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There's no immigration crisis, and these charts prove it

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The humanitarian crisis involving immigrant children at the U.S.-Mexico border has, among other things, laid bare a number of the falsehoods driving much of the Trump administration's immigration agenda.

The administration has said that the country is in danger of being “overwhelmed” by “massive increases in illegal crossings” that will bring “horrible crime,” “unbelievably great taxpayer expense” and the loss of American jobs.

None of those claims are true.

Below, we've compiled some of Wonkblog's coverage highlighting the latest data and research shedding light on erroneous beliefs about immigration in the United States.

Myth No. 1: Undocumented immigrants are flooding into the United States

In fiscal 2017, apprehensions of immigrants entering illegally at the Southwest border (a proxy for the total number of individuals crossing the border illegally) hit their lowest level in 46 years.

Apprehensions are up by about 12 percent in the current fiscal year. If that pace holds up for the remainder of the year, we'll close out 2018 with the fourth-lowest number of illegal-immigration apprehensions in at least four decades.

Myth No. 2: Undocumented immigrants bring crime

The reality is just the opposite: A large body of social-science literature has demonstrated that immigrants, legal or otherwise, commit crime at lower rates than native-born Americans. This chart, using Texas Department of Public Safety data compiled by the libertarian Cato Institute, illustrates this quite clearly.

The Cato study found evidence that undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit certain types of crime, including “gambling, kidnapping, smuggling, and vagrancy,” than native-born Americans. But those crimes accounted for less than 0.002 percent of all crimes committed in Texas during the study period.

“Although ardent skeptics may remain unconvinced,” another recent study concluded, “the weight of the evidence presented here and in supporting work challenges claims that unauthorized immigration endangers the public.”

Myth No. 3: Immigrants take our jobs and lower our wages

This is a more complicated question than the previous two. The best information comes from a massive summary of the literature published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) in 2017. “Most studies find little effect of immigration on the employment of natives,” that report concluded. In other words, no, the immigrants are not taking your jobs.

That effect is displayed in this chart from a separate summary of the immigration literature done in 2014: There is no correlation between unemployment and immigration rates in the world's wealthy nations.

However, studies have shown potential negative wage impacts from immigration, particularly for less skilled or less educated native-born workers.

“Some studies have found sizable negative short-run wage impacts for high school dropouts, the native-born workers who in many cases are the group most likely to be in direct competition for jobs with immigrants,” the authors of the NASEM study wrote. If low-skilled immigrants are competing with low-skilled Americans for low-skill jobs, that larger applicant pool may result in somewhat lower wages.

But that relationship is far from clear, and the report notes that other research has found little to no effect from immigration on low-skilled wages. The 2014 report, for instance, included the chart below, showing how 27 studies estimated the effects of immigration on wages. Most of the weight of the bars is clustered right around the zero line on the X axis, indicating, essentially, no effect on wages. A handful of outliers on either end indicates studies showing negative or positive impacts on wages.

One reason immigration could have a positive impact on wages in the long run, the NASEM authors wrote, is that it's pretty clear that “immigrants are more innovative than natives; more specifically, high-skilled immigrants raise patenting per capita, which is likely to boost productivity and per capita economic growth.” High-skilled immigrants may be more likely to start new businesses, hire more people and increase more demand for workers in the long run — all of which is likely to result in increased wages.

Myth No. 4: Immigrants are a drain on the economy

In fact, research by the Cato Institute has found that poor noncitizens are considerably less likely than poor native-born Americans to use public assistance programs.

Not only that, “the average value of benefits per recipient is almost always lower than for the native-born,” the report found. “For Medicaid, if there are 100 native-born adults, the annual cost of benefits would be about \$98,400, while for the same number of noncitizen adults the annual cost would be approximately \$57,200.”

The NASEM report found that, in the long run, the typical immigrant and that person's descendants will pay about \$259,000 more in taxes than they receive in government benefits. First generations tend to be more costly to governments, the report says, in part because of the costs at state and local levels of educating these immigrants' children.

Those children, however, tend to grow up to be extremely productive adults. “As adults, the children of immigrants (the second generation) are among the strongest economic and fiscal

contributors in the U.S. population, contributing more in taxes than either their parents or the rest of the native-born population,” the report concluded.

The report's bottom line, based on its analysis of hundreds of economic studies: “Immigration is integral to the nation’s economic growth. The inflow of labor supply has helped the United States avoid the problems facing other economies that have stagnated as a result of unfavorable demographics, particularly the effects of an aging workforce and reduced consumption by older residents. In addition, the infusion of human capital by high-skilled immigrants has boosted the nation’s capacity for innovation, entrepreneurship, and technological change.”

Here's what we can say in conclusion. Current rates of illegal immigration remain extremely low by historic standards. Legal and undocumented immigrants are significantly less likely to commit most crimes than native-born citizens, making them a net benefit to public safety. The research shows that immigrants are not taking jobs away from U.S. natives, and their impact on wages appears to be small to nonexistent, particularly across the long term.

Immigration appears to be crucial to economic growth, particularly as native-born fertility rates decline. More immigration leads to a stronger economy, particularly on the long-term horizon.

What's striking about these findings is they suggest an urgent need for a policy of greater immigration and more open borders at a time when the Trump administration is pursuing exactly the opposite. The true immigration crisis, as it turns out, may be that we're not letting enough immigrants in.