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No, immigrants aren't more likely to commit crimes than US-born, despite Trump's border speech

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Former president Donald Trump on Thursday seized on the arrest of an undocumented man in a high-profile murder in Georgia to underscore his assertion that many migrants are dangerous and "coming from prisons."

But research suggests immigrants actually commit fewer crimes than people born in the U.S.

"The findings show pretty consistently undocumented and illegal immigrants have a lower conviction rate and are less likely to be convicted of homicide and other crimes overall compared to native-born Americans in Texas," Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C., told USA TODAY.

Speaking in Eagle Pass, Texas, Thursday, Trump cited the case of Laken Riley, a 22-year-old nursing student, who was brutally murdered last week by a Venezuelan migrant.

He referred to "Biden migrant crime" and blamed President Joe Biden for allowing millions of people to come into the U.S. from other countries.

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"And they're coming from jails and they're coming from prisons and they're coming from mental institutions and they're coming from insane asylums and they're terrorists," Trump said, adding that jails from all over the world are "emptying out" into the U.S.

None of the data analyzed by researchers supports those accusations.

According to Nowrasteh's findings from 2012 to 2022, undocumented immigrants have a homicide conviction rate 14% below that of native-born Americans. Immigrants have a 62% lower homicide rate and undocumented immigrants have a 41% lower total criminal conviction rate than native-born Americans.

Most of the data on crime and immigration status in the U.S. comes from the Texas Department of Public Safety, the only agency that keeps such detailed records. Texas has the nation's second-highest population of undocumented immigrants after California, Nowrasteh said, adding that he believes national data would be similar.

"I don't think that Trump's statements accurately convey the reality of immigration," Nowrasteh said.

Research by Michael Light, a sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin, shows a similar pattern.

"We looked at homicides, sexual assaults, violent crimes, property crimes, traffic and drug violations," Light said. "And what we find across the board is that the undocumented tend to have lower rates of crimes with all of these types of offenses."

The American public, however, has a different impression.

When asked specifically about the impact of immigration on crime in the United States, 57% of Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center earlier this year said the large number of migrants seeking to enter the country leads to more crime.

Border patrol intercepts migrants with criminal records

For the last 150 years, rates of crimes committed by immigrants once they arrive in this country have been lower than those committed by native-born Americans, said Ran Abramitzky, an Economics professor at Stanford University, who has also studied the data.

Incarceration rates have steadily declined since 1960 among immigrants from all regions, Abramitzky said.

He and other experts said it doesn't make sense for immigrants to commit crimes because they will get kicked out of the country.

"Deportation is quite a hefty penalty, as being removed and sent back to their home country where they have fewer job and quality of life opportunities is enough to scare most

immigrants," Nowrasteh said.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection does catch a number of criminals as they try to enter the country.

According to Border Patrol statistics, more than 15,000 people with criminal records were arrested at the border in 2023, an increase from about 12,000 the year before. So far in fiscal year 2024, about 5,600 have been arrested. Typically, Border Patrol will conduct a criminal background check of immigrants before releasing them into the U.S. pending a hearing.

Pete Hermansen, a retired Border Patrol agent-in-charge, said during his two-decade career with the agency he saw a statistical pattern in migrant apprehensions at the border.

"Eighty-seven percent are just coming here to better their lives," he said. "Thirteen percent are a threat to the country. That statistical analysis comes from my 21 years at the Border Patrol, either arresting people, seeing their criminal history or identifying criminals when I ran the intelligence program."

The partisan politics of immigration

As a result of the strife at the border, Light and Nowrasteh both say they have faced criticism for their work by some who disagree with their findings, yet the researchers argue their numbers bear the truth.

"There are those who find it helpful and those who don't and miss the point and say the undocumented shouldn't be here in the first place," Light said. "I've certainly heard that crime rates are not the point."

Abramitzky said partisan politics typically plays a role in the rhetoric around immigration.

"Whereas Democrats are increasingly more positive when talking about immigrants and pointing to their contributions to the U.S., Republicans remain negative and increasingly focus on crime and legal issues when they talk about immigrants," Abramitzky said.

More enforcement of regulations around immigration won't change immigrant crime rates or prevent horrific murders like Riley's death, Nowrasteh said in a Wednesday blog post.

"The statistics do tell us that deporting all illegal immigrants, ending parole, curtailing asylum, or any combination of those policies would not reduce homicide rates," Nowrasteh said.

Lauren Villagran contributed to this report.