

## **The truth about immigrants**

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April 22, 2019

We need to stop and think before we blame Venezuelan immigrants for any increase in our crime. While it is tempting to point to attention-grabbing headlines about Venezuelan gangs, shoot-outs with Venezuelans or Venezuelan immigrants fist-fighting with the police and leap to far-fetched conclusions, it is important not to create prejudice in our minds from stories that should be reported by journalists, but should not be blown out of proportion by a fearful population willing to believe that these stories represent the whole Venezuelan immigration picture.

(For this column, I will refer to Venezuelans as immigrants and not make a distinction between illegal and legal immigrants or displaced people.)

Because the situation with Venezuelan immigrants is relatively new, we don't have the statistics we need to make an informed decision about their impact on TT society so I am going to look at extensive studies that have been done in the US regarding crime and immigrant populations.

A New York Times article on March 30 entitled "The Myth of the Criminal Immigrant" by Anna Flagg, who is an interactive reporter for The Marshall Project, a non-profit news organisation covering the US criminal justice system, discusses the problem with perception vs statistics when it comes to immigrants and crime.

In her article, Flagg points out that immigration has been increasing in the US for some time, but statistics do not show that crime is increasing because of immigrants. A 2017 Gallup Poll said half of Americans agreed with US President Donald Trump that immigrants make crime worse, but many studies do not prove this to be true.

In a large-scale study by four universities, led by Robert Adelman, a sociologist at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Buffalo, researchers compared immigration rates with crime rates for 200 metropolitan areas in the US since 1980. They selected large cities like New York and smaller manufacturing centres like Muncie, Indiana. Most of the areas had a larger immigration population than in 1980 and fewer violent crimes.

"In 136 metro areas, almost 70 per cent of those studied, the immigrant population increased between 1980 and 2016 while crime stayed stable or fell. The number of areas where crime and immigration both increased was much lower – 54 areas, slightly more than a quarter of the total. The ten places with the largest increases in immigrants all had lower levels of crime in 2016 than in 1980," writes Flagg.

In Orange County, which includes Los Angeles, California, the immigrant population more than doubled since 1980, but violent crime decreased by more than 50 per cent. Oakland, California, a city on the eastern side of the San Francisco, California, bay and Lawrence, Massachusetts, on

the east coast, which have been described by Trump as “breeding grounds for drugs and crime,” all had an increase in immigration, but showed a falling crime rate.

“In Lawrence, though murder and robbery rates grew, overall violent crime rates (which include armed robbery) still fell by ten per cent. In general, the study’s data suggests either that immigration has the effect of reducing average crime, or that there is simply no relationship between the two, and that the 54 areas in the study where both grew were instances of coincidence, not cause and effect. This was a consistent pattern in each decade from 1980 to 2016, with immigrant populations and crime failing to grow together,” Flagg says.

In the studies highlighted by The Marshall Project, the number of immigrants increased at least 57 per cent and as much as 183 per cent. Violent crime rates in most areas ranged between a 43 per cent decline and a six per cent rise, often trending downward by the 2000s.

“Places with a sharp rise in the immigrant population experienced increases in crime rates no more frequently than those with modest or no growth in immigration. On average, the immigrant population grew by 137 per cent between 1980 and 2016, with average crime falling 12 per cent over the same period.”

Flagg concedes that the data likely undercounts the numbers of undocumented immigrants, but this will be the challenge for any such study.

Additional studies in Texas show no increase in crime because of illegal immigrants. Houston police chief Art Acevedo has publicly stated that Houston, which has one of the largest undocumented immigrant populations in the US, has “no wave of crime being committed by the immigrant community.”

A study of immigrants in Texas by the Cato Institute in 2015 showed that undocumented immigrants had a criminal conviction rate 50 per cent below that of native-born Americans. In Texas, border communities have some of the lowest crime rates despite their proximity to the “dangerous” Mexican border, The Texas Tribune reports.

It is important that we don’t lose sight of dealing with the crime situation in TT by blaming it on Venezuelans entering the country. We need to gather statistics about Venezuelan immigrants so we get a clear picture of their impact on our society. In the meantime, let’s try to separate emotions from facts, which is always a good idea.