

The Northern Virginia Daily

Diane Dimond: The controversy over crime and immigrants

Diane Dimond

December 3rd, 2018

We hear so much these days about the migrant caravan straining to cross into the U.S. Media reports focus on the immigrants' desire for a better life, the desperation that led hundreds of them to throw rocks and storm the border at Tijuana, and the tear gas that forced them farther back into Mexico. We hear repeated warnings about how our crime rate will surely increase if we allow unchecked immigration. But is that true? Do those who migrate here commit more crimes than legal residents?

Researching that proved to be a real eye-opener. Why? Because there is no definitive answer! Neither states nor the federal government systematically keep track of the citizenship status or the birth country of those they arrest. It's unbelievable but true.

That said, the Center for Immigration Studies says there is enough data from various federal, state and local agencies to piece together a picture of crimes committed by non-citizens. After studying that data, the center concluded that, yes, non-citizens are more likely to commit federal crimes than citizens -- crimes that have nothing to do with immigration issues. No one is keeping a tally as to whether these criminal immigrants are here legally or illegally, but the center says the group accounts for a disproportionate share of those sentenced for crimes like kidnapping, drug offenses, money laundering, embezzlement, fraud, auto theft, assault, homicide and gun-related offenses.

So, what data is out there that no agency is bothering to collect and analyze?

Let's start with the U.S. Sentencing Commission, which found that in 2014, 75 percent of all defendants who were convicted for federal drug crimes were illegal immigrants. Seventy-five percent. Most of those crimes occurred in a concentrated area, along the border region in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Florida and New York were also negatively affected by criminal immigrants.

Then there is the FBI, which tracks murders in the nation and reports that from 2004 through 2008, 251,000 criminal aliens were incarcerated. The Government Accountability Office issued a study using the FBI data to create a sample population of criminal aliens and found that an estimated 25,000-plus homicide arrests were made.

The GAO also calculated the cost of incarcerating this group by studying the reimbursements made to federal, state and local lockups under the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program, which compensates facilities convicting and housing illegal immigrants. The GAO put the price tag of fiscal years 2005 to 2009 at around \$1.6 billion, so this year's taxpayer tab is sure to be closer to \$2 billion.

Peter Kirsanow, a commissioner of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, says there is an "overwhelming amount of data that shows that illegal aliens not only commit more crimes -- at a higher rate, that is -- than lawful residents but more serious crimes at a far higher rate than lawful residents."

"We're not talking about a little bit" of crime, Kirsanow said. "Americans are being slaughtered."

But my research showed there is great controversy on the issue of crime and immigrants. And to further confuse things, it is not always possible to know whether the experts speaking or the study they refer to is focused on *the entire immigrant population* or just those who entered illegally.

Criminology professors Charis Kubrin and Graham Ousey say they examined 51 different research studies on the topic and concluded there is no relationship between immigration and increased crime. In a scholarly article published last year, they said that narrative is simply false.

"Overall, immigration does not cause crime," professor Kubrin said. "In fact, our analysis reveals that, if anything, immigration causes a drop in crime," especially in traditional immigrant destinations like Los Angeles and Chicago, where, presumably, large and supportive communities rally around newcomers.

The CATO Institute agrees. The institute's Alex Nowrasteh cites 2015 statistics from Texas showing that native-born residents were much more likely to be convicted of a crime than undocumented migrants. "As a percentage of their respective populations, there were 56 percent fewer criminal convictions of illegal immigrants than of native-born Americans," Nowrasteh said. The Texas data also showed a marked decline in migrants' homicide and property crimes.

Of course, those statistics provide a snapshot from only one state. But 2016 data (the latest) from the U.S. Sentencing Commission shows a similar nationwide trend, a drop in nearly all categories of federal crimes perpetrated by non-citizens.

So, should we take heart by the fact that while crimes committed by illegal immigrants still exist in substantial numbers, they may actually be occurring less frequently? Or is the point that any person who illegally enters the U.S. and commits a crime is one too many?

Kirsanow says, "You could probably find out ... how many Norwegian prisoners there are in Minnesota, but it's difficult to desegregate data with respect to illegal aliens." That is outrageous.

I don't want to hear about the politics of this question or who is to blame. I want the problem fixed. We deserve good, reliable, up-to-date facts. That Washington has not yet set up a structure to definitively analyze the effect of immigration on our country is unconscionable. That must change.