

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Trump's weak argument for 'Great Border Security'

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July 31, 2018

Among Donald Trump's favorite talking points are the ideas that illegal immigrants are a particular threat to Americans. But the fact is: illegal immigrants as a group are less crime prone than native-born Americans.

As research published earlier this year in the journal *Criminology* found, increases in illegal immigration have not been associated with increases in violent crime. In fact, there's evidence that increases in illegal immigration are actually associated with lower violent crime.

"Debates about the proper role of undocumented immigrants in U.S. society will no doubt continue, but they should do so in light of the available evidence," the authors of the study wrote. "For this reason, any set of immigration policies moving forward should be crafted with the empirical understanding that undocumented immigration does not seem to have increased violent crime."

Other research has failed to find a connection between higher illegal immigration and greater prevalence of drug and alcohol problems like drug arrests, drug overdose deaths and driving under the influence arrests.

And research published in June by the Cato Institute found both legal and illegal immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans.

Of course, such a level-headed, empirical approach to policy isn't quite what Trump is going for. It's much more emotionally compelling for his supporters to believe illegal immigrants are a particular threat to America.

It's worth keeping in mind that most people living in the United States illegally have been here for a long time. According to Pew, about two-thirds of illegal immigrants in 2014 had lived in the United States for at least a decade. Only 14 percent had lived in the country for less than five years.

Even Trump's Chief of Staff John Kelly concedes that most people still crossing the border illegally aren't a threat to Americans. "Let me step back and tell you that the vast majority of the people that move illegally into the United States are not bad people," he recently said. "They're not criminals. They're not MS-13."

Of course, none of this necessarily means illegal immigration is something Americans should just accept.

But Trump's reliance on a hysterical view of the border situation and the link between illegal immigration and crime makes it harder for both sides of the immigration debate to have reasonable conversations.

Do some illegal immigrants commit serious crimes? Obviously.

Does it necessitate the construction of a border wall? No. Does it necessitate reducing certain forms of legal immigration, as Trump proposes? No. Does it necessitate holding up amnesty for DACA recipients, as supported by a vast majority of Americans? No.

It should also be said: If Trump really wants to reduce violence in Mexico, he should press for an end to the War on Drugs. Once upon a time, he recognized the folly of the drug war. "We're losing badly the war on drugs," he said. "You have to legalize drugs to win that war. You have to take the profit away from these drug czars."

Alas, Trump these days insists on pandering to the worst instincts of Americans. Rather than provide clarity to a complex issue, Trump's rhetoric on immigration merely muddies the waters and holds America back from a productive conversation on immigration.