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SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION: The Truth About Kidnapping in Arizona

An oft-repeated claim in the debate over Arizona's harsh anti-immigrant law, SB 1070, is that tough immigration-enforcement measures are needed to prevent violent crime from engulfing the state. In particular, supporters of SB 1070 often cite kidnappings in the state's capital, Phoenix, as a reason to crack down on unauthorized immigrants. Arizona politicians such as U.S. Senator [John McCain](#)¹ and State Senator [Russell Pearce](#),² for instance, have justified their calls for more immigration enforcement by claiming that Phoenix is the "the number two kidnapping capital of the world" after Mexico City. Not only is this claim false, but it ignores two inconvenient facts. First of all, the *victims* of most kidnappings in Phoenix are unauthorized immigrants. Second, crime rates in Arizona have been falling for years. Cracking down on the unauthorized immigrants upon whom so many kidnappers prey is a classic case of blaming the victim. Moreover, this blame-the-victim posture diverts attention from the fact that the broken U.S. immigration system has *created* a lucrative market for kidnappers.

The claim that Phoenix is "the number two kidnapping capital of the world" is untrue.

- According to [PolitiFact Texas](#), the global data upon which such a comparison might be made does not exist. The definition of "kidnapping" varies from place to place, and many kidnappings go unreported to local law-enforcement authorities.³
- The experts whom PolitiFact consulted speculated that, if there were such data, other cities in Latin America, Africa, and Asia "would prove to have more kidnappings than Arizona's capital."⁴

Most of the kidnappings that do occur in Phoenix are of undocumented immigrants.

- As Terry Greene Sterling describes in her book [*Illegal: Life and Death in Arizona's Immigration War Zone*](#), most of the kidnapping victims in Phoenix are unauthorized immigrants held for ransom by the smugglers (*coyotes*) they hire to bring them to the United States.⁵ These are "drop house" kidnappings in which "incoming migrants at the border are baited with low smuggling fares. Those low fares are ramped up by thousands of dollars once the migrants are held at gunpoint in a drop house."⁶
- "Drop house" kidnappings are distinct from "home invasion" kidnappings, "in which kidnappers abduct rich individuals, like drug dealers or human smugglers, or their family members."⁷

Crime rates are falling in Arizona.

- Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicate that rates for both property crime and violent crime (including murder, assault, and rape) have [fallen](#) in Arizona in recent years,⁸ including in the state's three [largest cities](#): Phoenix, Tucson, and Mesa.⁹
- An investigation by *The Arizona Republic* found that crime rates in Arizona border towns have remained [flat](#) for the past decade despite the surge in unauthorized immigration.¹⁰

The root cause of many kidnappings in Phoenix is a broken immigration system.

- The federal government has been trying for decades, [without success](#), to forcibly impose arbitrary numerical limits on immigration that bear no relationship to the economic and social realities that drive immigration.¹¹ The result has been unauthorized immigration that creates lucrative markets for both people smugglers and kidnappers.
- Were Congress and the White House to reform our immigration system to better match reality, unauthorized immigration would slow to a trickle, the market for people smugglers would dry up, and kidnappers would no longer have a large pool of vulnerable immigrants to hold for ransom.

Endnotes

¹ *Meet the Press* [transcript](#) for June 27, 2010.

² E.J. Montini, "[Perception trumps reality, again, on immigration](#)," *The Arizona Republic*, June 30, 2009.

³ PolitiFact Texas, "[McCain says Phoenix is the second kidnapping capital in the world](#)," June 28, 2010.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Terry Greene Sterling, *Illegal: Life and Death in Arizona's Immigration War Zone* (Guilford, CN: Lyons Press, 2010, p. 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Walter Ewing, [Arizona's Punishment Doesn't Fit the Crime](#) (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Council, June 22, 2010.

⁹ Walter Ewing, [New FBI Data Confirms Falling Crime Rates in Arizona](#) (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Council, June 17, 2010.

¹⁰ Dennis Wagner, "[Violence is not up on Arizona border despite Mexican drug war](#)," *The Arizona Republic*, May 2, 2010.

¹¹ Immigration Policy Center, [Breaking Down the Problems: What's Wrong with Our Immigration System?](#) (Washington, DC: American Immigration Council, October 2009).