

The Myth of the Criminal Immigrant

By ANNA FLAGG MARCH 30, 2018

The Trump administration's first year of immigration policy has relied on claims that immigrants bring crime into America. President Trump's latest target is sanctuary cities.

“Every day, sanctuary cities release illegal immigrants, drug dealers, traffickers, gang members back into our communities,” he said last week. “They’re safe havens for just some terrible people.”

As of 2017, according to [Gallup polls](#), almost half of Americans agreed that immigrants make crime worse. But is it true that immigration drives crime? Many studies have shown that it does not.

Immigrant populations in the United States have been growing fast for decades now. Crime in the same period, however, has moved in the opposite direction, with the national rate of violent crime today well below what it was in 1980.

In a large-scale [collaboration](#) by four universities, led by Robert Adelman, a sociologist at the State University of New York at Buffalo, researchers compared immigration rates with crime rates for 200 metropolitan areas over the last several decades. The selected areas included huge urban hubs like New York and smaller manufacturing

centers less than a hundredth that size, like Muncie, Ind., and were dispersed geographically across the country.

+5,000+10,000+15,000+20,000 immigrants per 100,000 people
CHANGE SINCE 1980 per 100,000 people
+500 violent crimes
-500-1000- 1500 Miami New York
↑ More crime
↓ Less crime ← Fewer
More immigrants → According to data from the study, a large majority of the areas have many more immigrants today than they did in 1980 and fewer violent crimes. The Marshall Project extended the study's data up to 2016, showing that

crime fell more often than it rose even as immigrant populations grew almost across the board.

In 136 metro areas, almost 70 percent of those studied, the immigrant population increased between 1980 and 2016 while crime stayed stable or fell. The number of areas where crime and immigration both increased was much lower — 54 areas, slightly more than a quarter of the total. The 10 places with the largest increases in immigrants all had lower levels of crime in 2016 than in 1980.

And yet the argument that immigrants bring crime into America has driven many of the policies enacted or proposed by the administration so far: restrictions to entry, travel and visas; heightened border enforcement; plans for a wall along the border with Mexico. This month, the Justice Department filed [lawsuit](#) against California in response to the state's restrictions on local police to assist Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers in detaining and deporting undocumented

immigrants charged with crimes. On Tuesday, California's [Orange](#)

[County](#) signed on in support of that suit. But while the immigrant population in the county has more than doubled since 1980, overall violent crime has decreased by more than 50 percent.

There's a similar pattern in two other places where Mr. Trump has recently feuded with local leaders: Oakland, Calif., and Lawrence, Mass. He described both cities as breeding grounds for drugs and crime brought by immigrants. But Oakland, like Orange County, has had increasing immigration and falling crime. In Lawrence, though murder and robbery rates grew, overall violent crime rates still fell by 10 percent.

In general, the study's data suggests either that immigration has the effect of reducing average crime, or that there is simply no relationship between the two, and that the 54 areas in the study where both grew were instances of coincidence, not cause and effect. This was a consistent pattern in each decade from 1980 to 2016, with immigrant populations and crime failing to grow together.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/30/upshot/crime-immigration-myth.html>