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Trump's speech highlighted victims of crimes by immigrants — but a look at the data shows it's incredibly rare

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President Donald Trump is ordering the Department of Homeland Security to create an office called "VOICE" serving "victims of immigration crime."

The announcement at the president's speech to a joint session of Congress, where he also featured family members of victims allegedly killed by immigrants, elicited groans from Democrats in the audience. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer called the creation of the office "ridiculous."

As a campaigner and now as president, Trump has long painted undocumented immigrants and refugees as scourges on American society, saying they're responsible for killings and terrorism. He used this argument in promoting and defending the executive order that banned immigration from seven predominantly Muslim nations until courts rolled back the rule.

But the facts suggest the president's rhetoric is wrong.

Recent social science research underscores that the relationship between immigration and crime or terrorism is likely the opposite of what Trump seems to believe.

"[I]mmigrants are less, not more, criminal than nonimmigrants" and "immigration rates are largely unassociated with crime rates," according to a 2002 analysis of immigration-crime studies. It continues: "It is the least reliable and useful sources of data that are used to support arguments about the link between immigration and crime."

If there is a crime increase related to immigrants, it's a marginal one tied to poverty and theft. But on crimes that matter most — violent ones — a 2009 study of finds that "broad reductions in violent crime [...] are partially attributable to increases in immigration," as many other recent studies have similarly concluded.

"[R]oughly 1.6 percent of immigrant males age 18-39 are incarcerated, compared to 3.3 percent of the native-born. This disparity in incarceration rates has existed for decades, as evidenced by data from the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial censuses," a [2015 update](#) to an analysis of Census Bureau and crime rate statistics said. "In each of those years, the incarceration rates of the native-born were anywhere from two to five times higher than that of immigrants."

The discrepancy between Trump's beliefs and policy actions is even more clear when it comes to foreign-born attackers.

The reality of immigrant terrorism

According to a September 2016 [study](#) by Alex Nowrasteh at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, some 3,024 Americans died from 1975 through 2015 due to foreign-born terrorism. That number includes the 9/11 terrorist attacks (2,983 people) and averages nearly 74 Americans per year.

Since 9/11, however, foreign-born terrorists have killed roughly one American per year. Just six Americans have died per year at the hands, guns, and bombs of Islamic terrorists (foreign and domestic).

According to Nowrasteh's [analysis](#), over the past 41 years (January 1975–December 2015), and including the 9/11 attacks:

- The chance an American would be killed by a foreign-born **refugee terrorist** is 1 in 3.64 *billion* per year, based on the last 41 years of data.
- The chance of an American being murdered by an **undocumented immigrant terrorist** is 1 in 10.9 *billion* per year.
- The chance an American could be killed by a **terrorist on a typical tourist visa** was 1 in 3.9 million.

And some other telling findings:

- In the US, there hasn't been a single American killed by a terrorist from one of the seven countries included in the President's travel ban that has been stayed by courts.
- There have been no terrorists from Syria in the US in this period.
- Meanwhile, there were three terrorists from the UK, one from Japan, and one from South Korea.

Of course, this data is backward-looking. Proponents of the travel ban [point out](#) that the seven countries included in the order have a history of violence and unstable leadership, so they could still pose risks. The CATO study also doesn't include terrorism in other countries where Americans were victims.

Nowrasteh kept it focused on incidents on US soil as context for immigration policy.

He also applied a wide definition of terrorist. Included in the 154 terrorists is a Japanese man arrested at a New Jersey rest stop in 1986 in possession of pipe bombs. Another was a Cuban who assassinated a Chilean dissident on US soil in 1976.

"If I was going to make an error, I wanted to err on the side of counting too many people," Nowrasteh told Business Insider.

Fear walking, not immigrants

Here's how the lifetime odds of the most common — and feared — causes of death for Americans stack up against immigrants and refugees (highlighted in red):

Compared to the threat posed by refugee terrorists — which the president's executive order is allegedly designed to curtail — the data suggest the typical American, over the course of a lifetime, is:

- **6 times** more likely to die from a shark attack (one of the rarest forms of death on Earth)
- **29 times** more likely to die from a regional asteroid strike
- **260 times** more likely to be struck and killed by lightning
- **4,700 times** more likely to die in an airplane or spaceship accident
- **129,000 times** more likely to die in a gun assault
- **407,000 times** more likely to die in a motor vehicle incident
- **6.9 million times** more likely to die from cancer or heart disease

Put another way, as frightening and disturbing as events like 9/11 are, an American's unfathomably remote chances of winning the Powerball lottery jackpot are many times greater than those of being killed by a refugee terrorist on any given year — and even higher compared to the odds of being killed by an illegal immigrant terrorist.

Weighing the logic of all-out counter-terrorism efforts

Displaced Iraqis flee their homes during a battle with ISIS militants, in district of Maamoun in western Mosul, Iraq, February 23, 2017. REUTERS/Alaa Al-Marjani

It's worth pointing out that the US government's multi-billion-dollar-per-year homeland security efforts to thwart terrorism, certainly since 9/11, have ostensibly reduced American deaths and kept the odds low.

However, it's hard to say — the DHS does not publicly release data about the number of terror attack attempts per day and lives saved as a result of its efforts. The same is also true of counter-terrorist military operations.

But assume for a moment that one 9/11-like event killed 3,000 Americans per year, and indefinitely.

While this ongoing hypothetical tragedy would drastically raise the lifetime odds of death by a foreign terrorist, the data suggest a typical American is still far more likely to die walking out the door, getting into a car, jumping into a pool, or simply standing up.

Mueller and his colleague Mark G. Stewart explored the costs and benefits of fighting terrorism for the Cato Institute in a September 2014 [study](#). That report states:

"[T]he United States spends about \$100 billion per year seeking to deter, disrupt, or protect against domestic terrorism. If each saved life is valued at \$14 million, it would be necessary for the counterterrorism measures to prevent or protect against between 6,000 and 7,000 terrorism deaths in the country each year, or twice that if the lower figure of \$7 million for a saved life is applied."

Assuming the [2010 terrorist attack plot on Times Square](#) was successful (the car bomb didn't go off), Mueller told Business Insider, hitting that measure would require four such attacks per day on US soil.

"As has been suggested," Mueller and Stewart wrote in their study, "terrorists scarcely seem to be numerous, competent, and dedicated enough to carry out such a task."