

Illegal immigration does not lead to more crime

Alex R. Piquero

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This is not a commentary on Rob Tibbetts' heartfelt and poignant essay on his daughter's death and how it has been used by various people for their own personal or political gain. Nor is this a commentary on Donald Trump Jr.'s comments about his view on Democrats' reaction to Mollie Tibbett's death. Instead, this is a commentary on what the data and research tell us about immigrants, immigration, and crime. Here's the punch line: There is no "there there."

Years of research, using different sources of data (self-reports, arrests, convictions), at different levels of analysis (individual, city, state), conducted in different time periods, by different authors continues to show the exact same finding: Immigrants do not commit crime at higher rates than native-born Americans, and more immigration, in the aggregate, does not lead to more crime. Period.

Some readers will bypass this round of science and then say, "well it's illegal immigration" or "undocumented immigrants" that we're worried about and point to Mollie Tibbett's death as an example of a failed immigration or border system. In his essay, Trump Jr. insists for more correct reporting on illegal alien crime. And although we have no precise estimate of the number of illegal or undocumented immigrants in the United States (and therefore, just knowing the numerator of their offenses tells us little by way of comparing to native-born Americans), some research does exist concerning the criminal activity of illegal/undocumented immigrants. So what do those studies tell us?

The punch line is the same: Illegal immigration does not increase (violent) crime.

As reported by NPR in May, four scientific studies, including one that I was part of, provide no evidence linking illegal immigration to crime. This is the case from research completed at the national level over a three-decade time period by University of Wisconsin sociologist Michael Light. It also includes research by the Cato Institute comparing conviction and arrest rates in Texas. And it includes my own co-authored research published in Migration Letters showing that young undocumented immigrants self-reported committing less crime than either their legal immigrant or U.S.-born peers.

This is what the science tells us and more research may continue to tell us the same thing or may yield different conclusions. Yet, for now we need to follow what the data say. Yes, data are pesky. And as the Sioux City, Iowa-born engineer and statistician William Edwards Deming once noted, "Without data, you're just another person with an opinion." The debate about immigration and crime tends to be one informed more by opinion than data when it should be the other way around.