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Unauthorized immigrants aren't crime 'bogeymen'

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President Trump recently called for the creation of a new government agency to collect information on crime committed by illegal immigrants. Called Victims Of Immigration Crime Engagement office (VOICE), he said it will help those victims “who have been ignored by our media, and silenced by special interests.” More data should be collected on all criminals and their victims, but focusing on illegal immigrants will make them seem more crime prone than they really are.

A new brief published by the Cato Institute found that, contrary to public perception, illegal immigrants are much less crime prone than native born Americans. By using a technique to identify illegal immigrants in the Census data, my coauthor Michelangelo Landgrave and I find that they are about 44 percent less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans. Legal immigrants are even less likely to be incarcerated, at a rate 69 percent lower than that of natives.

When people think of crimes committed by illegal immigrants, they are especially outraged by murders, such as that of Kate Steinle in San Francisco. This was a tragedy, and all criminals deserve to be punished for their offenses, no matter where they are from or where they commit their crimes. Yet the numbers allow us to put these crimes in context. Because illegal immigrants are less crime prone than natives, we can breathe a little easier to know that there is no illegal-immigrant crime wave.

As a percentage of their respective populations, about 1.53 percent of all native-born adults between the ages of 18 and 54 are incarcerated, compared to 0.85 percent of illegal immigrants and 0.47 percent of legal immigrants in the same age range. That illegal immigrant incarceration rate includes those in immigration detention and those incarcerated for immigration crimes. Excluding them brings the illegal immigrant incarceration rate down to 0.5 percent – within a smidge of legal immigrants.

Cato’s paper is familiar to those who read the latest research on immigrant criminality. Most researchers who look at this issue also find that all immigrants and legal immigrant incarceration rates are below those of natives. Furthermore, crime tends to drop in areas that have growing immigrant populations.

Many might read this and think that illegal immigrants are all criminals by definition, so we're really undercounting criminals, but that isn't true. Only some illegal immigrants actually committed the crime of entering the country without permission or illegally reentering after being deported. New estimates by Robert Warren and Donald Kerwin at the Center for Migration Studies found that 64 percent of illegal immigrants who entered in 2013 did so by overstaying a visa, not by crossing a border illegally. These people are not criminals under current law, although they can be deported.

Criminal immigrants captivate the public when they commit real crimes that actually have victims, not when they cross a border in contravention of a bureaucrat's order. Much of the public debate over immigration is concerned with economics and culture. Instead of arguing over how the government is going to micromanage immigration to achieve certain economic or social goals, they should focus all of their energy on keeping out immigrants who threaten the life, liberty, and private property of Americans.

Illegal immigrants who commit violent and property crimes should be deported after serving their sentences. Although Americans are more likely to be victims of crime than other residents of developed countries, comparatively few of those crimes are committed by illegal or legal immigrants.

There are many reasons to be concerned about illegal immigration, but their low rate of incarceration compared to native-born Americans should put our minds at ease.

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