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‘Crime will fall!’: Trump’s new rallying cry for border wall echoes old strategy of inflating dangers posed by immigrants

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After years of fanning public fears over illegal immigration, President Trump on Wednesday signaled he has no plans to stop, unveiling a new rallying cry: “BUILD A WALL & CRIME WILL FALL!”

The bumper sticker-ready slogan, rolled out in a series of tweets, neatly packaged Trump’s argument for a border wall to keep out terrorists, drug traffickers and violent gang members with a political framing aimed at boosting his 2020 reelection chances.

“This is the new theme, for two years until the Wall is finished (under construction now), of the Republican Party!” Trump wrote. “Use it and pray!”

The messaging was a bid to shore up his conservative base after the president took heat from border hawks for offering Democrats a deal over the weekend. But it also illustrated Trump’s consistent misrepresentations of the dangers posed by immigrants and the effectiveness of a border barrier to deter criminals as he tries to paint resistant Democrats as weak on public safety.

Though state and local data is limited, studies from independent think tanks have found that unauthorized immigrants commit crimes, including murders and rapes, at lower rates than do native-born Americans. And U.S. authorities have reported that between 80 and 90 percent of illicit narcotics, such as heroin, cocaine and fentanyl, were seized by U.S. authorities at legal ports of entry along the southern border.

John Sandweg, who served as a high-ranking Department of Homeland Security official in the Obama administration, said that a sizable portion of immigrants apprehended at the border had existing arrest records in the United States and were attempting to reenter the country after being deported. However, he added that the majority of those were for nonviolent offenses, such as loitering and driving without a license.

Fact-checking President Trump's Oval Office address

“Certainly, the guys who scare you are the convicted felons trying to make reentry,” Sandweg said. “But the number caught at the border are very low because that group is the least susceptible to [being stopped by] a wall. They are adept at evading capture. When we looked at crime rates, there was very little correlation between what was going on at the border and crime rates inside the United States.”

Under pressure to deliver on his core campaign promise, Trump at the halfway mark of his first term has begun arguing that much of his border wall is already being constructed. “We’re

building a lot of wall as we speak, a tremendous amount,” he told reporters at the White House on Wednesday.

But his administration said no new linear feet of wall have been built since Trump took office, and polls suggest he is losing the public safety debate. Just 35 percent of Americans believe a border wall would make the country safer, compared with 57 percent who believe it would make no difference, according to a survey this week from the Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The Department of Homeland Security has said that nearly 40 miles of replacement barriers have been completed in San Diego and El Paso through funding allocated by Congress in 2017. The agency is planning to use the \$1.375 billion allocated in 2018 to build 84 miles of new and replacement barriers, with the first new structure — a levee wall system — breaking ground in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas as soon as February.

“We have looked at every mile of the border, and we have a plan where that [wall] would be deployed,” said a DHS official who spoke on the condition of anonymity in a briefing for reporters. Officials said they would use the \$5.7 billion for the wall that Trump is demanding of Congress in 2019 to build 215 miles of new and replacement structures in the Rio Grande; El Centro, Calif.; and Yuma, Ariz., sectors.

“Illegal immigration is a crime, so if a border wall reduces illegal immigration, it’s reducing crime,” said RJ Hauman, government relations director for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which supports a wall.

While illegal crossing can be criminally prosecuted, foreigners who overstay their visas are committing a civil infraction. About 62 percent of the new undocumented immigrants in 2016-2017 violated the terms of their visas, compared with 38 percent who crossed illegally, according to a study published last week from the Center for Migration Studies.

Border Patrol officials have pointed to sharp declines in illegal crossings in San Diego and Yuma, Ariz., where barrier fences were constructed over the past two decades. But they said migrants have shifted attention to other sectors along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border.

That has coincided in the past half decade with a major spike in migrant families from Central America seeking to surrender to border agents, often at legal ports of entry, in hopes of winning political asylum. This group, which reached a record 107,000 people in fiscal 2018, would be largely undeterred by a border wall, immigration analysts said.

David Inserra, a national security analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said every crime by an undocumented immigrant should be prevented because they have no right to be here. But he acknowledged that a physical barrier at the border is not the most cost-effective solution.

“Once you get into the political realm, slogans and rhetoric are important,” Inserra said. “But as an underlying policy matter . . . resources could be better spent looking at finding smugglers at ports of entry or stopping sanctuary cities from letting people go after we’ve caught them.”

A White House official declined to comment.

Trump has focused attention on sensational crimes by highlighting families of Americans who were killed by undocumented immigrants. In a prime-time address from the Oval Office this

month, he railed about the murder of an Air Force veteran beaten with a hammer and a girl in Maryland killed by MS-13 gang members who arrived illegally as minors.

And he said that over the past two years Immigration and Customs Enforcement had arrested 266,000 undocumented immigrants with criminal records, including those charged or convicted of 100,000 assaults, 30,000 sex crimes and 4,000 violent killings.

“How much more American blood must we shed before Congress does its job?” Trump said.

But experts said the president’s statistics were highly misleading. Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the statistics referenced people placed in ICE custody over the past two years but whose crimes may have been committed over a much longer period.

Cato’s analyses have concluded that crime rates among immigrants are lower than for the native-born. For example, Nowrasteh last year examined data from Texas — the only state that categorizes crimes based on immigration status.

He found that the criminal conviction rate for undocumented immigrants was 50 percent below that of native-born Americans, and the homicide conviction rate was 16 percent lower for the undocumented.

Texas is “a border state, has the second-highest population of illegal immigrants, is conservative and governed by a Republican, and it’s a state that doesn’t go easy on crime,” Nowrasteh said. “There’s no conspiracy in favor of illegal immigrants like people might try to say about California.”