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More Immigrants, Fewer Drug-Related Deaths

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Blaming immigrants for drugs and crime is a longtime strategy of politicians seeking votes. However, research shows immigrants are associated with fewer drug overdoses and homicides in an area, the opposite of what several office seekers have argued.

Professors Ben Feldmeyer (Univ. of Cincinnati), Diana Sun (Florida Atlantic University), Casey T. Harris (Univ. of Arkansas) and Francis T. Cullen (Univ. of Cincinnati) examined county-level data from 2000 to 2015 in the United States to analyze the relationship between immigration and drug overdoses and homicides. The research is unique for studying these connections at the county level.

“Our findings directly contradict the pervasive fears and political rhetoric suggesting that immigration has fueled drug problems across U.S. communities,” the authors of the study write. “We see no evidence linking immigration to rising overdose death rates, and instead we find that immigration has most often been associated with lower levels of overdoses and homicide mortality. Thus, it appears that, if anything, immigration is more likely to have been part of the solution than the source of the overdose crisis of the early twenty-first century.”

Feldmeyer, Sun, Harris and Cullen found, “County overdose rates were reduced by 4.5% for every one-percentage-point increase in the foreign-born population.” They discovered a one-percentage-point increase in the foreign-born population in a county was associated with a 3.0% decline in the death rates from natural opioids, heroin, and cocaine. “Taken together, these supplemental models show sizable protective effects of immigration and suggest that a 10-percentage-point increase in a county’s foreign-born population could contribute to as much as 40% to 50% lower overdose death rates overall and for nearly each of the substances examined here, net of controls.”

The study found “increases in immigration are associated with significantly lower homicide and lower overdose death rates overall and across substance type.” The authors of the study explain the positive outcomes are connected, at least partly, to immigrants revitalizing an area.

“Rather than disorganizing communities and contributing to crime, immigration provides resources and a stabilizing influence that insulates residents, both foreign born and native born, from social problems like crime,” the authors note. “As this theory indicates, immigrants to the United States tend to be a select group of motivated individuals that are not particularly crime

prone. They tend to have conventional values and goals (emphasizing work and family) and typically have higher than average levels of education, resources, and resilience compared with others in their home country, all of which help to insulate them from crime and drug activity.”

Feldmeyer, Sun, Harris and Cullen write that the academic literature shows that people immigrating into “established ethnic communities where migrants can draw on resources from existing family and friendship networks” is positive, helping both natives and the foreign-born. (Note: This is the opposite of what opponents of family immigration have asserted.) The authors also note “immigrants may lift local economies because they are often seen as an attractive labor pool that can draw outside investment into communities.”

A consistent theme in many GOP Congressional ads during the 2022 cycle was that fentanyl, the synthetic opioid, was “flooding” into the United States because of Joe Biden’s “open border” policies. David Bier and Jeffrey Singer of the Cato Institute pointed out that nearly all illegal fentanyl entering the United States is smuggled in via lawful ports of entry and by U.S. citizens, with “barely 0.02 percent of the people arrested by Border Patrol agents possess[ing] any fentanyl.”

In his book *Let Them In*, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Jason L. Riley pointed out how media coverage differs for crimes committed by native-born U.S. citizens and immigrants here without legal status. He described a horrible crime involving two lifelong, native-born criminals: “Two men entered a home in Cheshire, Connecticut, and held a husband, wife, and their two daughters—ages 17 and 11—hostage for seven hours. The husband was beaten unconscious with a baseball bat, then bound and left in the basement for dead. The wife and daughters were raped, strangled, tied to their beds, doused with gasoline, and set on fire. . . . Only the husband . . . survived.”

Riley writes, “Less than two week later . . . three Newark, New Jersey, college students. . . were lined up against a wall, forced to kneel, and fatally shot.” Another individual with a record of arrests, Jose Carranza, committed the killings. Riley argues both incidents should have raised issues about the criminal justice system.

“The Cheshire murders received little attention from pundits outside of the Connecticut area,” according to Riley. “And no one much cared about the Newark incident either, until it was later revealed that Carranza was an illegal alien from Peru, at which point talk radio and cable news outlets could talk of little else.”

Immigrant crime victims or heroic immigrants don’t seem to get much media attention. In 2018, as discussed in this *Forbes* article, “When a brave man in Virginia died trying to save a rape victim nobody noticed he was an immigrant.” Loty R. Salazar wrote a tribute to her late brother, who immigrated from Bolivia: “My beloved brother Patricio ‘Pat’ Salazar gave his life to save a woman from a vicious sexual assault. He did not know the woman who was being raped, he saw something bad happening and took action. The woman’s assailant then turned on my brother, beating him so brutally that he never regained consciousness.” (The perpetrator, who evidence indicates is native-born, was sentenced to 35 years in prison.)

Donald Trump, perhaps more than any other modern politician, has blamed immigrants for drugs and crime in America. In their book on the former president, *Washington Post* fact checkers Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly cite academic research and write, “‘Far from immigration increasing crime rates, studies demonstrate that immigrants and immigration are associated inversely with crime,’ the National Academy of Sciences study concluded. ‘Immigrants are less likely than the native-born to commit crimes, and neighborhoods with greater concentrations of immigrants have much lower rates of crime and violence than comparable non-immigrant neighborhoods.’”

The study by Feldmeyer, Sun, Harris and Cullen contradicts the rhetoric from elected officials and office seekers who have blamed immigrants for crime and drug overdoses in the United States. The study shows immigrants in America are associated with fewer homicides and drug-related deaths.