Statesman

When facts don't fit the narrative on immigration

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In 2015, with made-for-television trappings befitting his reality TV star status, businessman Donald Trump descended a Trump Tower escalator and announced that he was running for president. And, almost immediately he began laying the foundation for his angry rhetoric on immigration.

The U.S., he said at his first press conference as a candidate, had become a place where other countries send people they don't want. A "dumping ground," he called it.

He singled out one country in particular, beginning a pattern that reserves a particular scorn for Hispanic immigrants.

"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best," he said. "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."

Politicians highlighting crimes committed by unauthorized immigrants isn't new, Alex Nowrasteh, a researcher with the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, points out. The Republican politicians who dominate state government in Texas are a case in point. But no politician has gained more political mileage from pushing this narrative than the president, who leverages it to justify his demand for his border wall.

But is there evidence showing that unauthorized immigrants commit crimes at greater rates than native-born Americans or legal immigrants?

In a word, no, not even in a border state like Texas, Nowrasteh told me.

He should know because he set out to investigate, using data from the Texas Department of Public Safety. Unique among the 50 states, the DPS preserves the results from law enforcement immigration checks. This allowed Nowrasteh to check immigration status against criminal convictions and arrests and compare them to the share of undocumented immigrants in Texas' population.

His findings might surprise the build-the-wall crowd: Unauthorized immigrants don't increase the crime rate at all. Indeed, the results showed that immigrants in the country illegally are less

likely to be convicted of crimes than native-born Americans, and legal immigrants are the least likely of all.

The raw results broke down this way: In 2017 in Texas, 399,155 native-born Americans, 16,275 unauthorized immigrants, and 18,235 legal immigrants were convicted of crimes. Using those numbers and comparing against the percentage of their respective sub-populations, Nowrasteh found that unauthorized immigrants were 47 percent less likely to be convicted of a crime than native-born Americans, and legal immigrants were 65 percent less likely. This holds true in just about all cases, including homicide, sex crimes, larceny, and most other crimes.

Put another way, there are an awful lot of criminals in Texas, and the vast majority were born here.

Actually, the findings shouldn't really surprise us. They echo those of similar studies, including a previous one by Cato using Texas data for 2015.

"Historically in the U.S., immigrants have always had a lower crime rate," Nowrasteh told me. "One of the reasons probably is that the punishment is so much greater for them. After they serve their jail term, they're deported."

Likely there are other reasons, including that the people who risk so much to come here illegally − their life savings, death − are willing to do so because they believe they are investing in their future and the future of their families.

Nowrasteh's report notes that, according to polling, some American voters believe that undocumented immigrants have a higher crime rate than U.S. citizens. This despite the facts.

That tells me that the president, at least among his supporters, is winning his rhetorical war on illegal immigration. A dumping ground, the words Trump used in announcing his candidacy, is where we dispose of trash. He has said undocumented immigrants "infest our country," using a term traditionally used for pests. Trump laughed when a supporter suggested shooting migrants. He tweets about an "invasion" of immigrants, and depicts over and over again a lawless, porous border overrun by immigrant criminals when the reality is that the United States spends billions on border enforcement and the net flow of migration into the U.S. in recent years is roughly at a historical average.

Trump might be winning for the sake of his wall and his policy goals, but his rhetoric dehumanizes immigrants and creates an unreasonable fear of them. It plays reckless with the truth and has little respect for humanity and compassion. It creates a one-sided war − all based on a falsehood.