



## The Myth of the Migrant Crime Wave

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"The United States is being overrun by the Biden migrant crime. It's a new form of vicious violation to our country," said former President Donald Trump during a visit to the U.S.-Mexico border in Eagle Pass, Texas, on Thursday.

Trump's remarks come at a tense moment in the nation's sentiment toward immigration. Americans now say that immigration is "the most important problem facing the U.S.," according to the results of a Gallup poll published this week. Earlier in February, 57 percent of Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center said that "the large number of migrants seeking to enter the country leads to more crime." For many, those ideas became more salient last week, when Jose Antonio Ibarra, a Venezuelan man who immigrated to the U.S. illegally, was charged with the murder of Georgia college student Laken Riley.

Riley's murder, along with incidents such as migrants drinking alcohol and consuming drugs in public and getting into fights in New York City, have spurred increased coverage of a "migrant crime" wave. "Over the past month, Fox News hosts, guests and video clips have mentioned 'migrant crime' nearly 90 times, more than half of those in the past 10 days," reported *The Washington Post's* Philip Bump on Thursday. Numerous right-of-center media outlets have similarly warned about the "migrant crime wave" in recent headlines. £18B in UK

There's no question that some undocumented immigrants have committed heinous crimes. But there are many reasons to be doubtful that recent incidents are evidence of a surging migrant crime wave.

For one, crime is down in the cities that received the most migrants as a result of Texas' busing operations under Operation Lone Star, per an NBC News analysis. "Overall crime is down year over year in Philadelphia, Chicago, Denver, New York and Los Angeles," NBC News reported.

David J. Bier, associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, echoes that finding. "We don't have real-time data, but the partial crime data that exist for this year show consistent declines in major crimes in major cities," he says. "The most significant crime spike in recent years occurred in 2020—when illegal immigration was historically low until the end of the year."

"National crime data, especially pertaining to undocumented immigrants, is notoriously incomplete," since it "comes in piecemeal and can only be evaluated holistically when the annual

data is released," cautions NBC News. What's more, "most local police don't record immigration status when they make arrests."

However, several analyses conducted at both the state and federal levels find that immigrants—including undocumented ones—are less crime-prone than native-born Americans. Looking at "two decades of research on immigration and crime," criminologists Graham Ousey and Charis Kubrin found that "communities with more immigration tend to have less crime, especially violent crimes like homicide," wrote *The Washington Post's* Glenn Kessler. A 2015 Migration Policy Institute report indicated that undocumented immigrants have a lower rate of felony convictions than the overall U.S. population does.

The Cato Institute's "research has consistently shown that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes and less likely to end up incarcerated than natives," Bier continues. An article this week by Alex Nowrasteh, vice president for economic and social policy studies at the Cato Institute, indicated that illegal immigrants have a lower homicide conviction rate in Texas than native-born Americans do, while legal immigrants have a lower conviction rate than both groups.

"Few people are murderers, and illegal immigrants are statistically less likely to be murderers. Still, some illegal immigrants do commit homicide, and that statistical fact is no comfort to victims and their families," wrote Nowrasteh. But "we should understand that more enforcement of immigration laws will not reduce homicide rates."

This has not been Trump's conclusion. "Migrant crime is taking over America," he said in a video posted to Truth Social on Wednesday. "How many more innocent victims must be harmed and how much more innocent blood must be spilled until we stop this invasion...and remove these illegal alien criminals from our country?"

Politicians on both sides of the aisle have proposed tightening legal pathways, such as asylum, as a way to reduce border crossings and improve security. "Banning asylum is not the answer," counters Bier. "Under Title 42 from 2020 to 2023, asylum was completely banned for many crossers, which only led to more people evading the Border Patrol, eliminating the opportunity for people to be screened at all."

Rather than relying on broad-stroke enforcement to capture once and future criminal migrants, there are several more targeted policies the U.S. government could adopt. "It should be legal [for migrants] to obtain a visa in their home countries, which would allow more people to be vetted more carefully abroad and free up Border Patrol to interdict those who evade detection," Bier says. The U.S. could also "negotiate better access to criminal databases in other countries and improve the quality of their data," and "supply foreign governments with advanced fingerprinting and booking technology on the condition that U.S. border agencies have access to the data," he continues.

Riley's death is unquestionably a tragedy. But U.S. immigration policy will be better served by statistically informed conclusions than the emotions sparked by individual crimes.