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Trump Highlights Immigrant Crime to Defend His Border Policy. Statistics Don't Back Him Up.

Katie Rogers

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WASHINGTON — President Trump hit back on Friday at criticism over his administration's hard-line stance on immigration, lamenting the "death and destruction caused by people that shouldn't be here," and accusing Democrats and the news media of not caring.

While statistics show that native-born Americans commit crimes at higher rates than immigrants, Mr. Trump has long pushed a narrative that suggests otherwise.

"No major networks send cameras to their homes or display the images of their incredible loved ones," Mr. Trump said about the people who stood behind him on Friday — family members of those killed by undocumented immigrants. "These are the stories that Democrats and people that are weak on immigration" do not want to hear, he added.

Mr. Trump's somberly delivered remarks came two days after he signed an executive order to end the separation of families at the border, and amid a fiercely emotional national debate over the fate of some 2,300 children — many of them toddlers and infants — who have already been separated from their parents while trying to enter the United States.

The president said that what the people who stood behind him, known as "angel families," had been through was worse. Mr. Trump has embraced the stories of Americans killed by undocumented immigrants since the early days of his presidential campaign, giving them a platform to describe their tragedies at the Republican convention. He also honored several of them during his first address to Congress.

On Friday, he gave them a platform at the White House, inviting the family members to deliver a personal story about their relatives, and deliver details of the deaths of their children. Some died in car accidents. Others were raped, beaten or tortured before they were killed.

"I'm one of your legal immigrants," said Sabine Durden, whose son, Dominic, was killed in a vehicular accident. Mr. Trump introduced her by saying her story was an "incredible" one.

"I didn't drag him over borders through deserts," Ms. Durden said, at one point holding up a container of her son's ashes. "I didn't place him in harm's way."

Several of the family members, holding large photos of their loved ones, said they shared the president's anger with the news media.

“I wish some of our media had the same integrity as our president,” Steve Ronnebeck, whose 21-year-old son, Grant, was shot by a man over a pack of cigarettes.

The parents were emotional and raw as they delivered stories of personal tragedies delivered at the hands of immigrants who had entered the United States illegally. Their concerns about illegal immigration, and the crime statistics that the president pointed to, are echoed by many Americans.

“Americans have long believed that immigrants are more likely than natives to commit crimes and that rising immigration leads to rising crime,” the National Academy of Sciences wrote in a [2015 study](#). “This belief is remarkably resilient to the contrary evidence that immigrants are in fact much less likely than natives to commit crimes.

According to a 2017 report from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, 1.53 percent of native-born Americans are incarcerated, compared with 0.85 percent of undocumented immigrants and 0.47 percent of legal immigrants.

The Marshall Project, in a 2018 analysis of data from 200 metropolitan areas over the last few decades, found that crime has fallen despite the immigrant population increasing. Other [studies](#) have found that the immigration has little effect on crime.

Inviting the families to speak to the public was another strategy for the president, who has railed against undocumented immigrants since his days on the campaign trail and whose rhetoric about them has intensified in recent days. He has branded many illegal immigrants as “murderers and thieves” who want to “infest our country.”

For Mr. Trump, the stories fit perfectly into his dark message about the threats coming over the border, which whipped up his supporters at rallies and helped motivate his voters at the polls. Stories from the victims’ families put a human face on Mr. Trump’s demand for a sprawling wall along the southern border.

His relationship with the families dates back to his time as a candidate. In his campaign announcement in summer 2015, Mr. Trump assailed immigrants from Mexico, saying: “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”

The speech was noticed by several mothers and fathers whose children were the victims of brutal crimes committed by undocumented immigrants, some of whom had been deported several times, only to return.

As he battled Hillary Clinton for the White House, Mr. Trump kept in touch with many of the families by phone. And after he won the election, the president invited three of the family members to sit with Melania Trump, the first lady, during his first address to Congress.

This week, the president told his supporters at [a rally in Duluth, Minn.](#), that angel families were not of interest to the news media or to Democrats.

“They don’t bring cameras to interview the angel moms whose children were killed by criminal aliens who should have never been here in the first place,” Mr. Trump said on Wednesday. “Not even close. They don’t want to talk to the angel moms.”

It was sentiment shared at the White House on Friday by Laura Wilkerson, whose 18-year-old son, Josh, died in 2010 after being tortured and beaten.

“It’s sad for our country,” Ms. Wilkerson said. “And it’s time to take it back.”