

## Do Immigrants Really Commit Less Crime?

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September 6, 2017

One of the most common responses to even the mere thought of curtailing illegal immigration or reducing legal immigration is that “immigrants commit less crime” so what’s the point? As Bret Stephens puts rather vulgarly in *The New York Times* when ironically implying we should deport “nonimmigrants,”

*On point after point, America’s nonimmigrants are failing our country. Crime? A study by the Cato Institute notes that nonimmigrants are incarcerated at nearly twice the rate of illegal immigrants, and at more than three times the rate of legal ones.*

The first problem is that Stephen’s statistics are wrong, but we’ll get to that later.

One of the biggest flaws is actually something that is almost never mentioned and makes meaningless many of the comparisons between immigrant and nonimmigrant crime. The after-effect is occasionally mentioned, which is that second generation immigrants generally have higher crime rates than first generation immigrants. In the United States, the second generation tends to have similar crime rates to native born citizens. The conclusion has generally been that since no vetting can be administered to young children or the unborn, there’s some slippage from the first generation to the next, at least among legal immigrants.

This is probably true in part, but there is another massive hole in the argument; Age. Indeed, in virtually every analysis on immigration and crime, age is not taken into account.

By far the most likely group of people to commit crime is young men. As psychologist David Lykken noted “...if we could magically place all boys and men between the ages of 12 and 28 in a cryogenic freeze, we would slash the rate of violent crime by two thirds.” We would, of course, also lose a lot of brilliant inventors and entrepreneurs, but that’s another matter. Regarding murder, between 1976 and 2005, only 24.1 percent of murders were committed by those over the age of 34. 47.5 percent were committed by those under the age of 25.

Young boys and older men commit substantially less crime than adolescent men. And while women only commit about one quarter of the total crime and one tenth of the violent crime, it is women in the same age group that make up the majority of female offenders.

Overall, in 2010, the average age of an immigrant in the United States was 42.4 years old while the average native born citizen was 37.4 years old.

The problem is much bigger than just an age discrepancy, though. As noted above, crime is not evenly distributed amongst age groups. Many immigrants weren’t even in the United States during the period of their lives they were most likely to commit crime. Instead such crime was committed in their country of origin. Of course, it’s better for such crime to be committed

abroad, at least for the United States, but it makes comparisons regarding crime between immigrants and non-immigrants an apples-to-oranges sort of affair.

A report from the Department of Homeland Security notes that median age of a new lawful permanent resident (green card) between 2012 and 2014 was 32 years old.

Right off the bat, more than half of the immigrants who are granted green cards in the United States have already aged passed the most criminally inclined age group. This radically skews the picture of how much crime is committed per capita. To find this out, we would need to take a more longitudinal approach comparing only young immigrants and contrasting them to a random sample of native-born Americans of the same age. In other words, we would need to control for age.

A similar mistake is made with income inequality, where Americans are haphazardly compared to each other. Of course, this doesn't account for the fact that people generally make more money as they get older. A raw comparison would imply that because a 45-year old attorney made more money than an 18-year old working at McDonalds, we have enormous amounts of income inequality.

Of course, this is not to say that income inequality isn't a problem at all just as it is not to say that immigrants are criminally inclined. But it is to say that that a raw comparison in criminal activity misses several huge pieces of the puzzle.

Furthermore, even with the issue of age unaccounted for, the question of ascertaining the actual levels of immigrant criminality is quite challenging because many jurisdictions forbid police officers from even asking about immigration status. The Cato study, like most of these studies on immigrant crime, use surveys. In Cato's case, it was the American Community Survey. For a good breakdown of all the problems with this approach (of which there are many), 1791L has a great video on the subject.

Thus, any attempt to figure out exactly where things stand is tricky. Randall Hoven dug into the available statistics and explains one of the issues in an article for *The American Thinker*,

*The federal data cover seven years and all non-citizens. The state and local data cover four years and illegal aliens only (and only those reported via SCAAP).*

The GAO has some of the best data on the subject, which Hovall uses to conclude,

*The GAO estimates 'criminal aliens' were arrested, convicted and incarcerated for 25,064 homicides. If non-citizens committed them over seven years, the annual rate would be 14.2 per 100,000 non-citizens. If illegal aliens committed them over four years, the annual rate would be 58.0 per 100,000 illegal aliens. Either way you compute, those are high rates.*

*By comparison, the FBI reports the murder rates for the entire U.S. from 2003 through 2009 varied from 5.0 to 5.8 per 100,000 inhabitants for an average rate of 5.5. To be clear, 5.5 is much lower than either 14.2 or 58.0.*

The rates are similarly high for other crimes.

That being said, the critics are right about legal immigrants. The highly vetted legal immigrants do have lower crime rates than native born citizens, although again, this ignores the issue of age.

The next problem with Stephen's argument is that he effectively assumes all immigrants are the same. The Nobel Prize winner from India and the Jihadist from Saudi Arabia are lumped into the same category if they attempt to immigrate to the United States. Perhaps we should disaggregate who were talking about.

As of now, most immigrants to the United States come from Latin America, specifically Mexico. Many of these countries have some of the highest murder rates and crime rates in the world. For example, Venezuela's murder rate is 57.15 per 100,000 and Guatemala's murder rate is 31.21. Mexico, for its part, is 16.35. The United States—which many liberals tell us is awash in gun violence—has a murder rate of 4.88.

In the United States, the murder and crime rate for Hispanics has generally been higher than the white or Asian rate. Unfortunately, it's the high murder and crime rates in the black community that drive the American rates up and thus, a broad comparison isn't necessarily a good way to approach the issue.

How best to help the black community alleviate this tragic state of affairs would be the subject for another article. But substantially increasing the supply of labor, particularly unskilled labor, is unlikely to help as that will push down wages and likely increase unemployment.

Regardless, any broad pronouncement that immigrants of all legalities commit less crime is categorically false. The evidence shows that illegal immigrants commit more crime than native born citizens and while legal immigrants commit less, issues with the data such as age blur the picture. Indeed, the advocates of mass immigration should find no safe harbor with crime statistics.