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GOP vows to make America safe again. Statistics contradict their growing crime claims

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HEARD ON MORNING EDITION

By Meg Anderson, Sergio Martínez-Beltrán, A Martínez

7-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST TRANSCRIPT

At the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee Tuesday night, Republicans promised to “make America safe once again.” They say crime is up nationwide. Is it?

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A MARTÍNEZ, HOST:

The theme of the Republican National Convention last night was, quote, "Make America safe once again," and that theme echoes a common refrain of former President Donald Trump over the years. He often claims that we live in a society plagued by widespread violent crime and, contrary to evidence, that immigrants perpetrate those crimes.

SACHA PFEIFFER, HOST:

That was no different last night, when members of his party spoke.

(SOUNDBITE OF MONTAGE)

ERIC SCHMITT: Under Joe Biden, the rule of law has disintegrated. Crime is rampant. Our communities are under siege.

KARI LAKE: And the Democrats have handed over control of my state, Arizona's border, to the drug cartels.

TED CRUZ: Every day, Americans are dying – murdered, assaulted, raped by illegal immigrants that the Democrats have released.

PFEIFFER: That was Missouri Senator Eric Schmitt, Arizona Senate candidate Kari Lake and Texas Senator Ted Cruz. The speakers often talked about immigration, violent crime and the fentanyl crisis as if they were one and the same.

MARTÍNEZ: Here to help us sort all of this out is NPR's Sergio Martínez-Beltrán, who covers immigration, and NPR's Meg Anderson, who covers criminal justice. All right, Sergio, let's start with you. A lot of the speeches talked about migrants pouring into the country. Do a little fact check for us, if you could.

SERGIO MARTÍNEZ-BELTRÁN, BYLINE: Yeah, so it is true that under President Biden, the southern border saw a record high in terms of people crossing into the U.S. without authorization, but that number has really gone down since January. In June, there was a 24% decrease in arrests at the border in comparison to May, so no, there has not been a, quote-unquote, "open border" or "invasion" at the southern border.

MARTÍNEZ: OK. Now, Republicans also accused Democrats of wanting to allow unauthorized migrants to vote. What about that one?

MARTÍNEZ-BELTRÁN: Right, so it is illegal to vote in the U.S. if you're not a citizen, but several Republicans last night repeatedly falsely said that Democrats want to allow unauthorized migrants to vote, and, you know, this is in line with the long-standing Republican rhetoric that elections in this country are rampant with voter fraud, although there's no evidence for that.

MARTÍNEZ: OK. Now, we heard also a lot of linking of migrants to crime. What do we know about that link?

MARTÍNEZ-BELTRÁN: So last night, we heard from the family of Rachel Morin. She was murdered on a trail in Maryland last year, and a man from El Salvador, who is in the country without authorization, has been charged with her murder and rape. You know, this is very tragic. This is horrible, but it is not emblematic of any particular trend, even though Republicans did try to frame it that way. Multiple studies have found, A, that migrants are less likely to commit a crime than people born in the U.S. For example, Stanford University found that immigrants are 30% less likely to be imprisoned than white Americans.

MARTÍNEZ: All right. Now, Republicans also linked fentanyl specifically to immigration and border policies.

MARTÍNEZ-BELTRÁN: Right. Last night, several speakers talked about how an increase of fentanyl in the U.S. is directly related to President Biden's border

policies. We heard that multiple times throughout the night, including from Anne Fundner, the mother of a teenager who died by fentanyl poisoning in 2022 in California.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ANNE FUNDNER: I hold Joe Biden, Kamala Harris and Gavin Newsom, and every Democrat who supports open borders, responsible for the death of my son.

MARTÍNEZ-BELTRÁN: You know, A, there's no doubt that the number of overdoses has gone up, but what we know from Department of Homeland Security data is that most fentanyl smuggled through the U.S.-Mexico border happens through port of entry by U.S. citizens.

MARTÍNEZ: All right. Let's turn now to Meg Anderson, covers criminal justice for NPR. What about what was said more broadly about crime, Meg? What stood out to you?

MEG ANDERSON, BYLINE: Yeah, so in addition to everything Sergio just touched on, several speakers pressed for harsher consequences for crimes in general. They also criticized calls from the left to defund the police. Here's Randy Sutton. He's a former police lieutenant who spoke last night.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

RANDY SUTTON: Joe Biden and Kamala Harris - well, they stand with the criminals. The last few years have been devastating for our police. The war on cops is very real, and it's getting Americans killed.

ANDERSON: But researchers who study crime say whether or not crimes will rise or fall doesn't depend so much on how much is spent on police, but rather how police are using their resources - and actually, the big elephant in the room about crime and policing that speakers did not mention is that right now crime is actually falling.

MARTÍNEZ: Yeah, and that's something that you wouldn't necessarily know from listening to that clip from Sutton.

