



Laken Riley's Death Made the News, but Here's the Real Story on Undocumented Migrants

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Jose Antonio Ibarra, who federal authorities said entered the United States illegally in 2022, was arrested last month in Georgia in the killing of Laken Riley, a 22-year-old nursing student. This case and others like it are gaining national attention during a debate over immigration policy and border security.

In his State of the Union address on March 7, President Joe Biden even mentioned that the accused killer was an "illegal."

As tragic as these cases are, analyzing the broader facts is crucial before changing public policy. Otherwise, the government could do more harm than good.

Undocumented migrants commit fewer homicides

According to my latest research, undocumented migrants in Texas were about 26% less likely to be convicted of homicide than native-born Americans over the decade of 2013-22. Legal immigrants were about 61% less likely.

The homicide conviction rate averaged 2.2 per 100,000 undocumented migrants over those 10 years, compared with 3.0 for native-born Americans. Those who came here illegally committed about 6% of all murders for which there were convictions, compared with 90% committed by native-born Americans.

At the same time, undocumented migrants were 7.4% of Texas' population and native-born Americans were 82%.

Most who entered Texas illegally are from Latin America and the Caribbean. Compared with the entire region, they have a criminal conviction rate of about 6.5 times lower. Even if we assume that the real rate of murders by undocumented immigrants is 50% higher than the conviction rate, they'd still have a lower homicide rate than native-born Americans convicted of homicide in Texas and substantially below those in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Suppose you think there's a lower illegal immigration population in Texas than I estimate. In that case, the rate of that population's homicide convictions will be slightly higher but still below that of native-born Americans. Regardless of the measures, legal immigrants have the lowest homicide conviction rate of all.

Why focus on illegal immigration population in Texas?

There are three reasons to focus on Texas:

- It's a border state with more than 2 million undocumented migrants and is the epicenter of a vast increase in illegal border crossers since 2020.
- Texas takes criminal justice seriously. It has no sanctuary jurisdictions, it harshly punishes criminals and Republicans have controlled Texas for more than 20 years.
- Texas is the only state that keeps data on the immigration status of convicted criminals.

The third point is key. Immigration data is taken when suspects are arrested, but it isn't perfect.

New Census data proves it: No, America is not seeing an unprecedented surge in immigration

After conviction, authorities investigate prisoners more closely to identify undocumented immigrants better – but they concentrate on those convicted of the worst crimes like homicide.

This means researchers should wait a few years to tally up criminals who came here illegally and focus on serious crimes like homicide to compare their crime rates with native-born Americans and legal immigrants.

Undocumented migrants commit fewer homicides for many reasons. First, the punishments are harsher – they get deported. Second, many came from more violent countries because they wanted more safety. Third, they mostly leave their families, friends and cultures behind because they want a better future for themselves and their children. People like that are just less likely to be criminals in the first place.

In the event that they do commit homicides, they typically kill people they know – who are mostly other undocumented immigrants.

That's one reason why the death of Laken Riley, a stranger to Ibarra, is so shocking. According to the FBI, of homicides where we know the prior relationship, nearly 80% of the killers know their victims.

Few people are murderers, and undocumented migrants are less likely to commit homicide than native-born Americans in Texas. Still, some do commit homicide, and that fact is no consolation to victims and their families – nor should it comfort them.

Killers and other violent and property offenders should be arrested, tried, convicted and severely punished – no matter their immigration status. Undocumented immigrants convicted of violent and property crimes should then be deported with a total ban on returning to the United States.

Nonetheless, illegal immigration is not the source of the crime wave of recent years, and more enforcement of immigration laws won't reduce homicide rates.

All states should keep the immigration and crime data like Texas does.

We need to punish the actual criminals and stop blaming an entire population for crimes they are less likely to commit than native-born Americans.

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