

The Washington Post

Tucker Carlson's rhetoric on immigrants and crime is wildly misleading

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August 24, 2018

Thanks to President Trump's endorsement on Twitter, it's Fox News host Tucker Carlson's embrace of a white-nationalist talking point about crime in South Africa that's been isolated as problematic from his Wednesday night broadcast. When people like David Duke are hailing you for drawing attention to a subject, that's not an indicator that you're focused on the most useful issues.

But in the same show, Carlson also had a more subtle, less acknowledged talking point on immigrants and crime that deserves both attention and dismissal.

His guest was the Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute. Carlson invited Nowrasteh on to discuss the murder of Mollie Tibbetts in Iowa by an immigrant in the country illegally, an act that Carlson and other conservatives have moved to the center of the immigration debate in recent days.

"Immediately you hear people say — and I'm sure you will say in a minute — don't use this crime to tar the reputation of every illegal alien," Carlson said to Nowrasteh. "I think most people look at this and say, if you're in our country illegally, a single crime is too many. I mean, talk about adding outrage to insult. Already breaking our laws, and then committing crimes."

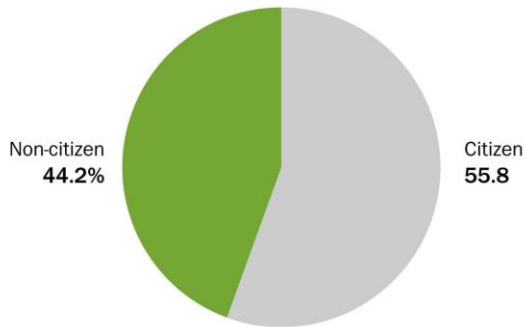
"And there are an awful lot of crimes committed by people here illegally and by noncitizens more broadly," he continued. "The U.S. Sentencing Commission says 44 percent of all federal inmates are noncitizens. That's a huge number. Why wouldn't we be upset by that?"

Because it's remarkably — and obviously intentionally — misleading.

It's true that, from 2011 to 2016, about 44 percent of the federal prison population was made up of noncitizens.

Composition of federal prison population, 2011–2016

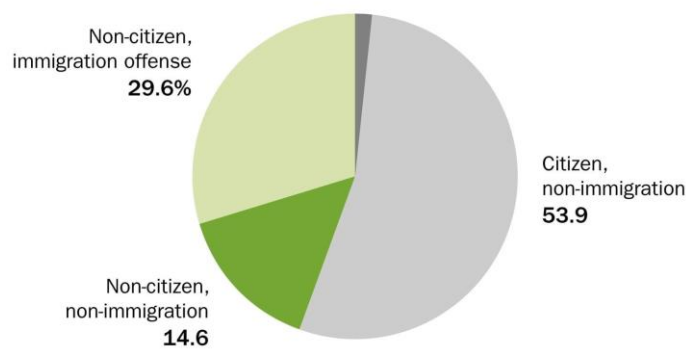
United States Sentencing Commission



But that’s because most immigration offenses are federal crimes. During that period, more than two-thirds of those noncitizens incarcerated in federal facilities were there for immigration-related offenses. Only about 15 percent of the total population were noncitizens incarcerated for nonimmigration offenses.

Composition of federal prison population, 2011–2016

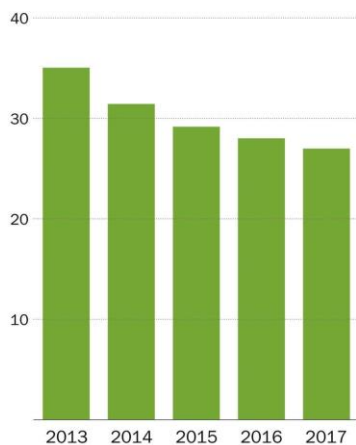
United States Sentencing Commission



What’s more, the noncitizen population has been declining. From fiscal year 2013 to fiscal year 2017, the number of noncitizens sentenced to federal institutions dropped 23 percent.

Non-citizen federal prison population

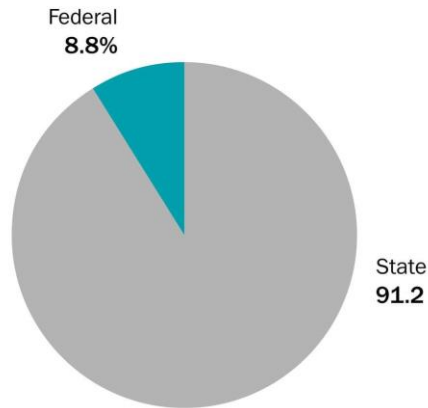
United States Sentencing Commission. Figures in thousands.



But, as Nowrasteh quickly pointed out to Carlson, federal prisoners make up a small percentage of the total incarcerated population in the United States. Nowrasteh put it at 10 percent; in 2016, the most recent year for which data are available, the percentage was actually a bit lower.

Correctional population, 2016

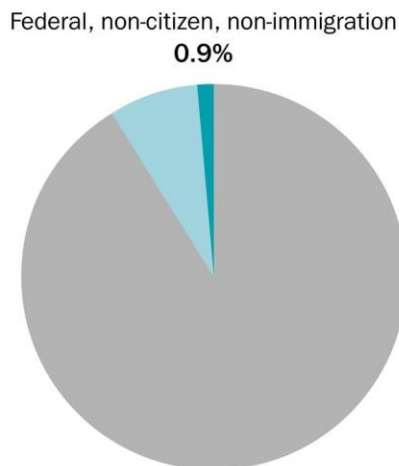
Bureau of Justice Statistics



That same year, the percentage of noncitizens who were federally incarcerated for nonimmigration crimes was lower than 1 percent of the national population.

Correctional population, 2016

Bureau of Justice Statistics, United States Sentencing Commission



Some percentage of those incarcerated at the state level are noncitizens, too, of course. It's not clear what percentage that is.

But this wasn't what Carlson was arguing. He was arguing that the 44 percent number *itself* suggested that crime among immigrants was rampant. Multiple studies make clear that it isn't — as does his own number, once you look at it more closely.

When Nowrasteh pointed out that the federal prison population was only a tenth of the total number, Carlson quickly conceded the point. And that's the tell. Carlson knew that the 44

percent number was misleading, but he offered it anyway — and he used it to argue that Americans should necessarily be upset about immigration.