

IMMIGRATION

Trump's claims of a migrant crime wave are not supported by national data

An NBC News review of available 2024 crime data shows overall crime levels dropping in cities that have received the most migrants.



— Donald Trump at the Conservative Political Action Conference in National Harbor, Md., on Saturday.

Mandel Ngan / AFP - Getty Images

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By Olympia Sonnier and Garrett Haake

WASHINGTON – When Donald Trump speaks at the southern border in Texas on Thursday, you can expect to hear him talk about “migrant crime,” a category he has coined and defined as a terrifying binge of criminal activity committed by undocumented immigrants spreading across the country.

“You know, in New York, what’s happening with crime is it’s through the roof, and it’s called ‘migrant,’” the former president said at a rally in Michigan earlier this month. “They beat up police officers. You’ve seen that they go in, they stab people, hurt people, shoot people. It’s a whole new form, and they have gangs now that are making our gangs look like small potatoes.”

Trump has undoubtedly tapped into the rising anger over crimes allegedly committed by undocumented migrants that have gained national attention – most recently, the killing of college student Laken Riley in Georgia last week, after which an undocumented migrant from Venezuela was arrested and charged with her murder, and the much-reported fight between New York police officers and a group of migrant teens.

According to a recent [Pew poll](#), 57% of Americans said that a large number of migrants seeking to enter the country leads to more crime. Republicans (85%) overwhelmingly say the migrant surge leads to increased crime in the U.S. A far smaller share of Democrats (31%) say the same. The poll found that 63% of Democrats say it does not have much of an impact.

But despite the former president’s campaign rhetoric, expert analysis and available data from major-city police departments show that despite several horrifying high-profile incidents, there is no evidence of a migrant-driven crime wave in the United States.

That won’t change the way Trump talks about immigrants in his bid to return to the White House, as he argues that President Joe Biden’s immigration policies are making Americans less safe. Trump says voters should hold Biden personally responsible for every crime committed by an undocumented immigrant.

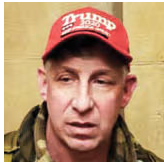
An NBC News review of available 2024 crime data from the cities targeted by Texas’ “Operation Lone Star,” which buses or flies migrants from the border to major cities in the interior – shows overall crime levels dropping in those cities that have received the most migrants.

Overall crime is down year over year in [Philadelphia](#), [Chicago](#), [Denver](#), [New York](#) and Los Angeles. Crime has risen in [Washington, D.C.](#), but local officials do not attribute the spike to migrants.

“This is a public perception problem. It’s always based upon these kinds of flashpoint events where an immigrant commits a crime,” explains Graham Ousey, a professor at the College of William & Mary and the co-author of “Immigration and Crime: Taking Stock.” “There’s no evidence for there being any relationship between somebody’s immigrant status and their involvement in crime.”

Ousey notes the emotional toll these incidents have taken and how they can inform public perception, saying, “They can be really egregious acts of criminality that really draw lots of attention that involve somebody who happens to be an immigrant. And if you have leaders, political leaders who are really pushing that narrative, I think that would have the tendency to sort of push up the myth.”

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“At least a couple of recent studies show that undocumented immigrants are also not more likely to be involved in crime,” Ousey says – in part because of caution about their immigration status. “The individual-level studies actually show that they’re less involved than native-born citizens or second-generation immigrants.”

Another misconception often cited by critics is that crime is more prevalent in “sanctuary cities.” But a [Department of Justice](#) report found that “there was no evidence that the percentage of unauthorized or authorized immigrant population at the city level impacted shifts in the homicide rates and no evidence that immigration is connected to robbery at the city level.”

Trump’s campaign claims without evidence that those statistics obscure the problem.

“Democrat cities purposefully do not document when crimes are committed by illegal immigrants, because they don’t want American citizens to know the truth about the dangerous impact Joe Biden’s open border is having on their communities,” Karoline Leavitt, Trump campaign press secretary, said in a statement. “Nevertheless, Americans know migrant crime is a serious and growing threat; and the murder, rape, or abuse of one innocent citizen at the hands of an illegal immigrant is one too many.”

Trump has been pushing the argument that immigrants bring crime since launching his first campaign in 2015, often featuring at his rallies the family members of those who were killed by undocumented immigrants who had been drinking and driving. And his arguments are not new – opponents of immigration have long tried to make the case that migrants bring crime.

National crime data, especially pertaining to undocumented immigrants, is notoriously incomplete. The national data comes in piecemeal and can only be evaluated holistically when the annual data is released.

The data is incomplete on how many crimes each year are committed by migrants, primarily because most local police don’t record immigration status when they make arrests. But the studies that have been done on this, most recently by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, show that in Texas, where police do record immigration status, migrants commit fewer crimes per capita.

In December 2020, researchers studying Texas crime statistics found that “contrary to public perception, we observe considerably lower felony arrest rates among undocumented immigrants compared to legal immigrants and native-born U.S. citizens and find no evidence that undocumented criminality has increased in recent years.”

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