

## COMMENTARY

# The Mythical Connection Between Immigrants And Crime

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## **Newcomers to the U.S. are less likely than the native population to commit violent crimes or be incarcerated.**

Is the conversation that Republicans want to have about immigration any more serious than the one Democrats want to have about race?

The Republican presidential field sports no shortage of individuals capable of speaking intelligently about America's broken immigration system. Sens. Marco Rubio and Lindsey Graham have drafted legislation on the issue. Jeb Bush co-wrote an entire book on the subject. And Rick Perry ran a border state with the nation's second-largest immigrant population for 14 years. So why is Donald Trump, whose comments about immigrants and crime are as ugly as they are uninformed, doing all the talking?

The candidates who expect to outlast Mr. Trump in the primaries are no doubt eyeing his supporters. But Republicans would do better to focus on swing voters, whom they might lose if Mr. Trump's position on immigration is perceived as the GOP's. Mr. Trump is bringing heat to a debate that needs more light, and other candidates have an opportunity to provide it.

They might start by pointing out that numerous studies going back more than a century have shown that immigrants—regardless of nationality or legal status—are less likely than the native population to commit violent crimes or to be incarcerated. A new report from the Immigration Policy Center notes that while the illegal immigrant population in the U.S. more than tripled between 1990 and 2013 to more than 11.2 million, “FBI data indicate that the violent crime rate declined 48%—which included falling rates of aggravated assault, robbery, rape, and murder. Likewise, the property crime rate fell 41%, including declining rates of motor vehicle theft, larceny/robbery, and burglary.”

A separate IPC paper from 2007 explains that this is not a function of well-behaved high-skilled immigrants from India and China offsetting misdeeds of Latin American newcomers. The data show that “for every ethnic group without exception, incarceration rates among young men are lowest for immigrants,” according to the report. “This holds true especially for the Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans who make up the bulk of the undocumented population.”

It also holds true in states with large populations of illegal residents. A 2008 report by the Public Policy Institute of California found that immigrants are underrepresented in the prison system. “The incarceration rate for foreign-born adults is 297 per 100,000 in the population, compared [with] 813 per 100,000 for U.S.-born adults,” the study concludes. “The foreign-born, who make up roughly 35% of California's adult population, constitute 17% of the state prison population.”

High-profile incidents, like the recent arrest of a Mexican national in the horrific shooting death of a young woman in San Francisco, can give the impression that immigrants are more likely to commit violent crimes. But the alleged killer is no more representative of Mexican immigrants than Dylann Roof is representative of white people.

Every immigrant here illegally has already broken a law, though that doesn't mean they are predisposed to crime. In a 2005 paper, the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago reported that more recently arrived immigrants are even less crime-prone

than their predecessors. In 1980 the incarceration rate of foreign nationals was about one percentage point below natives. A decade later that had fallen to a little more than a percentage point, and by 2000 it was almost three percentage points lower.

Mr. Trump wants to have an unserious debate about immigration, one that involves scaring voters and scapegoating newcomers for crime problems that are mostly homegrown. The liberal press corps will continue indulging him because he's entertaining, and they know his bluster helps Hillary Clinton.

But it behooves other Republicans to raise the level of discourse. After six years of President Obama fluctuating between doing nothing on immigration and issuing legally suspect executive actions that are still tied up in the courts, voters will want to know where the GOP candidates stand.

How do you balance border security and labor-market demand? Should relatives of people already here continue to be given an immigration preference? Is it time to move toward a skills-based immigration system similar to Canada's? How should the federal government treat border states and cities that bear the upfront costs of illegal entries? Is walling off the southern border feasible? Would it make the U.S. safer? And what should be done about the estimated 12 million undocumented people already living here?

Voters—including the more than 40% of swing Hispanic voters that George W. Bush won in 2004—will be paying attention not only to what the candidates say about border issues but also how they say it. Tone matters, and Mr. Trump sounds like someone eager to spurn voters that the Republicans likely need next year. Most people agree that illegal immigration ought to be reduced. The question is not whether it's a problem but how to solve it. It's time for some adults in the GOP presidential race to weigh in.

