceived more negatively compared to others in the first place. We speculate that labels that explicitly derogate the group (e.g., describing it as illegal) and/or use dehumanizing terms (e.g., alien) are likely to be perceived more negatively. However, there are certainly other factors that could play a role in people's perceptions of the negativity of these labels. It is possible, for example, that certain

negative (vs. neutral) labels have been more closely associated with particular immigrant subgroups (e.g., Latinx immigrants) for which people have more negative associations, thereby causing people to have more negative perceptions of some of the labels, relative to others. Further research is needed more upstream to the questions examined here that would explore the factors underlying people's initial perceived negativity of these immigrant labels.

Finally, across the studies, when the effect of each individual immigrant label was examined separately, there were some noteworthy idiosyncrasies in their elicited effects. For instance, across studies, the "noncitizen" and "immigrant" labels elicited less prejudice, less punitive behavioral intentions, and less punitive policy preferences, relative to more negatively valenced labels such as "illegal alien." However, in some cases, the more neutral label "undocumented immigrants" also elicited less prejudice, relative to some of the more negatively valenced labels. These pairwise comparisons are interesting in and of themselves and largely confirm the theory that relatively neutral labels elicit less prejudice, more positive behavioral intentions, and support for less punitive immigration policies compared to their negative counterparts.

Conclusion

The present research illuminates the psychological and intergroup effects of immigrant labels, along with a process that engenders these effects. While stylistic preferences comprise one way to choose among competing labels (Garner, 2011), the psychological and behavioral effects of these labels are undeniably important considerations. Fundamentally, this research matters because the labels that the American public holds in mind when considering and interacting with the over 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the US (Passel & Cohn, 2017) will affect how these people—and the many more who hope to come to the US—are treated. As illustrated by the opening quote, how institutions, the media, and the political elite refer to these immigrants will likely shape the public discourse and the viability of comprehensive immigration reform (Gomez, 2007; Lakoff, 2009). Structuring the conversation in a more neutral manner may elicit less prejudiced responses from the American public, engendering more harmonious coexistence in an increasingly diverse United States.

Notes

1. Temporally, Studies 2–5 were conducted before Study 1, with the assumption that the labels would differ in negativity. We initially examined the effects of the labels using those intuited groupings—much like previous work that intuitively classified negative versus neutral labels (e.g., Carnaghi & Maass, 2007). Study 1 was conducted to verify our assumptions about the perceived negativity of the labels. For completeness, we measured the perceived negativity of *all* the labels examined in this report, including the label "immigrants who have come to the United States without documentation or visas"—a label that is additionally examined in Studies 4 and 5. Consistent with our hypotheses and initial analyses, respondents viewed the "immigrants" label as relatively neutral ($n = 72$; $M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.31$) and this group's behavior was perceived as similarly (il)legal as the behavior of the other labeled groups, $\chi^2(428) = 0.44$, $p = .75$. Because this label is only examined in later studies, we explain the perceived negativity and illegality of this label here.

2. This final sample is more than twice as large as the estimated minimum sample size needed to detect a moderate effect at .80 power and .05 alpha ($n = 200$; G*Power; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, &

Lang, 2009). The online supplement provides a comparison of power, sample, and effect sizes in previous immigrant labeling research and the present studies.

3. This item was intended as a manipulation check to exclude participants who did not perceive (as we intended) the labeled group to have engaged in illegal behavior. However, results do not meaningfully differ based on participants' responses to this item, and all participants are retained for analyses.

4. For Studies 2–5, MANOVAs were conducted and confirmed that, across each study, group label had a significant multivariate effect on prejudice, behavioral intentions, and policy preferences. These MANOVAs and correlations between the dependent variables in Studies 2–5 are included in the online supplemental material.

5. Because the feeling thermometer and social distance items were measured on different scales, all items were standardized prior to creating the composite.

6. At the request of reviewers, we conducted exploratory analyses (reported in the supplemental material) to examine the potential moderating role of familiarity in Studies 4 and 5, as well as the average effect of familiarity on our dependent measures across Studies 3–5. However, it is important to note that only Study 3 was designed to explore this question directly by recruiting from a population with enough familiar and unfamiliar individuals to ensure adequate sample size and statistical power to examine potential moderation by familiarity. Overall, the pattern of these exploratory analyses shows that those familiar (vs. unfamiliar) with members of the referenced groups consistently show less prejudice, less endorsement of punitive behavioral intentions, and less support for punitive immigration policies. We suggest that these findings be interpreted with caution given that they are post hoc analyses on data drawn from samples not intended to examine the moderation question directly.

7. The online supplement includes a meta-analysis of the pairwise comparisons of each label, relative to the other labels. "Illegal immigrant" does not differ from the other negative labels; however, there is a robust difference on prejudice and punitive behavioral intentions between "illegal immigrant" and the neutral label "undocumented immigrant." Moreover, the differences between "illegal immigrant" and the neutral label "noncitizen" are robust across all measures.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

ORCID iD

Julian M. Rucker https://orcid.org/0000-0002 -0892-1416

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