

EXPLAINER

Immigrants and Crime in the United States

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Immigrants in the United States commit crimes at lower rates than the U.S.-born population, notwithstanding the assertion by critics that immigration is linked to higher rates of criminal activity. This reality of reduced criminality, which holds across immigrant groups including unauthorized immigrants, has been demonstrated through research as well as findings for the one state in the United States—Texas—that tracks criminal arrests and convictions by immigration status.



A growing volume of research demonstrates that not only do immigrants commit fewer crimes, but they also do not raise crime rates in the U.S. communities where they settle. In fact, some studies indicate that immigration can [lower criminal activity](#), especially violent crime, in [places with inclusive policies](#) and social environments where immigrant populations are well established.

A Look at the Overall Immigrant Population

National studies have examined incarceration rates and prosecutions of immigrants in the country, overwhelmingly finding that immigrants of all legal statuses commit crimes at lower rates than those who were born in the United States.

Immigrants Are Prosecuted and Imprisoned at Lower Rates than the U.S. Born

Immigrants in the United States have had lower incarceration rates than the native-born population since at least 1870 (when such data were first recorded). In 2020, immigrants were **60 percent less likely to be incarcerated** than the U.S. born, according to a [study by the National Bureau of Economic Research](#).

And though a [2021 Justice Department study](#) points out prosecutions of immigrants increased between 1990 and 2018, **nearly 90 percent were for violations of immigration-related laws**. Notably, U.S.-born citizens were ten times more likely than immigrants to be incarcerated for committing weapons-related offenses, five times more likely for violent offenses, more than twice as likely for property crimes, and nearly twice as likely for drug offenses.

At the state level, multiple studies have found there is [no clear relationship between violent crime and immigration](#). And research at the city level suggests that increases in [immigration can be associated with declining homicide rates](#), with the largest effect on municipalities with long histories of immigration, as well as [reductions in property crimes and robbery](#). This makes immigrants less likely to be either offenders or victims of crime at the local level compared to the U.S.-born population.

Unauthorized Immigrants and Crime

While being present in the United States without authorization represents an administrative infraction (punishable by removal), unauthorized immigrants are less likely to commit misdemeanor and felony crimes than the U.S.-born population and other immigrant groups.

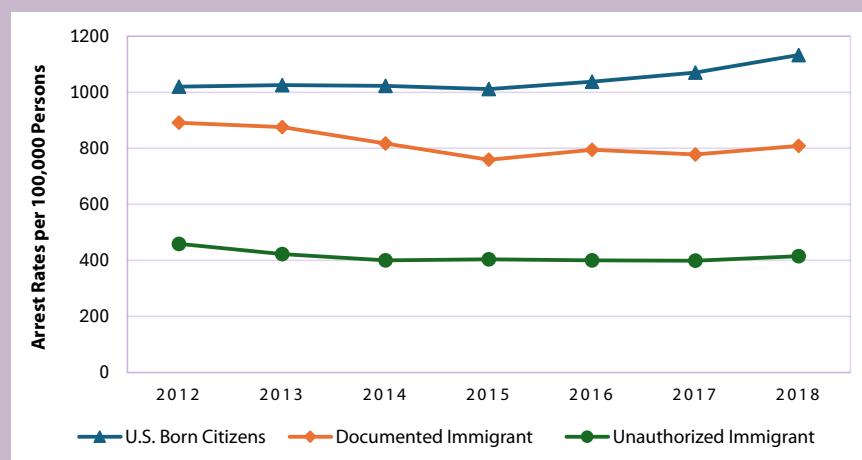
A Unique Data Snapshot: Immigrants and Crime in Texas

Texas represents a unique laboratory to study immigrants and criminality because it is the only state that records criminal arrests and convictions by immigration status. A 2020 federal study based on [Texas Department of Public Safety](#) data found that immigrants of all legal statuses were arrested at:

- Less than half the rate of U.S.-born citizens for violent and drug crimes
- One-quarter of the rate of the U.S. born for property crimes

Unauthorized immigrants in Texas by far had the lowest offending rates compared to the U.S. born and lawfully present immigrants:

Texas Study: Overall Offending Rates by Citizenship and Legal Status



Reports of [general crime rates in border states](#) and many interior cities that have received large numbers of recent arrivals from the U.S.-Mexico border also show an overall downtrend in criminal activity year over year. More research, however, will be necessary to understand if these trends follow the same patterns as those reported in existing studies.

