



Editorial: No, Undocumented Immigrants Aren't More Crime-Prone. They Are Actually Less So.

March 22, 2024

From Donald Trump's vitriolic description of Mexican immigrants during his 2015 presidential campaign announcement ("They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists.") to Alabama Sen. Katie Britt's speech this month using a young woman's tragic murder to excoriate the Biden administration's border policies ("That could've been my daughter. It could've been yours."), Republicans today have weaponized a toxic trope with disturbing precedents in America.

Fact: Immigrants to the U.S. — including illegal immigrants — commit violent crime here at significantly *lower* (not higher) rates than native-born Americans.

That's not a justification for illegal immigration. But it should stand as an indictment of the truly ugly lie that Trump and his party are peddling right now in an effort to ride racial fear and xenophobia back into the White House.

After framing his first campaign from the start as an attack on immigrants as inherently dangerous, Trump has twisted that foul lie like a knife.

His initial campaign call for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" was as blunt an expression of outright religious bigotry as you'll find from a major American political figure in the modern era.

As president, his child-separation policy at the southern border stands alongside Japanese internment as an indefensible moral outrage. His more recent declaration that immigrants are "poisoning the blood of our country" was literally Hitlerian.

The shock that even many Republican office-holders initially expressed with Trump's ham-handed demagoguery regarding immigration (including *legal* immigration, which he effectively reduced by almost half as president) apparently has worn off. That was clear from Sen. Britt's March 7 **State of the Union response speech** on behalf of the GOP.

Most of the chatter regarding Britt's overwrought performance has focused on her grossly misleading account of the human trafficking of a migrant, which, it turns out, didn't happen in the U.S. nor during President Joe Biden's tenure.

But Britt's technically factual account of the murder of 22-year-old nursing student Laken Riley in Georgia in February was also misleading, in a more subtle and dangerous way.

The murder, allegedly by an undocumented Venezuelan migrant, was as tragic as any other.

But Britt's focus on the suspect as "one of the millions of illegal border crossers President Biden chose to release into our homeland" treats the incidental factor of his migrant status as if it's the whole point. And her seething exhortation that "innocent Americans are dying" was clearly meant to foster the impression there is an epidemic of violent migrant crime afoot.

That's the opposite of true. The fact that migrants who are in the U.S. illegally have *lower* violent-crime rates than those born here is neither seriously disputed nor particularly surprising.

It's not surprising because, by definition, foreign nationals living in America without legal immigrant status have every incentive to stay out of trouble and avoid attracting the attention of authorities.

Among the many academic studies that have confirmed this phenomenon, one of the strongest was conducted by the libertarian **Cato Institute** in 2019 and focused on Texas, which has among the highest populations of both documented and undocumented immigrants.

That study found that documented immigrants — who have followed the rules to get here and who know that a criminal conviction could mean deportation — were 61% less likely than native-born Americans to be convicted of a homicide. These are the people you want living next door.

But even *undocumented* migrants in Texas, the study found, were 26% less likely than native-born Americans to be convicted of homicide. Convictions for other serious crimes followed similar patterns.

"Crime, at least in the state of Texas, is a domestically produced problem and not an imported one," states the study, noting that "Texas is one of the states where we would expect higher illegal immigrant crime rates if they were an especially crime prone subpopulation."

"Illegal immigration is a serious public policy problem in the United States," the study concludes, "but it is not a problem because it increases the crime rate."

Illegal immigration is, indeed, a serious issue that must be addressed. The Biden administration tried to do that recently with **bipartisan border reform legislation** that gave immigration hardliners virtually everything they have sought on the issue lately — and House Republicans killed it at Trump's command because he knows the border crisis is more useful to him politically than a solution.

That's politics. But what Trump and his GOP enablers are doing to foster panic over an immigrant crime wave that doesn't exist is worse than that.

Virtually every surge of immigration in America's history has been met with some degree of fear, prejudice and the false vilification of migrants as criminals. That is, perhaps, a sadly inherent element of human nature. But when a presidential candidate and his entire party build their electoral case around that putrid lie, it must be relentlessly called out.