

The San Diego Union-Tribune

Are crime and immigration connected? Not so, research says

Luis Gomez

March 7, 2018

In a bold speech in Sacramento on Wednesday, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions said he is suing California over what he calls “irrational, unfair, and unconstitutional policies” that threaten the safety of Americans.

Sessions pointed the finger at state and city officials over “sanctuary state” laws that prevent federal agents from enforcing immigration laws. But his emphasis on reducing homicide and violent crime rates echo claims President Donald Trump and members of his administration have made that correlate crime with immigration.

What exactly does the Trump administration say?

You can read Sessions’ full remarks from Wednesday here, but here’s a bit of what he said about immigration and crime:

“California is using every power it has — and some it doesn’t — to frustrate federal law enforcement. So you can be sure I’m going to use every power I have to stop them.

We are going to fight these irrational, unfair, and unconstitutional policies that have been imposed on you and our federal officers. We are fighting to make your jobs safer and to help you reduce crime in America. We are fighting to have a lawful system of immigration that serves Americans. And we intend to win.”

Those remarks go hand-in-hand with the language in an executive order Trump signed in January 2017 aimed at boosting immigration enforcement:

“Many aliens who illegally enter the United States and those who overstay or otherwise violate the terms of their visas present a significant threat to national security and public safety.”

Trump has previously cited the 2015 killing of Kathryn Steinle, a San Francisco woman who was shot by an unauthorized Mexican immigrant who had previously been deported, as an example

because the immigrant had a criminal record. A San Francisco jury eventually found Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez not guilty of homicide charges.

And most recently, at a listening session at the White House in late February, Trump said crime would increase if federal immigration agents were not present in California.

"Frankly, if I pulled our people from California, you would have a crime nest like you've never seen in California. All I'd have to say is, 'ICE, Border Patrol, leave California alone,'" Trump said.

What does the research say about crime and immigration?

There is, however, vast amounts of research that does not concur with the views of the Trump administration.

For one, immigrants tend to have lower incarceration rates than native-born residents in the U.S., according to a 2007 research published by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Then, in 2015, another report by the American Immigration Council reached a similar conclusion:

"[R]oughly 1.6 percent of immigrant males 18-39 are incarcerated, compared to 3.3 percent of the native-born. The disparity in incarceration rates has existed for decades, as evidenced by data from the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial census. In each of those years, the incarceration rates of the native-born were anywhere from two to five times higher than that of immigrants."

Alex Nowrasteh of the CATO Institute concluded in an essay that a number of factors could help explain this data.

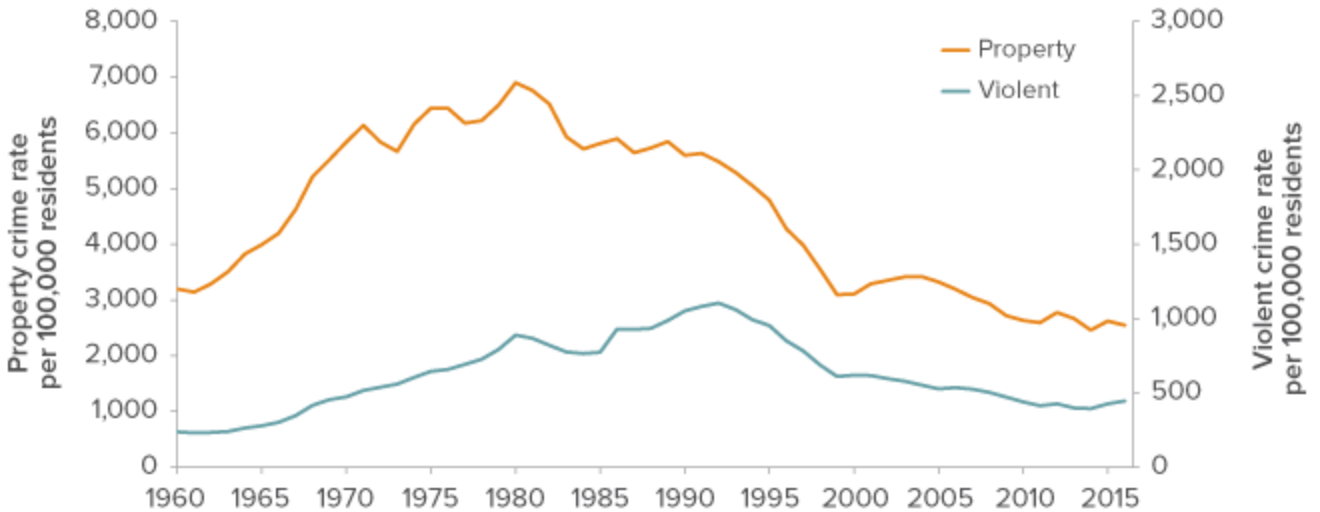
One explanation: Immigrants who commit crimes face harsher penalties that include deportation and are therefore motivated to avoid breaking the law. Another one is that immigrants "self-select for those willing to work rather than those willing to commit crimes."

And what are the crime rates in California?

Crime in California remains at historic lows, the Public Policy Institute of California concluded in its most recent analysis of crime trends in the state.

A few highlights:

- Violent crime rates went up by 3.7 percent — that's 444 for every 100,000 residents — in 2016, but historically the rates have been down since peaking in 1992 when there were 1,104 reported violent crimes for every 100,000 residents.
- Property crime went down by 3.3 percent in 2016, though slightly up from a historic 50-year low for California.
- Only two counties in the state, Los Angeles and Kern counties, saw increases in both violent and property crime. Most counties experienced drops in property crime. San Diego County experienced a drop in both.



NOTE: Violent crime includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft). Courtesy: Public Policy Institute of California

Are border cities safer?

Several news organizations including Politifact and The Texas Tribune have concluded that border cities like San Diego and El Paso, Texas, are some of the safest cities in the nation.

A 2013 Congressional Quarterly report citing FBI statistics found that San Diego and El Paso have, in fact, the lowest crime rates in the nation. And they're both on the border.

Ironically, Indiana where Vice President Mike Pence comes from had one city that was ranked among those with the highest crime rate: Indianapolis.