

Truth Held Hostage: Dissecting the Lies about Kidnapping in Arizona

Arizona politicians who support the state's sweeping anti-immigrant law (SB 1070) are not particularly fond of facts. For instance, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer (R) has made all manner of ludicrous [statements](#) [1] about unauthorized immigrants typically carrying drugs, killing cops, and leaving headless bodies in the desert. But the most hypocritical of the anti-immigrant statements made by politicians such as Brewer concern kidnapping. Not only do Brewer and company pretend that kidnappers are lurking behind every corner in Arizona, but they usually neglect to mention that unauthorized immigrants are the primary *victims* of the kidnappings that do occur. In other words, the kidnapping of unauthorized immigrants is being used as a justification to crack down on unauthorized immigrants. This is a nonsensical policy that attacks the victims rather than the perpetrators of the crime.

The *reality* of most kidnappings in Arizona is captured in a new book by journalist Terry Greene Sterling, entitled [Illegal: Life and Death in Arizona's Immigration War Zone](#) [2]. Sterling recounts the terrifying experience of two unauthorized immigrants from Mexico—Rosario and Selestino—who were kidnapped for ransom by the smugglers (*coyotes*) they hired to bring them to the United States. After a five-day journey by foot through the desert, Rosario and Selestino, along with several other immigrants, were taken at gunpoint to a filthy “drop house” in a Phoenix suburb, told that the fee for smuggling them had nearly doubled, and threatened with death if they couldn't produce the extra money.

At one point, writes Sterling, a kidnapper named Vic forced Selestino into a closet and made him take off his clothes. Then, “as Selestino stood nude in the closet, Vic said: *If you try to run away, I will kill you, and I will cut your corpse into small pieces and dispose of them. This would not be the first time I've done such a thing, and it will certainly not be the last.*” Fortunately, Rosario, Selestino, and the other imprisoned immigrants were rescued after three days when Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents raided the drop house. Rosario and Selestino were allowed to temporarily live and work in the United States in exchange for testifying against their kidnappers in court.

This grim scenario is typical of kidnappings in Arizona, but supporters of SB 1070 would have you believe that the average Arizonan is in danger of being plucked off the street and held hostage at any moment. For example, Arizona State Senator Russell Pearce (R-Mesa), who introduced SB 1070, [writes](#) [3] that “Phoenix runs second in the world in kidnappings and third in the United States for violence. Arizona has become the home-invasion, carjacking, identity-theft capital of the nation.” These sentiments have been echoed by Governor Brewer and Senator John McCain (R-AZ), both of whom have resorted to anti-immigrant demagoguery in a cynical attempt to reverse their declining political fortunes. Governor Brewer [argued](#) [4] that she simply had to sign SB 1070 into law because “we cannot stand idly by as drop houses, kidnappings and violence compromise our quality of life.” Similarly, Senator McCain [asked](#) [5] rhetorically on *Meet the Press*, “why is it that Phoenix, Arizona, is the number two kidnapping capital of the world? Does that mean our border's safe? Of course not.”

Not surprisingly, the claim that Phoenix ranks second in the world for kidnapping is untrue. According to [PolitiFact Texas](#) [6], the global data upon which such a comparison might be made simply does not exist. And the experts whom PolitiFact consulted also 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.” Moreover, a police sergeant in Phoenix has [alleged](#) [7] recently that the Phoenix Police Department is inflating its kidnapping statistics; perhaps as a way to obtain federal stimulus funds.

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It is also patently untrue that Arizonans are suffering from a surge in violence. In fact, the rates for both property crime and violent crime (including murder, assault, and rape) have [fallen](#) [8] in Arizona in recent years, including in the state's three [largest cities](#) [9]: Phoenix, Tucson, and Mesa. Crime rates in Arizona border towns have remained [flat](#) [10] for the past decade despite the surge in unauthorized immigration. In addition, a 2008 [report](#) [11] from the conservative Americas Majority Foundation found that crime rates in general are *lowest* in states with the *highest* immigration growth rates, including Arizona.

Politicians such as Pearce, Brewer, and McCain have chosen to ignore these inconvenient facts; opting instead to scare Arizonans into voting for them by raising the phantom specter of immigrant violence. What these self-serving politicians are reluctant to admit is that unauthorized immigrants are among the most vulnerable of crime victims. Kidnappers, robbers, and other criminals know that unauthorized immigrants are highly unlikely to go to the police for fear of deportation. That is why unauthorized immigrants are [targeted](#) [12] for kidnapping and other crimes in the first place.

Successfully combating the criminals who prey upon unauthorized immigrants requires the building of *more* trust between immigrants and the police, not less. Yet the undermining of trust between police and the immigrant community is precisely what SB 1070 accomplishes by recruiting local police into immigration enforcement. And one need look no further than Arizona's Maricopa County and Sheriff [Joe Arpaio](#) [13] for an example of how turning local police into immigration agents detracts from actual crime fighting. While Maricopa County has diverted resources to immigration enforcement, response times to 911 calls have increased, arrest rates have dropped, and thousands of felony warrants have not been served. Is this what Pearce, Brewer, and McCain are hoping to accomplish for Arizona as a whole?

What SB 1070's supporters are apparently unable to grasp is that unauthorized immigrants have been driven into the waiting arms of smugglers—and kidnappers—by more than a decade and a half of failed [border-enforcement](#) [14] initiatives which have been implemented in the absence of immigration reform. According to survey data gathered by a research team at the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego, [91 percent](#) [15] of unauthorized immigrants from Yucatan, Mexico, who were interviewed in 2009 had hired a coyote to help them enter the United States across an increasingly fortified border. Moreover, thanks to the reliance upon smugglers, [97 percent](#) [16] of migrants from Yucatan eventually made it into the United States. This provides easy prey to kidnappers masquerading as coyotes. Yet the SB 1070 non-solution to this problem is to crack down on the victims of the kidnappers.

The root of the problem is a [broken](#) [17] U.S. immigration system, not unauthorized immigrants themselves. 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 in the first place. The predictable result has been unauthorized immigration that creates lucrative markets for both people smugglers and kidnappers. Were Congress and the White House to actually reform our immigration system to match the realities of the modern world, 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.

Of course, were that to happen, politicians such as Pearce, Brewer, and McCain could no longer score political points by crowing about kidnapping without mentioning who is actually being kidnapped—or why. Given the outcomes of the recent Republican Party primary elections in Arizona, however, that is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Brewer and McCain gained a considerable amount of electoral traction by demonizing immigrants, which will no doubt inspire other politicians hoping to ride an anti-immigrant wave into public office.

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[1] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/09/AR2010070902342.html>
[2] http://www.globepequot.com/individual_book_page.php?isbn13=9781599218618
[3] <http://www.azcentral.com/members/Blog/EJMontini/56598>
[4] http://azgovernor.gov/dms/upload/PR_042310_StatementByGovernorOnSB1070.pdf
[5] http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37943252/ns/meet_the_press-transcripts/
[6] <http://www.politifact.com/texas/statements/2010/jun/28/john-mccain/mccain-says-phoenix-second-kidnapping-capital-world/>
[7] <http://www.kpho.com/news/24668841/detail.html>
[8] http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/.../default/files/docs/Arizona_Punishment_Doesnt_Fit_the_Crime_042810_0.pdf
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