

BOUNDLESS

Illegal Immigration Is Not an “Invasion”

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In the wake of multiple mass shootings in the United States this month, the country has turned its attention to something known as the “great replacement theory,” a racist, anti-immigrant conspiracy theory that has motivated multiple mass killers and been invoked by members of the far right to justify hardening immigration restrictions and increasingly militarized borders.

However, immigration advocates and researchers who study the spread of extremism online and through social media caution that the use of words like “invasion” to describe an increase in migration to the U.S. from other countries is not only inaccurate and inflammatory, but could lead to a rise in extremist violence.

The shooter who murdered ten Black people in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York on May 14, 2022 was motivated by replacement theory, which in short is a baseless conspiracy theory claiming that there is a coordinated plot — either by Jewish people or by Democrats, depending who you ask — to replace white, “traditional” Americans. The more mainstream version of the conspiracy theory in the U.S. maintains that Democrats are encouraging illegal immigration from Latin America to replace white voters (there is no evidence of this).

And though the shooter who murdered 19 elementary school children and two adults in Uvalde, Texas this week was not motivated by any clear reason investigators have uncovered, in the immediate aftermath of the shooting far-right commentators and even some Republican lawmakers began inaccurately claiming that the shooter was an undocumented immigrant, despite the Texas governor’s original statement that the shooter was a U.S. citizen. Some of these organizations went on, in nearly the same breath, to call for increased security against the “invasion” of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Merriam-Webster defines an invasion as “an act of invading, especially: incursion of an army for conquest or plunder.” As David J. Bier at the Cato Institute pointed out, “[a]n “invasion” isn’t just an overstatement. It’s a completely unserious attempt to demand extraordinary, military-style measures to stop completely mundane actions... But the goal of this nativist language warfare is nothing less than the removal of immigrant rights.”

A true invasion — an act of military force perpetrated one another sovereign nation by another — is met with violence, and the purpose and effect of using this inflammatory language to talk about illegal immigration is to justify further violence. For this reason, it is unfortunately unsurprising that various nativists who parrot ideas like the great replacement theory have gone on to commit terrorist attacks. The impact of this inflammatory and inaccurate rhetoric cannot be understated.