

In Southaven, President Donald Trump once again paints immigrants as criminals in misleading claim

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During President Donald Trump's rally in Southaven this week, he repeated misleading claims that paint Hispanic immigrants as bloodthirsty gang members.

But studies on the subject have concluded immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native-born citizens.

And in Memphis, statistics from the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation show that when it comes to the crimes of homicide and robbery, Hispanics are much more likely to meet the police as victims than as criminals.

In the rally at the Landers Center in Southaven on Tuesday, Trump railed against "sanctuary cities of death," drawing boos from the audience.

"Every day, sanctuary cities are unleashing vicious predators and bloodthirsty killers like MS-13 into our communities," the president said. "They go out and they hide out in sanctuary cities."

MS-13 is an international gang with ties to the central American country of El Salvador. Members of MS-13 have killed people in the U.S., though some law enforcement officials have argued the gang isn't the massive threat Trump has suggested.

There is no legal definition of the term "sanctuary city," but it generally refers to cities like San Francisco that stop officials from handing over immigrants to federal authorities, particularly after they've been arrested on a local criminal charge.

President Donald Trump gestures towards the crowd gathered for his Make America Great Again Rally at the Lander Center in Southaven, Miss. Mark Weber, The Commercial Appeal

In the Southaven speech, Trump went on to praise U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, saying the agency has done "an incredible job" in dealing with criminal immigrants.

"And they grab 'em by the neck and they throw 'em the hell out of our country or they throw 'em into jail," he said, drawing cheers from the crowd.

Trump's misleading association between immigrants and crime is not new: he opened his presidential campaign in 2015 by calling Mexican immigrants rapists and drug dealers, and he has returned to the theme over and over again since then.

At the national level, statistics tell a different story.

"All immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated than (U.S.) natives relative to their shares of the population," the libertarian Cato Institute wrote in a study last year. "Even illegal immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans."

A recent Department of Justice report said 5.6 percent of inmates in federal, state and local prisons are foreign born, a lower percentage than the foreign-born percentage of the population of about 13 percent.

One case that reflects the broader relationship between Hispanic immigrants and crime in the Memphis area is that of Bardomiano Perez Hernandez. He was fatally shot on Dec. 18 when robbers attacked men drinking beer in a parked van.

Police identified Bardomiano Perez Hernandez, 33, as the man whose body was found in the back of a van in a police impound lot. (Photo: Family photo via Memphis Noticias)

Perez Hernandez was shot and overlooked in the van, which was later towed to a police impound lot, where he was discovered weeks later, on Feb. 5. The overlooked body prompted an internal police investigation.

Though the failure to find the body was unusual, the shooting itself fit a pattern. Perez Hernandez was an immigrant from Mexico and the victim of an attempted robbery.

For years, criminals in Memphis have targeted Hispanic immigrants for armed robbery in the belief that they're more likely to carry cash and that language barriers, immigration fears and related factors will make them less likely to seek help from police.

The Census says Hispanics make up about 7 percent of the Memphis population. But they accounted for a disproportionate 17 percent of all robbery victims handled by the Memphis Police Department in 2017.

Hispanics made up only 1 percent of robbery suspects that year, according to TBI stats.

Memphis homicide stats from 2017 likewise showed more Hispanic victims than perpetrators: eight Hispanic homicide victims, four Hispanic homicide suspects, according to TBI stats.