It's a myth that immigrants are more criminally oriented

Alison Dagnes and Lawrence M. Eppard

Feb 19, 2021

Imagine coming down with a serious health condition. Would you want your doctor to try just anything and hope it works? Probably not. A neck brace will not repair a ruptured Achilles tendon. Ibuprofen does not cure cancer. Furthermore, the wrong prescription not only leaves your ailment untreated, but may actually make it worse.

Like medical issues that afflict individuals, large-scale social and economic problems which plague society also require rigorous examination and precise policy prescriptions. If we rely on bad information, the policies that we prescribe will be ineffective and may even make matters worse.

It may seem obvious that public policies should be based on facts. Yet when it comes to immigration reform, there are various myths that play an outsized role in shaping the popular and political discourse in America. These myths are stubbornly persistent, distort our understanding of the issue, and make it unnecessarily difficult to address.

One such myth is that immigrants (particularly unauthorized immigrants) are more criminally oriented than native-born Americans. There have been a number of rigorous studies that examine this with data and analysis, with two of the most heavily-cited coming from Michael Light and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin and Alex Nowrasteh at the Cato Institute. These studies not only reject the notion that immigrants are more criminally-oriented than native-born Americans, but actually reveal the opposite to be true: across the major crime categories, native-born Americans (as a group) have higher crime rates than both authorized and unauthorized immigrants.

Michael Light's study, for example, revealed that compared to unauthorized immigrants, native-born Americans were over 2 times more likely to be arrested for all violent crimes (and over 1.5 times more likely to be arrested for sexual assault and about 2.5 times more likely to be arrested for homicide specifically), about 2.5 times more likely to be arrested for drug violations, and over 4 times more likely to be arrested for property crimes. As Light and his coauthors explained, these data "significantly undermine the claims that undocumented immigrants pose a unique criminal risk. In fact, our results suggest that undocumented immigrants pose substantially less criminal risk than native U.S. citizens."

We hear about horrible individual cases, such as the killing of Kate Steinle in San Francisco by an unauthorized immigrant in 2015, but those are tragic exceptions. Politicians like to use these

awful cases to magnify their claims that immigrants are dangerous criminals, but they are just exploiting tragedy for political gain.

Like the inaccurate assumption of immigrant criminality, other myths have had a disproportionate impact on the immigration debate in the U.S. as well. Here are a few examples:

Myth: Unlike immigrants of the past, today's immigrants refuse to learn English.

Reality: A variety of studies show that immigrants today are learning English at least as fast as immigrants of the past.

Myth: Most unauthorized immigrants arrive by crossing the southern border.

Reality: Data shows that a majority of unauthorized immigrants in recent years have arrived via legal means (such as coming by air on a temporary visa) and then failed to leave when that visa expired.

Myth: Many terrorists enter the U.S. unlawfully by crossing the southern border.

Reality: Data shows that unauthorized immigrants represent a little less than 5% of foreign-born terrorists and have been linked to zero terrorism-related American injuries or deaths.

Myth: Immigration negatively impacts the American economy.

Reality: Economists have found that the net impact of immigration on long-run economic growth in the U.S. is positive.

There is no "right" answer to the question of how to structure immigration reform. In a constitutional republic like the U.S., public policies depend upon the preferences of voters and their elected representatives. But while red and blue Americans may differ on what should be done regarding immigration, we should not differ in our desire for these decisions to be based on facts. We need to embrace facts and shun myths in order to craft public policies that will solve real problems. If we all rely on well-sourced data, groups with different opinions can come together to find common ground and create successful policy.

Alison Dagnes and Lawrence Eppard are both faculty members at Shippensburg University as well as co-hosts of the Utterly Moderate podcast.