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Unfounded fear of immigrant crime grips Arizona

By Daniel Griswold

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ANALYSIS/OPINION:

Fears about an illegal-immigrant crime wave helped propel passage of Arizona's tough new law that makes it a crime to be present in the state without legal documents. Like the law itself, those fears are based more on perception than reality.

State Sen. Russell Pearce, chief sponsor of the law, often recites the names of recent victims of crimes allegedly committed in the state by illegal immigrants, including the slaying of a popular rancher in March. Drug-related crimes such as kidnapping are reportedly on the rise in Phoenix, fueling public support for the law.

One big problem in the Arizona debate is that the perceptions about immigrants and crime do not square with the most basic data. After years of witnessing a rise in the number of illegal immigrants in their state, the people of Arizona are in reality less likely to be victims of crime than at any time in the past four decades.

According to the most recent figures from the U.S. Department of Justice, the violent crime rate in Arizona in 2008 was the lowest it has been since 1971; the property crime rate fell to its lowest point since 1966. In the past decade, as illegal immigrants were drawn in record numbers by the housing boom, the rate of violent crimes in Phoenix and the entire state fell by more than 20 percent, a steeper drop than in the overall U.S. crime rate.

Arizona suffers from its share of crime, but it is not out of proportion for a large city. Among similar-sized metro areas, such as Boston, Dallas, Detroit, San Francisco and Washington, D.C., Phoenix had the lowest violent crime rate in 2008. In Detroit, which is not known as a magnet for illegal Hispanic immigrants, the rate was three times that of Phoenix.

The story is much the same in communities along Arizona's long border with Mexico. Crime rates there are stable and, if anything, lower than in the rest of the state.

According to a story in the Arizona Republic this month, the assistant police chief in Nogales, Roy Bermudez, "shakes his head and smiles when he hears politicians and pundits declaring that Mexican cartel violence is overrunning his Arizona border town. 'We have not, thank God, witnessed any spillover violence from Mexico,' Chief Bermudez says emphatically. 'You can look at the crime stats. I think Nogales, Arizona, is one of the safest places to live in all of America.'"

As for the galvanizing slaying of the rancher Richard Krentz in March, the Arizona Republic went on to report that, "according to the Border Patrol, Krentz is the only American murdered by a suspected illegal immigrant in at least a decade within the agency's Tucson sector, the busiest smuggling route among the Border Patrol's nine coverage regions along the U.S.-Mexican border."

Closer to home, the crackdown on illegal immigration in Prince William County in Northern Virginia was also justified by fears of crime. The Washington Examiner added to the misperceptions in an April 29 story when it

reported that since the crackdown began in the fall of 2007, "the county has turned over more than 2,000 suspected illegal immigrants to the federal government, and crime last year reached a 15-year low."

Of course, that doesn't mean the crackdown necessarily lead to the drop in crime. Nationwide, the crime rate has dropped by more than 30 percent in the past 15 years. Crime has dropped at a similar rate in more immigrant-friendly Fairfax County.

Legal and illegal immigrants do commit crimes, but at rates that are generally lower than their native-born counterparts, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. The large majority of immigrants who enter the United States, legally and illegally, come here to work and save and support their families. Once inside the country, they want to stay out of trouble and not jeopardize their opportunity to earn income in a our relatively free and open economy.

The frustration behind the Arizona law is understandable. The politicians in Washington refuse to reform our immigration laws in a way that would make legal immigration more available and attractive to low-skilled workers relative to illegal immigration.

Absent real reforms, ramped up enforcement will only drive illegal workers deeper underground, raise smuggling fees, and divert law enforcement resources away from apprehending real criminals who truly do threaten public safety.

• *Daniel Griswold is director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute in Washington. He has written widely on trade and immigration policy and is the author of the 2009 Cato book, "Mad about Trade: Why Main Street American Should Embrace Globalization."*

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