



## Some figures aren't so big up close

Ryan Fournier

May 17, 2017

Many statements have been made by our new president, as well as others, about the dangers of immigrant populations in the United States.

Far from ever limiting his talk, President Trump has ordered the building of a wall along our border with Mexico, and the strengthening of our border patrol force by 5,000 new officers.

He has pushed orders to ban travel from a handful of predominantly Muslim countries on the grounds of national security, and he has ordered the Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement, VOICE, office to “acknowledge and serve the needs of crime victims and their families who have been impacted by crimes committed by removable criminal aliens.”

These actions taken by our nation's leader, and the broader conversation associated with them, all orbit around a central idea: that we are in danger. Grave danger.

It would seem that citizen-born Americans are beset on all sides by foreign criminals, scrambling for a chance to commit acts of violence and depravity in our communities.

That is the message being sent, and by many, that is presumably the message being believed.

So is it true? Are immigrants a danger to our communities?

“According to data provided by the Department of Justice, the vast majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses since 9/11 came here from outside the country,” President Trump claimed on Feb. 28.

“Politifact,” a fact-checking website, investigated his claim. They found that though the analysis was done using data from the Department of Justice, the research was actually done by a congressional subcommittee, headed by Jeff Sessions, a Senator at the time of the analysis.

This subcommittee was not really provided with immigration information on the convicts in question. Apparently they “attempted” to discern that information with publicly available sources.

The kicker of the story is this; not only does that list include acts done outside the U.S., but almost half of the convictions in question were not actually for acts of terrorism, according to Alex Nowrasteh of the CATO Institute.

Those were included, he said, because they emerged from terrorism-related investigations.

Notably, one case was of a man convicted of receiving stolen cereal (it was actually quite a lot of cereal), after a tip that he was attempting to buy a grenade launcher led to nothing.

On Sept. 2, 2016, Sean Hannity of “Fox News” showed a graph of 2015 crime statistics from the U.S. Sentencing Commission.

The graph showed federal convictions only. It stated that 18 percent of drug trafficking, 30 percent of kidnapping, 75 percent of drug possession, 10 percent of money laundering and 5 percent of murder convictions in federal courts were attributed to illegal immigrants in that year.

“Politifact” investigated that claim and found it to be true, though they pointed out that federal courts are only a small part of a bigger story.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were under 200,000 inmates in federal prisons in 2015, compared with over 1,300,000 in state prisons. These numbers do not include inmates in county or city jails.

Hannity’s graph focuses on a small portion of the nation’s inmates. It entirely overlooks the possibility that federal authorities, because of the nature of their jurisdiction, may be particularly likely to apprehend immigrant criminals.

Hannity is not alone. This same logic has been repeated elsewhere. The problem with it is that it conceals much more than it shows. These figures are meant to illustrate a general danger presented to Americans by immigrant populations, but they do not provide general data.

Some studies do provide general, nationwide data on the matter. On May 15 the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank, published an international study based on census data from 2014.

It was co-authored by Nowrasteh. That study found that native-born Americans (not to be confused with Native Americans) had an incarceration rate of 1.53 percent, illegal immigrants .85 percent, and legal immigrants .47 percent.

In other words, almost two out of a hundred American citizen-born people were incarcerated, compared with less than one out of a hundred illegal immigrants, and less than one half out of a hundred legal immigrants.

Furthermore, many thousands of those immigrants were locked up for immigration crime, meaning their only crime was being here illegally. Like Hannity, Nowrasteh is not alone in his

scale of observation. There have been a number of studies done that show overall crime rates dropping in areas where immigrant populations are increasing.

Some show this trend specifically with regard to violent crime. In other words, immigrants may actually be populating our communities with statistically safer people.

It's worth a closer look, isn't it? If we are ready for a wholesale barring of the gates, then I think we should make sure there's something to be afraid of. That means running the numbers, or finding the ones who do. That means questioning our prejudices. That means checking the facts when our leaders speak, and it means continuing to speak with each other about the issues our society faces, even when we think we ought to feel a certain way.

Fear of foreigners is an ancient tradition, and it's way too easy.

It feels to me like our fears are being played like marching drums.

But where are we going?

We're walking backwards into the house with our eyes on the street, and little by little we're destroying our ability to enjoy the benefits offered by a world full of people.

When I say we, I don't just mean America.

The world is full of fear and anger.

I believe that neither paves the way for healthy or logical decision making.