

Chris Szablewski  
Race and Ethnicity in American Politics  
10/14/10

*Misconceptions about Violence and Undocumented Immigrants*

Keywords: Violence, Arizona, Undocumented Worker, Border, Discrimination, Violent Crime, Illegal Immigrants

Brief: This issue brief examines the perceived link between undocumented immigrants and criminal activity, with a primary focus on the states in the American Southwest. Many prominent American politicians have made claims about illegal immigrants and violent crime and these claims have been determined to be false in many cases.

Key Points

1. Undocumented Immigrants are often victims of violent crime rather than perpetrators due to the nature of their existence outside of the protections of American society.
2. Many border state politicians such as Arizona Governor Jan Brewer utilize public fears about undocumented immigrants in order to gain support for their objectives.
3. The actions of these politicians further degrade perceptions of undocumented workers and opens them to greater risks of hate crimes.
4. Suspicion about undocumented workers also arises from negative depictions in the media including movies
5. Undocumented immigrants have been the victims of violent crimes at the hands of citizens without any provocation.

Issue Brief: *Misconceptions about Violence and Undocumented Immigrants*

The border between the United States and Mexico is the most frequently crossed international border in the world. Approximately 350 million people cross the border legally

each year and millions more cross illegally. (Yoxall 519) It has become a way of life in American politics to raise alarms about the deluge of illegal immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America into the United States. This is especially true of those who hold more conservative viewpoints. Indeed, the question of border security and hard-line stances against undocumented immigrants has become a hallmark of the Republican Party. Increasingly, undocumented workers have been accused of many evils existing in American society. While there are huge issues with many immigrant stereotypes, the erroneous belief that illegal immigrants bring with them increased violent crime is the most troubling and is the most easily debunked. Not only is there no correlation between undocumented immigrants and violent crime but in many instances illegal immigrants are the victims and not the perpetrators as is popularly believed.

The stereotype of undocumented workers as criminals follows a long history of the identification of immigrants and outsiders with criminals and other unsavory characters. This belief that undocumented workers bring violence and crime is often played upon by proponents of imposition stricter immigration laws. They have been blamed for many crimes throughout the Border States and have gone so far as to draw the continued ire of the Governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer. In addition to her support of the passage of strict laws against undocumented workers, Brewer had maintained that decapitated bodies had turned up Arizona's deserts as a result of border violence caused by illegal immigration. She had made this



Source: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/09/03/politics/main6833851.shtml>

claim in the context of an interview on Fox News where she also said that she had taken a tough

stance against illegal immigration because of "the kidnappings and the extortion and the beheadings and the fact that people can't feel safe in their community" Later, when her statements about the beheadings did not stand up to fact checks, the governor was forced to retract what she had said. (CBS News) This is simply one more instance where political fervor has led to misconceptions about undocumented workers. Additionally, undocumented workers and Latinos in general are often stereotyped as being involved in the drug trade. This has been seen in depictions of Latinos as members of drug gangs in movies such as *Scarface*, *Carlito's Way*, and *Traffic*, show drug gangs and violence prevalent in Latino communities. (Ousey 450-451) Indeed, in one study into Latinos and drug trafficking, Martinez (2002) reports evidence that Latinos are not over-involved in drug- and gang-related violence. (451)



Source [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/29/colorado-immigration-issu\\_n\\_789175.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/29/colorado-immigration-issu_n_789175.html)

As previously stated, border violence is often the result of violence committed against illegal immigrants. Over the course of the late twentieth century there was an increase in vigilante activity throughout the Southwest. Vigilante groups comprised of ranchers formed in California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. These groups “operated in a legal and moral shade of grey” and while they operated within a legal framework on the one hand, “On the other hand, these groups were motivated by racist, xenophobic agendas and often used violent and abusive tactics that were beyond any permissible self-help privileges.” (Yoxall 519) Indeed, there have been numerous cases of violence inflicted against unarmed border crossers by overzealous ranchers and other inhabitants. In 1972, Kenneth Adami, a rancher, shot and killed five undocumented Mexican immigrants who entered his abandoned hunting shack in order to

escape the cold. More recently, two illegal immigrants were shot and killed after running away from a man at whose trailer they had stopped to ask for water after walking in 105 degree weather. (Yoxall 529) Due to the rural nature of the crossing points, it is impossible to know how many undocumented immigrants have suffered at the hands of vigilantes. It is also difficult to gauge the hardships many face if they survive the journey, as they must contend with possible unsavory characters who brought them across the border and unscrupulous employers. It can therefore be seen that undocumented workers are prime targets for not only violent crime but crime in general.

Overall, there are many misconceptions about the role of undocumented workers in American society. Many portray them as criminals who bring violence and instability with them; however, evidence suggests otherwise and undocumented workers may actually be more likely to be victims of crime.



Source <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2007/winter/immigration-backlash>

### *Sources Cited*

"Jan Brewer: I Made "Error" in Beheadings Claim - CBS News." *Breaking News Headlines: Business, Entertainment & World News - CBS News*. 3 Sept. 2010. Web. 14 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/09/03/politics/main6833851.shtml>>.

Ousey, G., & Kubrin, C.. (2009). Exploring the Connection between Immigration and Violent Crime Rates in U.S. Cities, 1980-2000. *Social Problems*, 56(3), 447-473. Retrieved October 14, 2010, from ABI/INFORM Global.

Peter Yoxall, "The Minuteman Project, Gone in a Minute or Here to Stay? The Origin, History and Future of Citizen Activism on the United States-Mexico Border." *The University of Miami Inter-American Law Review* Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring - Summer, 2006), pp. 517-566  
Published by: Joe Christensen, Inc. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40176628>

### *General Sources*

<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2007/winter/immigration-backlash>

<http://www.maldef.org/immigration/>