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Immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than U.S.-born Americans, studies find

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED



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Audio will be available later today.

The murder of Laken Riley took center stage during Thursday night's State of the Union address. Riley was a 22-year-old student who was killed last month at the University of Georgia. The suspect in her murder is a Venezuelan migrant whom officials say was illegally in the U.S.

During the Republican rebuttal, Riley's murder was brought up by Alabama Sen. Katie Britt. "She was brutally murdered by one of the millions of illegal border crossers President Biden chose to release into our homeland. Y'all ... as a mom, I can't quit thinking about this. I mean, this could have been my daughter. This could have been yours."

The claim that immigration brings on a crime wave can be traced back to the first immigrants who arrived in the U.S. Ever since the 1980s and '90s, this false narrative saw a resurgence.

During the current presidential campaign, the vitriol has been intense. Just in the last few months, former President Donald Trump has spoken of immigrants as criminals and mentally ill people who are "poisoning the blood of our country." Florida Gov. (and former presidential candidate) Ron DeSantis said migrants suspected of carrying drugs across the border should be shot, without specifying

how drug smugglers could be told apart from other migrants.

However, research indicates that immigrants commit less crimes than U.S.-born people.

Much of the available data focuses on incarceration rates because that's where immigration status is recorded.

Some of the most extensive research comes from Stanford University. Economist Ran Abramitzky found that since the 1960s, immigrants are 60% less likely to be incarcerated than U.S.-born people.

There is also state level research, that shows similar results: researchers at the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank, looked into Texas in 2019. They found that undocumented immigrants were 37.1% less likely to be convicted of a crime.

Beyond incarceration rates, research also shows that there is no correlation between undocumented people and a rise in crime. Recent investigations by *The New York Times* and The Marshall Project found that between 2007 and 2016, there was no link between undocumented immigrants and a rise in violent or property crime in those communities.

The reason for this gap in criminal behavior might have to do with stability and achievement. The Stanford study concludes that first-generation male immigrants traditionally do better than U.S.-born men who didn't finish high school, which is

the group most likely to be incarcerated in the U.S.

The study also suggests that there's a real fear of getting in trouble and being deported within immigrant communities. Far from engaging in criminal activities, immigrants mostly don't want to rock the boat.

But the idea that immigrants bring crime remains widespread.

A few months ago, NPR reported on a migrant shelter functioning in Staten Island, N.Y. Anthony Pagano, the owner of a flower shop located close to the shelter, told NPR he was against it being located in his community.

"How do you put migrants across from an elementary school? An all-girl high school, and another public elementary school," he asked. "You don't know who they are. Criminals. You see all the crimes that are being committed by migrants."

New York City Police data shows there was no rise in murder, rapes or robberies in the area.

Clarification

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An earlier version of this story has been edited to make clear that DeSantis said he was referring specifically to alleged drug traffickers and not all migrants.