Lower Crime Rates in Communities with More Unauthorized Immigrants

Some research suggests that **unauthorized immigrants are less likely to commit crimes** because they are [aware of a “constant threat of deportation”](#) and have more to lose than other groups if they violate the law. This in turn may result in lower crime rates in U.S. communities, with studies showing:

- As unauthorized immigration increases, [violent crime actually decreases or there is no effect](#), depending on the type of crime, according to one national study.
- The same thing holds true for some [metro-level jurisdictions](#), which experience lower crime rates as the number of unauthorized immigrant residents increases.
- No difference in violent crime, rape, or property crime rates in [“sanctuary cities” and “non-sanctuary” cities](#).

Screening and Vetting Migrants for Security Threats

Since 9/11, the U.S. government has made significant investments in screening and vetting migrants arriving at U.S. borders. And more recently, the United States has increased its investments and cooperation with other countries in the Western Hemisphere to have an earlier and better sense of who is seeking to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. Increased information sharing throughout the Americas and stepped-up law enforcement, terrorist watch list, and intelligence screening at U.S. borders are continuously improving to reduce security threats, despite existing limitations in accessing criminal databases from some migrants’ origin countries. Even if imperfect, the screening and vetting process is increasingly thorough and comprehensive. And [not a single American](#) has been killed in a terrorist attack on U.S. soil carried out by an immigrant who entered by crossing a land or water border illegally, the Cato Institute has reported.

Periods of high border arrivals tax its existing capacity and infrastructure, but the Border Patrol performs [necessary security screening and vetting procedures](#) for individuals encountered unlawfully crossing into the United States, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) inspector general found. And in cases where [migrants lack government-issued identification](#), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers may accept self-reported biographical information to conduct record checks, vetting, and a comprehensive risk classification assessment of an individual’s threat to national security before making a determination on detention or release.



Screening at U.S. Borders

Everyone arriving at a U.S. border, whether crossing legally or intercepted crossing without authorization, or flying into a U.S. airport from an international destination must go through an inspection process that includes screening and vetting by federal agents to confirm their identity and check for potential security threat and inadmissibility.

The process for noncitizens may include:



Reviewing identification and travel documentation

Collecting automated biographical and biometric information (for example, fingerprints and, if the individual is 14 or older, a DNA sample)



An interview

Querying collected information against U.S. and international law enforcement and immigration databases. These databases include watchlists of suspected terrorists; immigration infraction records; and local, state, and federal law enforcement records.



In many cases, the security screening and vetting process starts hundreds of miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border. For example, under their policy of “controlled flow,” [Costa Rican and Panamanian authorities](#) monitor migrants who transit northbound through their countries, collecting biometric information (i.e., fingerprints and retina scans) of suspicious individuals to run against international and U.S. security databases. These immigration agencies share the results with the U.S. government, which conducts a screening against security databases and sends back information about whether an individual has a criminal background or is a fugitive or known or suspected terrorist. Costa Rican and Panamanian authorities may detain and remove individuals flagged to be potential security threats.



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Resources Box

National Bureau of Economic Research, [*Law-Abiding Immigrants: The Incarceration Gap Between Immigrants and the US-born, 1870-2020*](#), March 2024

Proceedings of the National Academy of Social Sciences, [*Comparing Crime Rates Between Undocumented Immigrants, Legal Immigrants, and Native-Born US Citizens in Texas*](#), December 2020

Brennan Center for Justice, [*Debunking the Myth of the 'Migrant Crime Wave'*](#), May 2024.

The Marshall Project, [*Is There a Connection Between Undocumented Immigrants and Crime?*](#), May 2019

Criminology, [*Does Undocumented Immigration Increase Violent Crime?*](#), May 2017

CATO Institute, [*Illegal Immigrant Murderers in Texas, 2013-2022*](#), June 2024

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