



Venezuelan immigrants are the latest targets of anti-immigrant hate

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Republican Florida Sen. Marco Rubio claimed without evidence in an interview with Fox News on Sept. 21 that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's administration is deliberately releasing members of violent criminal and terrorist groups from prisons and sending them to the U.S. border.

"What we don't even know, and I think we need to be looking into it, there's been reports on this, is, is there a strategy here?" Rubio said. "Is Venezuela deliberately, or other countries, deliberately sending people here that they believe will cause harm within the United States? We also don't know the answer to that, but there's some suspicion that that might be the case."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says that since 2015, over 6 million Venezuelans have fled their country to escape a failed economy, violence and hunger.

The latest claim about Venezuelans surfaced in an article published by the right-wing media outlet Breitbart that attributes the claim to a "recent Department of Homeland Security intelligence report received by the Border Patrol ... reviewed by Breitbart Texas." The article contains no direct quotes from the alleged report, which Breitbart did not provide. It says that Border Patrol agents were warned that, in the words of writer Randy Clark, "the Venezuelan government, under the leadership of Nicolás Maduro Moros, is purposely freeing inmates — including some convicted of murder, rape, and extortion. The intelligence report warns agents the freed prisoners have been seen within migrant caravans traveling from Tapachula, Mexico toward the U.S.-Mexico border as recently as July."

Clark is identified as a former Customs and Border Patrol agent.

Rubio and other Republicans have seized on the movement of refugees to push a fearmongering narrative of criminals and terrorists crossing the border, and not for the first time.

Donald Trump built his first campaign for president around the same anti-immigrant rhetoric, when calling Mexican immigrants "criminals" and "rapists," and continued to spread lies about immigration during his presidency.

In an interview with Fox News' Sean Hannity broadcast on Sept. 22, Trump repeated the claims of invasion by criminals, saying: "They're poisoning our country. They're poisoning — I'd like to be nice about it. Yesterday I heard that Venezuela is emptying their prisons out into the United States."

The narrative is spread and amplified by right-wing media, and Republican lawmakers have invoked the same imagery.

In a Fox News interview about House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy's new "Commitment to America" agenda, Rep. Tony Gonzalez of Texas said: "I've heard this for months now. It's not only Venezuela, it's other countries as well that have been sending their less-desirables to our borders. We've seen it. We've seen, uh, Border Patrol catch 78 people on the terrorist watch list. It only took 19 terrorists from Saudi Arabia to kill almost 3,000 Americans. It's a powder keg waiting to happen."

Last week, Rep. Troy Nehls of Texas and 13 of his fellow congressional Republican sent a letter to the Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas repeating the contents of the Breitbart article and demanding clarification of the mentioned report, calling the information "widely reported," although it only cites the one article. The letter asks for a "projected headcount" of "released Venezuelan prisoners."

Research shows that the claim that immigrants are disproportionately responsible for crime is false. A study of immigration in Texas released by the libertarian Cato Institute in 2020, using the offensive term "illegal immigrants," concluded:

Whether one focuses on criminal convictions, arrests, or the number of individuals convicted or arrested, the results are the same: illegal immigrants have a lower crime rate than native-born Americans in Texas. Legal immigrants have the lowest rates of all, except for some measures of property crime where illegal immigrants are even less crime prone. Native-born Americans living in Texas have the highest criminal conviction and arrest rates in all of the figures above. Even on the margin, there is no statistically significant effect of the illegal immigrant population on the rate of criminal convictions, either overall or for illegal immigrants specifically.

Andrew Selee, president of the Migration Policy Institute, told the American Independent Foundation that in general, "Venezuelans in other countries have very low crime rates."

"Generally speaking, the relationship between migration and crime — there is no direct relation," he said. "The U.S. immigrants tend to commit many fewer crimes than the native-born."

Selee also gives little credence to the notion that there is a government-led effort to send criminals north: "I don't buy the Venezuela-is-releasing-people-from-the-prisons argument." He said he does not think that the current government is capable of such a plan.

Noting that many more Venezuelans have been coming to the United States over the last six months, Selee said the number "pales by comparison" with the number of Venezuelans who have gone to other countries.

"We think this is a crisis because it has just started," he said. "But other countries on the continent, like Colombia, have seen many times the number of Venezuelans coming in a short period and dealt with it with much less drama."