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Are Immigrants Prone to Crime and Terrorism?

Donald Trump portrays immigration as a threat to public safety, but research paints a very different picture.



New U.S. citizens, among 200 immigrants from 37 countries, raise hands as they are sworn in for a special U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization Flag Day ceremony on Tuesday.

Bebeto Matthews / AP

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Omar Mateen's killing of 49 people at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, has fueled an angry national debate on homegrown Islamist radicals, gun control, and violence against the LGBT community, but it has also intensified debate over immigration.

"The only reason the killer was in America in the first place is because we allowed his family to come here," Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, said Monday.

Trump hasn't been shy about his policy prescription for preventing terrorism in the U.S. Soon after the attacks in San Bernardino, which were carried out by a Chicago-born man and his Pakistan-born wife, last December, [he demanded](#) a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on." And in the month before that, when the Islamic State claimed the Paris attacks, he repeated a discredited claim that "thousands" of Muslims in the U.S. cheered the attacks of September 11, 2001, adding he would support some sort of registry of Muslims in the U.S.—a claim he and his supporters reiterated after Sunday's attack.

Nor are Muslim immigrants to the U.S. the sole focus of Trump's ire. He famously described Mexicans coming to the U.S. as "people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."

But in terms of both crime and terrorism, immigrants are not the problem Trump says they are.

[Study after study after study](#) bears out mostly the last part of his remarks:

Immigrants largely commit crimes at a lower rate than the local-born population.

Those numbers are true even of the children of immigrants. Writing in the *Oxford Handbook of Crime and Criminal Justice*, Sandra M. Bucerius, an associate professor at the University of Alberta, noted:

Second-generation immigrants typically have higher crime rates than first-generation immigrants. In the US context, however, most second-generation immigrants continue to enjoy lower crime rates than the native-born population. In stark contrast, research findings in European countries indicate that some second-generation immigrant groups have crime rates that drastically exceed those of the native-born population.

I asked Bucerius about immigrants and *crime* (not terrorism), and she told me that though most studies do not differentiate among different immigrant groups, researchers do know there are some “immigrant groups in every Western country that we have data on that [are] more criminally involved than the average.”

“We also know,” she said, “that those groups always experience social, economic and/or political exclusion higher than the average. This does not imply that all immigrants who are socially excluded become criminals. Yet, exclusion and discrimination seem to be a risk factor.”

Bucerius points out that that while studies point broadly toward lower crime rates among immigrants and their children, these studies do not—and often cannot—speak to differences across different ethnic or religious groups. For instance, she says, there are no studies that compare crime rates among Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

“What we can say is that—in some European countries— like Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, or France, we see a disproportionate number of second-generation immigrants involved in crime who are likely Muslim,” she said. “However, for these groups in particular, we need to take the very problematic history of guest-worker integration into account, and consider the highly problematic relationship between France and Algeria [and] forced secularism.”

Bucerius spent five years studying predominantly Muslim Turkish, Moroccan, and Albanian drug dealers in Germany, and the resulting book—*Unwanted: Muslim Immigrants, Dignity and Drug Dealing*—examines how different policies and exclusion practices cause and foster alienation among immigrants communities. For instance, she points out, most second-generation immigrants born in Germany in the 1970s, '80s, '90s are not German citizens.

“They were born and raised in a country that they could never become citizens of, and constantly live with the fear of deportation,” she said.

That’s certainly not the case for American-born men like Mateen and Syed Rizwan Farook, the San Bernardino shooter. Both were American citizens and for all outward appearances were living the American dream. To the casual observer, Mateen was all-American: He was born in New York to Afghan immigrants and lived in Port St. Lucie, Florida. He was described as a practicing, but not radical, Muslim. He earned an associates degree in criminal justice in 2006, and got a job with GS4, a private-security company. He even got married in 2009 and bought a house. But a few years later, things began to fall apart. In 2011, he got divorced—his ex-wife has described a violent man who beat her. In 2013 and 2014, the FBI questioned Mateen in two separate terrorism-related investigations, both of which were closed for lack of evidence. And in the aftermath of the attacks on Pulse, the nightclub in Orlando, there were conflicting, though perhaps not contradictory, reports about his sexual orientation: Mateen’s father said the shooter had been [angry at the sight](#) of two men kissing, while [witnesses say he was a regular](#) at the gay club where he killed 49 people.

And for the most part, until the attacks of September 11, 2001, Muslim Americans were relatively well integrated into U.S. society and many were [reliable Republican voters](#). But the attacks prompted scrutiny of the community—even if none of the attackers were immigrants—and [distrust has only grown since then](#). That sense of exclusion and alienation, Bucerius says, could be perceived by Muslim Americans in the years since the attacks of 2001.

“In the U.S., we need to remember the backlash that the Arab-American community has experienced post-9/11 and the everyday securitization not just by the state, but also by non-state actors [like] the neighbor calling the police because he believes the man next to him is a terrorist, the kid who gets arrested in school because his self-made clock is mistaken as bomb,” she said.

Indeed, while some of recent attacks in the U.S. that have been committed in the name of the Islamic State might have been the work of second-generation immigrants, first-generation immigrants themselves commit such acts at far lower rates. [Data from the New America Foundation](#) found about two-thirds of extremists were U.S. born citizens (80 percent were either U.S.-born or naturalized citizens).

“Empirically, domestic terrorism is carried out by citizens—not immigrants—with right-wing terrorism, racial hate crimes, and the sovereign-citizen movement making up a majority of domestic terrorist incidents,” Joel Day, assistant professor of security and global studies at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, [told PolitiFact](#). “Other domestic incidents have indeed been carried out by those who came here through legal channels.”

That’s one reason the Obama administration has refused to label the actions of groups like ISIS “radical Islam.” President Obama said Tuesday calling it that will ultimately only benefit terrorist groups.

“Groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda want to make this war a war between Islam and America or between Islam and the West,” he said. “They want to claim that they are the true leaders of over a billion Muslims around the world who reject their crazy notions. They want us to validate them by implying that they speak for those billion-plus people, that they speak for Islam. That’s their propaganda. That’s how they recruit. And if we fall into the trap of painting all Muslims with a broad brush and imply that we are at war with an entire religion, then we are doing the terrorist’s work for them.”

Propaganda—of the online variety—appears to have radicalized Mateen, but it's still unclear what prompted him to kill in the name of religion. Bucerius, who is also an executive member of the Canadian Research Network on Terrorism, Security, and Society, says researchers have identified four main reasons that can contribute to becoming alienated and committing terrorist actions: a sense of injustice or vicarious grievances; a sense of belonging/identity, which scholars identify as the primary reason for radicalization; a search for excitement, meaning, or glory; and some form of peer pressure.

Although the investigation is at an early stage, despite Mateen's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State, it appears unlikely that peer pressure was a factor in his actions. And although friends, family members, and his former wife have all spoken out about him—not altogether positively—their recollections don't fully explain why Mateen killed 49 people.

“We weren't aware of any action he is taking,” [his father said](#). “We are in shock like the whole country.”

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