

Fact Check: Trump invokes California crimes to argue for border wall

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President Donald Trump appealed for support for his border wall Tuesday night, pointing to two murders committed by undocumented immigrants in California as evidence of its necessity.

For the most part, the president accurately described the circumstances surrounding those crimes. However, there is no evidence that his prescribed solution — a wall along the southern border with Mexico — would have prevented the tragedies. And his emphasis on crimes committed by immigrants in the country illegally creates an impression they increase the threat of violence in the country, something that is not borne out by most research.

In his live address to the nation, Trump argued that Congress' failure to provide billions of dollars in funding for a border wall, as he has demanded, would allow "more innocent people to be ... horribly victimized."

His first example: the fatal shooting of Newman Police Cpl. Ronil Singh last month during a traffic stop in the Central Valley town of Newman, California. "America's heart broke the day after Christmas when a young police officer in California was savagely murdered in cold blood by an illegal alien, just came across the border," Trump said. "The life of an American hero was stolen by someone who had no right to be in our country."

It is true that Singh's alleged killer, Paulo Virgen Mendoza, is an undocumented immigrant who was apprehended and charged with murder shortly after the Dec. 26 shooting.

Trump also highlighted a 2015 murder in which "an Air Force veteran was raped, murdered and beaten to death by a hammer by an illegal alien with a long criminal history."

He was referring to the assault and murder of Marilyn Pharis, an Air Force contractor, in Santa Maria, Calif. One of two men convicted of her killing, Victor Martinez, was in the country illegally. The second man was a U.S. citizen, a fact the president failed to mention.

Both Virgen and Martinez had been arrested on multiple previous occasions dating back several years. But it is not clear how or when they initially entered the country or whether a wall would have prevented their coming to California. The majority of the state's border with Mexico is already lined with physical barriers — pedestrian fencing, vehicle fencing, or a combination of the two.

Researchers, moreover, have found that undocumented immigrants do not present more of a threat for violent crime than American citizens. A Feb. 2018 study from the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, for example, found that the arrest rate for illegal immigrants in Texas "was 40 percent below that of native-born Americans." Several other recent studies have failed to find

any link between a community's population of undocumented immigrants and the violent crime rate. At least one actually found a decrease in crime.