

## McGarrity: Trump and the Exaggerated Problem of - Log Cabin Democrat (Conway, AR) - April 5, 2017 - page 1

April 5, 2017 | Log Cabin Democrat (Conway, AR) | Joe McGarrity; Columnist

Psychologists have found that people are typically very bad at determining the risk involved in most situations. For instance, most of us believe that tornadoes kill more people than asthma, even though asthma is responsible for 20 times more deaths than tornados. People believe that gun violence causes more deaths than suicides, but the opposite is true. People also believe that flying is more dangerous than driving, even though you are 100 times more likely to die driving on a long trip than flying on a large commercial airline.

These systematic mistakes occur because people are barraged by images of these less likely events. A tornado is sensational news so it will be covered on the front page of the newspaper. Asthma, on the other hand, does not make for an interesting news story so its effects do not make it into the newspaper. When a plane crashes, it is always the lead story on the nightly news. In contrast, traffic accidents are too commonplace to be discussed during the TV news broadcasts.

Research in Psychology has found that people estimate the risk of a situation by reflecting on how easily examples of an occurrence come to mind. Because people have read so many news stories about tornadoes, they believe that this natural phenomenon is commonplace. What has actually happened is that people have read about every tornado in their area because every one of these tornadoes makes the newspaper. Because people are exposed to so many examples of unlikely events, such as tornadoes, they believe that the events are common. In contrast, because people do not read about the much more common occurrences, like deaths from asthma, people cannot recall examples of these deaths, so they believe that they are rare.

A systematic mistake in assessing risk has entered our political debate. Donald Trump has gained a lot of political popularity by claiming that illegal immigrants are much more dangerous than typical Americans are. Many people believe this — since any murders committed by illegal immigrants will get extensive media coverage now that Trump has brought this issue to people's attention. During the campaign, Donald Trump made sure that many American voters were aware of the tragic death of Kate Steinle by an illegal immigrant. Because individual examples of violence by illegal immigrants will continue to be so widely reported, most citizens will be able to recall several examples of violence committed by this group. Therefore, people will believe the likelihood of an illegal immigrant committing a murder is much higher than it actually is.

Research has shown that immigrants are more law abiding and less violent than the typical American. For instance, immigrants are much less likely to be jailed for crimes than native-born Americans. While reassuring, this research has also focused on immigrants, not on illegal immigrants. As you can imagine, it is impossible to get good numbers on illegal immigrants, since these people are trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Without these numbers, it would not be proper to just assume that the behavior patterns of immigrants are the same as they are for illegal immigrants. We just do not know. What I do know — is that the risk posed by illegal immigrants is much less than people generally assume. The over-reporting and sensationalism that surrounds actions by illegal immigrants will make the American public believe that this group of people is much more dangerous than it actually is. I suspect that both tornadoes and violence by illegal immigrants will continue to generate substantial news coverage, ensuring that people continue to believe that these events are much more likely to occur than the actual probabilities would suggest.

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Joe McGarrity is a professor of economics at the University of Central Arkansas. Contact him by email at [joem@uca.edu](mailto:joem@uca.edu).

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