ANDERSON: Yeah, it's true, but the most recent data from the FBI indicates that violent crime, including murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, is way down, after a surge in 2020. Those numbers are preliminary. They only cover about three-quarters of the country, but other analysts have found similar results. Of course, these are national numbers. Some cities have seen increases. Others have seen decreases. Dallas was offered as an example last night. That city has seen declining crime for the last few years, and the city's mayor, Eric Johnson, a former Democrat who switched parties last year while in office, was quick to take credit for that, but I spoke to Ernesto Lopez - he's a researcher at the Council on Criminal Justice - about this. He cautioned against trying to pin rising or falling crime rates on any one political party.

ERNESTO LOPEZ: You can have a blue city in a red county in a blue state, so it's really unclear how you would even start to untangle all those different layers.

ANDERSON: And when you look at the country more broadly, the decline in crime happened in cities and towns, big and small, red and blue. It happened in the Midwest, the South, the Northeast – all over.

MARTÍNEZ: Yeah, but research shows concern about crime has grown since 2021 among both Democrats and Republicans, though more among Republicans. So why is that the case, if crime is down?

ANDERSON: Yeah, that's actually been true for years. Surveys show that people in the U.S. just tend to think crime is up nationwide, even when it's not, and, you know, of course, there is a difference between perceptions of crime and safety and actual crime rates. That's according to Insha Rahman at the Vera Institute of Justice, which – that's a criminal justice research organization.

INSHA RAHMAN: And so if somebody walks outside and they see what looks like more disorder to them – say, more open-air drug use or homelessness – they conflate that with crime being up, because it taps into a sense of disorder.

ANDERSON: So one woman last night from Pittsburgh talked about, you know, filthy tents and drug dealers on her street. Those are real social problems, but they aren't necessarily indicators that crime is up. But, you know, because those problems certainly exist, Rahman says that politicians can tap into that to magnify people's fears.

MARTÍNEZ: All right. That's NPR's Meg Anderson and NPR's Sergio Martínez-Beltrán. Thanks to you both.

ANDERSON: You're welcome.

MARTÍNEZ-BELTRÁN: You're welcome.

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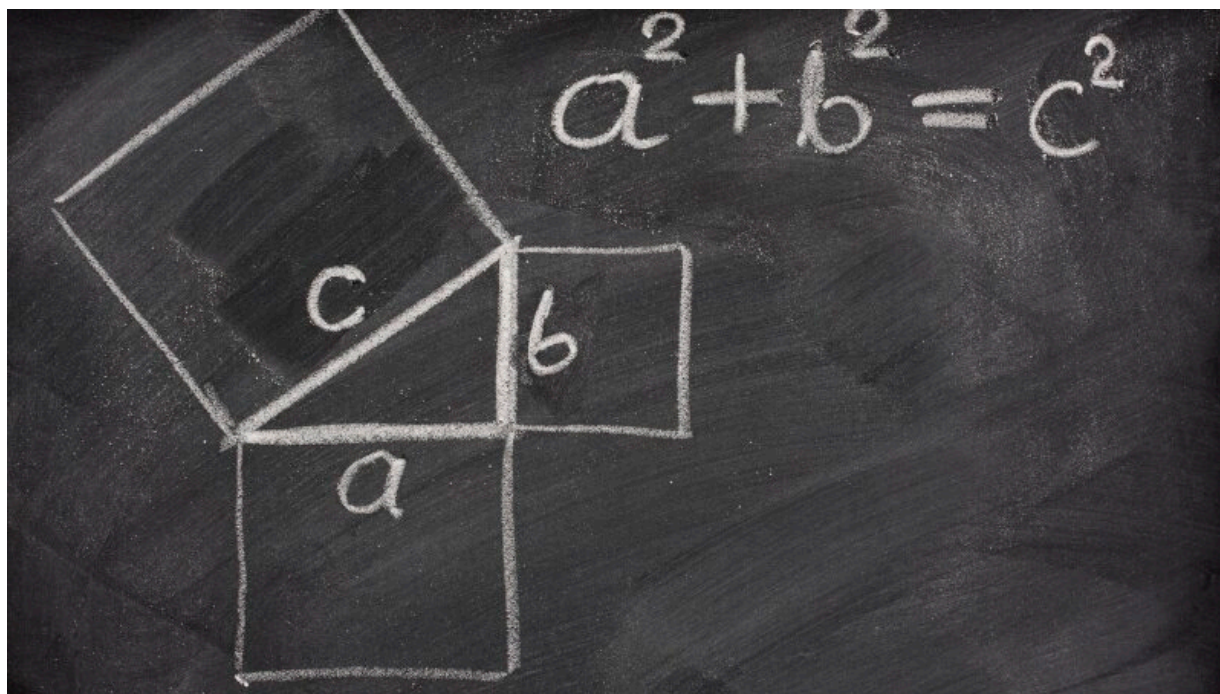
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