



What researchers say about immigration and crime

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AUSTIN (Nexstar) — Much of the debate over border security involves curbing crimes committed by immigrants living in the U.S. illegally. In competing rallies in El Paso, both President Donald Trump and former Congressman Beto O'Rourke made claims about immigration and crime.

“In the last two years alone, ICE officers have made 266,000 arrests of criminal aliens, including those charged or convicted of approximately 100,000 assaults, 40,000 larcenies, 30,000 sex crimes, 25,000 burglaries, 12,000 vehicle thefts, 11,000 robberies, 4,000 kidnappings and 4,000 murders,” Trump said.

A spokesperson from the Office of Public Affairs at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement confirmed President Trump's statistics were correct. In FY2017 and FY2018, ICE administratively arrested over 266,000 immigrants who were living in the country illegally who either had criminal convictions or pending criminal charges.

Leaders and groups from El Paso spoke out against President Trump's claims about the city becoming safer after a wall was built.

“We have the chance to tell him and the country, immigrants commit crimes, including violent crimes, at a lower rate than those who were born in this country,” O'Rourke said during his rally.

Several studies published show immigrants living in the country illegally isn't the root source of crime. The CATO Institute, a libertarian think-tank, has published three briefs over immigration and crime.

“The vast majority of research finds that immigrants do not increase local crime rates and that they are less likely to cause crime and less likely to be incarcerated than their native-born peers,” according to a brief published by CATO. “There is less research on immigrant criminality, but what research there is shows that illegal immigrants have lower incarceration rates nationwide and in the state of Texas relative to native-born Americans, although they have the same rates of re-arrest in Los Angeles County.”

The Texas Department of Public Safety separates data showing the number of convictions and arrests of immigrants and native-born Americans for crimes in the state. When looking at data from 2015, CATO's findings show homicide conviction rates for undocumented immigrants was 16 percent lower than the rate for native-born Americans in Texas. There were also fewer arrests of undocumented immigrants for larceny and sex crimes in the same year.

Michael Light is an associate professor of sociology and Chicago/Latino Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He's also studied whether undocumented immigration leads to an increase in violent crime and published a paper on the topic with Ty Miller, a professor at Winthrop University.

"There are good reasons to think that immigrants and especially the undocumented, would be more crime prone," he said in an emailed statement. "It's hard for them to get steady employment, hard to find solid footing in terms of housing. Poverty rates are higher and educational attainment is lower. Those are all risk factors that we typically associate with high-crime populations."

However, Light says the data doesn't support those arguments. He also points out there's a key difference between crime rates and crime counts.

"Criminologists and policy makers use rates because they identify the risk of victimization."

In short, researchers say both the President and former congressman are correct in their statements.