

# Key Findings from Research on Immigration and Crime, Sanctuary Communities, “Open Borders,” and Harm to Migrants

September 18, 2024

Compiled by Daniel G. Saunders, Ph.D., [saunddan@umich.edu](mailto:saunddan@umich.edu), 734-476-0924

## MAIN POINTS

The following points are based on scientific studies and a few media summaries.

- Many studies conducted over the past 150 years are quite consistent: Contrary to popular belief, both authorized and unauthorized immigrants have crime rates equal to or lower than those born in the U.S. These findings hold true for immigrants from Mexico ([Abramitzky et al., 2024](#); [Adelman et al., 2021](#); [Chouhy & Madero-Hernandez, 2020](#); [Green, 2016](#); [Kubrin & Ousey, 2023](#); [Light, He & Robey, 2020](#); [Light & Miller, 2018](#); [Martínez & Rumbaut, 2015](#); [Ousey & Kubrin, 2018](#); [Ramos & Alaniz, 2024](#)).
- Some studies focus on homicides. Immigrants, whether authorized or unauthorized, have lower homicide rates than people born in the U.S. In a study of two border cities, homicides decreased as immigration increased ([Martinez et al., 2015](#); [Nowrasteh, 2024a](#); [Orrick et al., 2021](#); [Ousey & Kubrin, 2013](#)).
- In a study of all 50 states, increased unauthorized immigration over 14 years was not related to terrorist attacks, radicalization, or terrorism prosecutions ([Light & Thomas, 2021](#)).
- “Sanctuary communities” are as safe as other communities. They are likely to decrease crime because immigrant victims are much more willing to call the police ([Dhingra, Kilborn & Woldemikael, 2022](#); [Martínez-Schuldt & Martínez, 2021](#); [Martínez, Martínez-Schuldt & Cantor, 2018](#); [O’Brien et al., 2019](#); [Otsu, 2021](#); [Wong, 2017](#); [Wong et al., 2020](#)).
- One study found that the Secure Communities program, in which local law enforcement cooperates with ICE, increased deportation rates but did not reduce violent or property offenses ([Hines & Peri, 2019](#)).
- Although there is no connection between crime and unauthorized immigration, the media almost always depicts immigrants as criminals. One study found that White viewers who watched threatening crime news of unauthorized immigrants were more likely than others to want harsher sentencing ([Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro, 2019](#)).
- Despite calls to close “open borders,” the U.S. has not had open borders since the 1920s. Reports indicate that the border is well fortified ([Contreras, 2023](#); [Jones, 2024](#)).
- Policies during the Trump administration led to long-lasting trauma for children separated from their parents ([Hampton, 2021](#); [Teicher, 2018](#)). The Trump administration’s “return to Mexico policy” forced asylum-seekers back to Mexico to await their hearings. That placed them in extreme danger. At least one in 70 people

forced to return reported being victims of rape, kidnapping, assault, and other crimes in Mexico ([Hampton, 2021](#); [Human Rights First, 2019](#); [Loweree, 2019](#)).

- Policy-makers can help prevent homicides by immigrants by supporting social service and law enforcement practices that welcome immigrants. These homicides will not be prevented through deportations, further criminalizing immigrants or banning sanctuary communities ([Martínez & Rumbaut, 2015](#); [Nowrasteh, 2024b](#)). Research studies do nothing to comfort the loved ones of those brutally murdered, but they can be used to create policies that will help keep everyone safe.