



Mollie Tibbetts murder case: Here are the facts on immigrants committing crimes in US

Alan Gomez

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The arrest of an undocumented immigrant in the murder of a 20-year-old Iowa college student has reignited a debate over the dangers — real and perceived — posed by illegal immigration.

During a Wednesday morning discussion about the case on *Fox & Friends*, a favorite of President Donald Trump, commentator Tomi Lahren summed up what many conservatives have been arguing since it was revealed that the man charged with killing Mollie Tibbetts had entered the country illegally from his native Mexico.

"Illegal immigration kills Americans," Lahren said. "It's Mollie Tibbetts (today), and it could be your daughter, your sister, your friend tomorrow."

Missing from that discussion was any proof that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes or acts of terrorism than native-born Americans. Immigration experts, including academic researchers, have said that's because all available national crime statistics show immigrants commit fewer crimes, not more, than those born in the U.S. Even opponents of increased immigration lack evidence linking immigrants to higher crime rates.

"There's 100 years of data from all different sources that all point in the same direction," said Walter Ewing, senior researcher at the American Immigration Council, which advocates on behalf of immigrants. "If you don't believe one study, there's 10 more behind it that say the same thing."

Ewing and others acknowledge that assessing the criminality of immigrants has always been difficult because statistics are hard to come by. Local police do not list the immigration status of those arrested, meaning it's impossible to determine exactly how many crimes are committed by legal immigrants, undocumented immigrants and native-born citizens.

Immigration researchers have spent decades trying to work around the problem.

One method uses prison data to determine the immigration status of convicted criminals. Those who are foreign-born make up more than 13 percent of the U.S. population, but the Department of Justice released a report in January that found only 5.6 percent of inmates in federal, state and local prisons are foreign-born.

The libertarian Cato Institute used similar data when it concluded that the incarceration rate for native-born Americans is 1.53 percent compared to 0.85 percent for undocumented immigrants

and 0.47% for legal immigrants. When Cato subtracted people in prison solely for immigration violations, the incarceration rate for undocumented immigrants fell to 0.5 percent.

Ewing used another approach to look at national immigration trends. From 1990 to 2013, both legal and undocumented immigrants came pouring into the U.S. The percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign-born increased from 7.1 percent to 13.1 percent. Yet over that time, violent crime rates plummeted 48 percent across the country.

In 2014, a team of university professors took a different approach. They examined crime habits of juveniles convicted of felonies in Arizona and Pennsylvania. Their study found that native-born juveniles were more likely to become repeat offenders than immigrant juveniles.

Department of Homeland Security statistics offer another way to look at the question. Nearly 800,000 undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children have received deportation protections under the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which Trump is in the process of ending.

DACA enrollees are required to maintain a clean criminal record to remain in the program. In the six years since the program started, only 2,127 DACA enrollees (0.27 percent) have been removed from the program after committing crimes or being identified as gang members, according to data from Homeland Security.

Jessica Vaughan of the Center for Immigration Studies, a group that has advised the White House on ways to limit legal and illegal immigration, said each of those approaches contains significant flaws. For example, she said the number of immigrants in U.S. jails and prisons may be low because some criminal immigrants get deported and others are released into the community by sanctuary cities.

Vaughan's team has researched the question of immigrant criminality for years and concluded it's impossible to determine whether immigrants commit crimes at a higher rate than the native-born. Vaughan said the answer doesn't even matter.

"Kate Steinle's parents I'm sure don't care one bit whether the crime rate in San Francisco is higher or lower than anywhere else," she said, referring to the 32-year-old who was shot and killed by an undocumented immigrant in 2015. "The issue is not crime rates. The issue is what we do with that small fraction of immigrants that is committing crimes and causing problems."

Trump repeatedly mentioned Steinle's death on the campaign trail. And during his State of the Union Address in January, he introduced the parents of two teen girls killed by undocumented immigrants allegedly belonging to the MS-13 gang, an international gang formed in Los Angeles and mostly made up of Salvadoran immigrants.