# Fear factor: why are we so obsessed with “African crime”?

Christopher Pyne was recently asked if he felt afraid on the streets of Melbourne. His response was “no, why?”.

Good question, Christopher. Why should anyone feel afraid in Melbourne? After all, it’s one of the safest cities in the world. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, only Tokyo, Singapore, Osaka, and Toronto are less dangerous.

Contrary to what Peter Dutton would have you believe, Melbourne does not have a problem with law and order. The Victorian Crime Statistics Agency reckons that, in a typical year, 97% of Melburnians will experience zero crime.

Not only is crime rare in the Victorian capital, but crime committed by immigrants is rarer still. Less than one-third of offenders are born outside Australia. And crime committed by a particular subset of immigrants–Sudanese youth, for instance–is so rare as to barely warrant a mention.

Nonetheless, we mention it plenty. Some of our nation’s most prominent voices are doing their best to whip up a moral panic about “African crime”. Everyone from the Prime Minister down seems to have jumped on this ugly, xenophobic bandwagon.

To put this issue into some much-needed perspective, let’s take a look at the statistics–not about crime, but about life in general. Based on the official data from 2012 to 2016, this is what an average year in Victoria looks like:

* 4,982 people are seriously injured in a car accident
* 2,024 people suffer a fatal heart attack
* 844 people fall to their deaths unintentionally
* 582 people commit suicide
* 333 people overdose on prescription drugs

You know how many Victorians, in an average year, get assaulted by a Sudanese youth? 41. In a state with 6.4 million inhabitants, that’s roughly 0.0006% of the population.

When you get behind the wheel of your car each morning, do you feel an overwhelming sense of fear? Probably not. So why on earth would you fear going out for dinner in Melbourne? You’re a thousand times more likely to get mangled in a car accident than to have a run-in with your local chapter of the Apex gang.

In this analysis, it makes no difference whether Sudanese immigrants are overrepresented in the crime statistics. We’re simply comparing the frequencies of one event versus another. The fact is, of all the misfortunes that might befall you on a given day in Melbourne, getting attacked by a kid from Africa is one of the least likely.

In a sane world, our fear of an event would correlate with the likelihood of the event happening. But humans aren’t wired that way. We’re prone to strange phobias and silly ideas.

Many of us harbour an irrational fear of flying, even though statistically it’s the safest way to travel. Conversely, many of us buy a lottery ticket each week, even though the odds are terrible compared to other forms of gambling.

As the psychologist Daniel Kahneman has noted, our failure to grapple with probabilities is what makes terrorism such an effective weapon. We live in constant fear of an event that almost never happens.

If we’re honest, we’ll admit that our current obsession with “African crime” belongs in the same basket of delusional and unjustified beliefs.

Tim Gregg is a freelance journalist based in Canberra. He blogs at Counterpoint and tweets at @\_TimGregg.