



Trump misleads in claim about terrorism convictions since 9/11

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President Donald Trump, in his first speech before a joint session of Congress, continued to call for improved vetting of people coming to the United States, raising concerns about foreigners convicted on terror charges.

"Our obligation is to serve, protect, and defend the citizens of the United States. We are also taking strong measures to protect our nation from radical Islamic terrorism," Trump said Feb. 28.

"According to data provided by the Department of Justice, the vast majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses since 9/11 came here from outside of our country. ... It is not compassionate, but reckless to allow uncontrolled entry from places where proper vetting cannot occur."

Trump's speech came as his administration said it's preparing a new executive order on immigration. Courts have halted the implementation of a previous order signed by the president.

We wondered about Trump's claim attributed to the Justice Department. Have the majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses since 9/11 been foreign born?

Trump's statement relies on an analysis put together by a congressional subcommittee then chaired by his now attorney general, Jeff Sessions. The analysis used Justice Department data, but was not issued by the department itself. That data had some limitations. Also, experts told us that most of the people convicted faced charges for threats that were not planned or carried out on U.S. soil. Many of the charges also include nonviolent offenses, such as fraud or immigration violations.

Justice Department data

A White House spokesperson referred us to a June 2016 Fox News report saying that of 580 individuals convicted for terrorism and terror-related cases, at least 380 were foreign-born. That accounted for convictions from 9/11 to the end of 2014.

Trump attributes the Justice Department for providing information on the origin of people convicted on terrorism charges. The information came from research done by the Senate

subcommittee on immigration and national interest, led by Sessions, then a U.S. senator representing Alabama.

A June 2016 press release said the subcommittee received a list from the Justice Department of 580 individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses between 9/11 and Dec. 31, 2014.

But neither the Justice Department nor immigration officials gave the subcommittee information on where the people were born or their immigration status.

"Because the Department of Homeland Security failed to provide us with immigration information on the 580 individuals on the Department of Justice's list, we have attempted to obtain information about the immigration history for each individual using publicly available sources," said a June 2016 letter signed by Sessions and Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, also a member of the subcommittee.

The subcommittee determined that at least 380 of the 580 individuals in the Justice Department list were foreign-born.

The list provided by the Justice Department is for convictions based on investigations on international terrorism: It includes acts planned or committed outside U.S. territory but over which federal criminal jurisdiction exists, and those within the United States involving international terrorists and terrorist groups.

Domestic terrorism cases with no international links are not included.

"Convictions listed ... involve the use of a variety of federal criminal statutes available to prevent, disrupt, and punish international terrorism and related criminal activity," the Justice Department letter said.

Some may get the impression that the convictions were for terrorist attacks planned or executed in the United States, but that's the case for only 40 of the 580 convictions, or less than 7 percent, said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration expert with the libertarian Cato Institute.

Furthermore, 241 of those 580 convictions were not for terrorism, but for identity fraud, immigration violations, or other non-terrorism offenses, he said.

"Many of the investigations started based on a terrorism tip like, for instance, the suspect wanting to buy a rocket-propelled grenade launcher," Nowrasteh wrote in apost for Cato Institute. "However, the tip turned out to be groundless and the legal saga ended with only a mundane conviction of receiving stolen cereal. According to Sessions' list, that cereal thief is a terrorist."

The letter sent by the Justice Department to Sessions' subcommittee said it included individuals whose conviction emerged from a terrorism investigation, "regardless of whether investigators developed or identified evidence that they had any connection to international terrorism."

Homegrown terrorism on the rise

Security experts said the bigger terrorist threat since 9/11 has come from within the United States.

"Far from being foreign infiltrators, the large majority of jihadist terrorists in the United States have been American citizens or legal residents ... every jihadist who conducted a lethal attack inside the United States since 9/11 was a citizen or legal resident," a New America study says. "In addition about a quarter of the extremists are converts, further confirming that the challenge cannot be reduced to one of immigration."

If terrorism includes any act of violence motivated by politics, then you would include both the ideologies of al-Qaida and ISIS, as well as the ideologies of white supremacism, said David Schanzer, director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security at Duke University.

"If you look at the phenomenon of terrorism as a whole, then there are a lot of citizens committing terrorism, whether connected with foreign organizations or ideologies or domestic ones," Schanzer said.

One high-profile example is Dylann Roof, who was not charged for domestic terrorism.

Roof, described by authorities as a self-radicalized white supremacist, in 2015 killed nine black parishioners in Charleston, S.C. He was found guilty on 33 federal counts, including hate crimes, but not with terrorism. He has been sentenced to death.

Authorities said Roof's actions were "consistent with the concept of leaderless resistance and martyrdom advocated by white supremacy extremist groups and self-radicalization leading to violence," AP reported.

Our ruling

Trump said, "According to data provided by the Department of Justice, the vast majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses since 9/11 came here from outside of our country."

Saying the data came from the Justice Department is misleading. It actually came from a congressional subcommittee chaired by then-senator Sessions.

Moreover, the data had some limitations. Federal agencies did not provide information on people's places of origin. Convictions listed also included offenses committed outside the United States and nonviolent acts, such as fraud, experts told us. Finally, the data doesn't account for incidents that some might consider domestic terrorism, such as the case of Dylann Roof.

Trump's statement contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression. We rate it Mostly False.