

Vox

Trump suggests he's privy to secret stats proving immigrants are violent criminals

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Undocumented immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than native-born Americans. The vast majority of drugs smuggled into the country through the southern border come through ports of entry. The construction of a border wall in El Paso did not reduce violent crime.

But all those facts — which come from federal government crime statistics — cut against the narrative that President Donald Trump is pushing. So during the South Lawn event on Friday in which he announced he'll sign a national emergency declaration pertaining to the southern border, Trump simply denied them.

Instead of backing his claims with numbers, Trump sensationalized individual instances of immigrant crime, resorted to suggesting he's privy to secret statistics, and made an evidence-free case that a wall is needed to stop human traffickers from taking “three women with tape on their mouth or three women whose hands are tied” across the border in remote areas between ports of entry.

Trump gaslights about the impact a wall would have on stopping the inflow of drugs

First, Trump denied the Drug Enforcement Agency's finding that smuggled drugs largely come through the southern border, citing the response he received at a political rally earlier this week in El Paso, Texas, when he asked his audience about the impact a border wall had there.

“You listen to politicians, in particular certain Democrats, they say [drugs] all come through the ports of entry. It's wrong, it's wrong. It's just a lie. It's all a lie,” Trump said.

“The other night I was in El Paso, we had a tremendous crowd, and I asked the people — many of whom were from El Paso, but they came from all over Texas — and I asked them, I said, ‘Let me ask you as a crowd, when the wall went up, was it better?’ ... It was not only better, it was, like, 100 percent better.”

But as is the case in most other American cities, violent crime in El Paso has been falling steadily for about 25 years, and actually went up slightly after border fencing was installed there in 2008 and 2009.

CNN recently depicted this in a graph:

And despite what Trump would have you believe, these numbers come from the FBI — not Democrats.

Trump called immigrant crime statistics “fake news”

Later, CNN’s Jim Acosta asked Trump what he thinks about a number of studies rooted in crime statistics compiled by the federal government that indicate immigrants — both documented and undocumented — commit crimes at lower rates than native-born Americans.

Trump flatly denied that the studies are accurate, and instead pointed at “Angel Moms” — mothers of children murdered by undocumented immigrants — who were in attendance.

“You don’t believe that stat, do you? Do you really believe that stat?” Trump said, suggesting Acosta is gullible. “Ask the Angel Moms. What do you think? Am I creating something? ... Your question is a very political question. You’re CNN, you’re fake news, you have an agenda ... the numbers you gave are wrong.”

But Trump’s suggestion that undocumented immigrants are more prone to committing acts of violence is false. For instance, a 2018 Cato Institute study that looked at crime in Texas found, “As a percentage of their respective populations, there were 56 percent fewer criminal convictions of illegal immigrants than of native-born Americans in Texas in 2015.”

“The criminal conviction rate for legal immigrants was about 85 percent below the native-born rate,” it adds.

In an overview of the relevant social science research published last year, the Washington Post concluded, “Undocumented immigrants are considerably less likely to commit crime than native-born citizens, with immigrants legally in the United States even less likely to do so.”

Trump claims he has access to secret statistics

Playboy’s Brian Karem pressed Trump about data from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) showing the number of being arrested trying to cross the southern border has steadily declined over the past 20 years, to 396,579 last year from 1,643,679 in 2000 — numbers cutting against Trump’s case that the situation at the southern border is an emergency.

Trump quickly got angry with Karem, telling him to “sit down.” He then suggested his position is based on statistics that aren’t publicly available.

“You have stats that are far worse than the ones I use,” Trump told Karem.

Trump’s willingness to flat-out deny reality when it doesn’t suit his purposes highlights one of the dangers of his presidency: He is shameless about not just contradicting the findings of his own government agencies but constructing a fact-free alternate reality where immigrants are violent criminals, drugs and tied-up women are pouring across the southern border, and the number of people making a dangerous trek through remote regions to enter the United States presents an existential threat.

But in a moment of accidental candor, Trump admitted his emergency declaration is unnecessary.

“I want to do it faster. I could do the wall over a longer period of time. I didn’t need to do this, but I’d rather do it much faster,” Trump said.

That admission could come back to haunt him when his emergency declaration is challenged in court. Trump acknowledged that such a challenge is likely during Friday's event but expressed confidence that the Supreme Court will ultimately rule in his favor.