

# How Mass Immigration Increases Crime

BY ALEX JOHNSON

**P**olling data consistently indicate that a majority of Americans believe that immigration and crime are linked. A 2007 Gallup poll, for example, found that 58 percent of those surveyed believed that immigrants tended to increase crime.

Incidents of violence along the U.S.-Mexico border and reports of atrocities committed by illegal immigrants in recent years have served to reinforce public perceptions. When Arizona passed S.B. 1070 last year, the law's proponents largely justified it as an anti-crime measure. In defending her decision to sign the bill into law, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer cited public concerns about crime and declared that "[t]here is no higher priority than protecting the citizens of Arizona."

Several critics of the law disputed these assertions about illegal immigrant crime. They pointed to statistics showing that crime in Arizona, like crime nationwide, has fallen in recent years even as immigration levels have risen.

A 2009 report by the Center for Immigration Studies sheds some light on the subject. As the study notes, the mere fact that crime rates have fallen in recent years hardly refutes the public's concerns. It could simply be that a declining crime rate among natives has "masked" an increasing crime rate among immigrants.

While the report itself refrains from drawing any overall conclusions, it assembles a wealth of data that tend to support widely held public beliefs about immigrant criminality.

Through a Freedom of Information Act request, for example, CIS was able to obtain data from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) showing that the agency estimates immigrant incarceration nationally at around 20 percent. Since the immigrant share of the adult population is around 15 percent, this estimate indicates that immigrants do indeed tend to commit crimes at a higher rate than natives.

The records that CIS obtained from ICE did not

indicate the methodology used to arrive at the 20 percent figure, but a 2004 study commissioned by the Department of Homeland Security reached a similar conclusion. After reviewing millions of records from state prisons, as well as some of the nation's largest county jails, the authors of the study estimated that non-natives made up some 22 percent of those incarcerated.

The reason why the above figures are estimates is because most state prisons and local jails make no attempt to determine the immigration status of their inmates. Only the federal prison system has made a comprehensive attempt to do so, and has established that non-citizens make up a little over 26 percent of federal inmates. As the report notes, even if immigration offenses are excluded, the number still stands at around 18 percent, and it adds that "the immigration crimes that result in federal sentences are not minor; they include crimes such as large-scale fraud, smuggling, or illegal re-entry after deportation, not civil offenses like visa overstay or employment."

Non-citizens who commit certain crimes face deportation after the completion of their prison term. The CIS report notes that this almost certainly has the effect of reducing the overall immigrant crime rate, as most criminals tend to be repeat offenders. In 2007 alone, the federal government deported nearly 100,000 criminal aliens.

Data on crimes committed specifically by illegal immigrants has been harder to determine. However, information generated by the federal government's 287(g) program provides us some insight. Pursuant to 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, local communities can elect to have their law enforcement personnel deputized as immigration agents. Because this process can be time consuming, ICE often conducts an audit to determine the extent of illegal immigrant crime in communities that apply for the 287(g) program.

Data for several counties show that illegal immigrants run afoul of local law enforcement far out of proportion to their numbers. In Arizona's Maricopa County, home to Sheriff Joe Arpaio, illegal immigrants make up an estimated 8.9 percent of the population but commit 21.8 percent of all felonies.

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*Alex Johnson is a freelance writer.*

The relationship between illegal immigration and crime is especially clear in Arizona because of the state’s proximity to Mexico’s raging drug war. In December of last year, the Mexican Attorney General reported that over 30,100 people have been killed in the conflict since he took office at the end of 2006.

It is increasingly hard to deny that the violence in Mexico has long since begun to spill over into Arizona. Even as critics of S.B. 1070 dismissed fears about immigrant crime, the federal government began posting signs in Arizona as far as 100 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border cautioning travelers to beware of drug and human smugglers operating in the area.

In August 2010, the *Washington Times* reported on these signs and on how Sheriff Paul Babeu of Pinal County, which has witnessed considerable violence in recent years, has spoken out about the problems that his county faces. “Mexican drug cartels literally do control parts of Arizona,” the *Times* reported him as saying. “They literally have scouts on the high points in the mountains and in the hills and they literally control movement. They have radios, they have optics, they have night-vision goggles as good as anything that law enforcement has.”

Drug and human smugglers routinely cross the border with impunity, often inflicting a great deal of property damage in the process and occasionally claiming the lives of locals. Indeed, it was the death of popular rancher Robert Krentz (whom authorities believe was most likely killed by a Mexican drug cartel runner) that finally led to the passage of S.B. 1070.

Drug cartels and illegal immigration are also

closely tied to another criminal phenomenon that, so far, appears to be largely unique to Arizona: ransom kidnappings. Early in 2009, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that, according to law enforcement officials, “more ransom kidnappings happen here [Phoenix] than in any other town in America.”

Drug smugglers latched on to the practice years ago as a means of collecting debts. At first incidents of ransom kidnapping were confined to Mexico, especially the province of Sinaloa, but they have spread northward in the past few years along with other aspects of the Mexican drug war.

The *Times* explains how illegal immigration is intertwined with the practice. “Like construction or restaurant work,” it reported, kidnapping in Phoenix relies on cheap Mexican laborers. The grunt work, like guarding the victim, is often done by young, unemployed illegal immigrants, desperate for work, who sign on for \$50 to \$100 a day.”

The situation reminds us that not all who come to America are eager for hard work and honest liv-

ing. “Kidnapping in Phoenix,” as the *Times* puts it, “attracts immigrants whose American dream is to make it big in the underworld.”

Government estimates and studies showing that a disproportionate number of foreign-born inhabit the nation’s prisons suggest that quite a few immigrants end up engaging in underworld activities. Such numbers, along with high-profile incidents of border violence, suggest that the public is right to fear that the recent waves of mass immigration have increased crime and that the federal government has lost control of its borders. ■



Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio