

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers
with Dr. Austin Kocher



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With Your Hosts

Tracie L. Morgan & Ashley Glimasinski

[Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care](#)

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Ashley: Learning is action. It may feel like you're not doing anything just by learning, but learning is the first step to maybe doing something later.

Tracie: Real learning doesn't mean always changing your opinion. It can, but not always. And sometimes, real learning is just realizing the issue is more complex than you first thought.

Austin: Learning is action. Taking care of your brain and getting good information in there is action. So I would just encourage folks to start in your state, start in your county, and just try to understand what's around you because if you start there, I promise you'll find a place that you feel like you can fit in and do the work that's meaningful to you.

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Tracie: Hi, I'm Tracie.

Ashley: And I'm Ashley.

Welcome to Hope In Action, where we offer clear insights, practical tools, and inspiring stories to navigate immigration with confidence, compassion, and faith.

Each week, we break down the law, share real-world examples, and help you speak up, live out your values, and make a difference in your community.

Whether you're looking to understand immigration through a faith-driven lens, have courageous conversations with those who matter to you, or take small steps toward justice, you're in the right place. Let's dive in.

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Ashley: Welcome back to Hope In Action. I'm Ashley.

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

Tracie: And I'm Tracie.

Ashley: Last episode, we asked a pretty big question. If we could build a better, a more humane immigration system, what would it look like? Today we're asking a different question. How did we end up with the immigration system we have now? Because if you listen to immigration debates today, it can sound like everything that's happened is brand new. The politics feel unprecedented. The headlines feel new, the outrage feels new. But so many of these conversations have happened before.

Tracie: I'll tell you what. Every week, someone asks me a version of the same question. Why don't people just come legally? Or why don't they wait their turn? Or has immigration ever been this bad before? And those are fair questions, but they assume something that actually isn't true. They assume that the rules have always looked like they do today, and they honestly haven't.

Ashley: One of the things that I love about history is that it reminds us that nothing is inevitable. And as Ecclesiastes says, there is nothing new under the sun. The systems we inherit were built by people and often they're just iterations of something similar that we saw in the past. That means these systems have been tried before. They were changed over time and they can change again. Today we're going to spend a little time looking backward before we spend the rest of the season looking forward.

Tracie: I'm excited about that. So, God commands us to remember our own story. I think about Deuteronomy 10 verses 17 through 19, which says, "For the Lord your God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt." What strikes me every time I read that passage is the reason that God gives. Not because welcoming

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

the foreigner is easy, not because it's politically convenient, but because remembering is what matters. God tells His people to remember their own story, to remember what it felt like to be vulnerable, displaced, and dependent on His provision. When we remember our history, we understand the present differently.

Ashley: Most of us grew up hearing that America is a nation of immigrants. And that's true, but it's only part of the story. The fuller story is that America has always welcomed some immigrants while excluding others.

Tracie: And as an immigration attorney, I absolutely see this all of the time. People often imagine immigration law is one big rule book that's always existed. Instead, it's more like a patchwork quilt or honestly, a series of band-aids right now. Every generation has stitched on another piece, added another band-aid, and sometimes it's expanding opportunities, sometimes it's closing doors. And sometimes it's creating a new system of people all together.

Ashley: If you look back over American history, the question has almost never been, should we have immigration? The question has usually been who belongs? Who's desirable? Who's dangerous? Who's worthy? Those questions and the answers to them keep changing, and it kind of reminds me of when the lawyer asked Jesus in Matthew, who is my neighbor? And Jesus says, look around you. And the lawyer says, but that's too small of a group. So when I think about these questions of who belongs, who's desirable, I think of that story.

Tracie: That is such a good story. I think about that often too. And we are absolutely not going to try and cover 250 years of American history in five minutes. Instead, we can definitely recommend a helpful immigration timeline by the National Immigration Forum that you can check out after the show. There are a few moments that really shaped our immigration system though, and I feel like we should highlight those. And the first one I want to talk about is the Chinese

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

Exclusion Act of 1882. For the first time, the US government, the federal government said an entire nation was unwelcome. Not because of something they had done, but because of who they were, where they were born. A few decades later, we had the national origins quota. And that's when the US government decided some countries, primarily from Northern and Western Europe, deserve far more immigration visas than others. And these choices weren't random. They reflected ideas about race, ethnicity, and who the government felt like America should become.

Ashley: And then came World War II. One of the hardest parts of that history is remembering that many Jewish refugees tried to escape Nazi persecution and were turned away. We spoke last season about how in 1939, the US turned away a ship carrying 937 Jewish asylum seekers before that was even a recognized term from landing on our shores. There's other cases where children tried to be sponsored or Americans wanted to sponsor Jewish children and those visas were denied. So there's so many instances we see where we could have done better as a country. And that's the thing is that after the war, the US and the world collectively said never again. The world looked back at what had happened during the Holocaust and they asked a painful question. Could more people have been saved if countries had been willing to open their doors?

Tracie: And I think the answer to that has to be yes. But in response to that question, the international community, they created a new legal framework for protecting people who were fleeing persecution. And for the first time, refugee protection became an international obligation, not just an act of charity. It was something we were called to do.

Ashley: And even after signing on to these international frameworks, the US still used a patchwork of temporary immigration policies concerning refugees and asylum seekers from different backgrounds for the next 15 years. So it's like we

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

learned the lesson and then waited 15 years to actually put it into place. And then 15 years later, we finally did create a permanent and defined system, but we'll get to that in a moment. So after World War II, in 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the national quotas that Tracie had mentioned earlier. So instead of ranking immigrants based on where they came from, the law shifted toward family reunification and employment-based immigration. And that's still the backbone of our legal immigration system today.

And like we said earlier, finally, 15 years after that, after 1965, so we're talking about 1980 now, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, bringing the US law into line with those international commitments it had made after World War II. It created the modern refugee and asylum framework that we, both Tracie and I work with every day. And when someone applies for asylum in the United States today, they're using a legal system that grew directly out of the lessons the world said it learned after World War II.

Tracie: And this is exactly where it all comes into play today. I deal with the Immigration and Nationality Act. I deal with the Refugee Act. And so when people talk about illegal immigration, they often are talking about it as though it's always existed in its current form, and it just hasn't. Modern immigration enforcement, visa overstays, employer sections, expanded border enforcement, these have all developed over time. And the legal categories we use today weren't handed down from the very beginning of our country. They were created through legislation and many of them over just the last 60 years.

Ashley: Wow, the last 60 years. And I think about how recent that is for these frameworks that we expect to just uphold our system. I can't believe how recent that is. And that it brings us back to scripture too, is that one of the things scripture does so well is remind us that laws matter, but so does the posture of our hearts. And throughout the Old Testament, God repeatedly calls His people to remember

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

their own history as strangers. That memory was supposed to shape the way they treated the people living among them. And history doesn't answer every question, but it does remind us of something important. The categories we use today, like legal, illegal, refugee, asylum seeker, those are legal categories, but not moral categories. They're products of our history and of the policy decisions that came out of that history.

Tracie: And once you realize that, you start asking different questions. Instead of asking, why is the system like this, you start asking, who built it this way? And is it actually working? You see numbers about immigration and you wonder what that data is actually showing us. What's happening behind the statistics? And that's where today's guest comes in.

Ashley: Dr. Austin Kocher is a research fellow at American University and president of Relevant Research. He studies immigration in a way that's really pretty unique. He's interested in the machinery behind the headlines, the data, the detention system, the enforcement agencies, and the places where right now, a lot of that information is missing. And what those gaps can tell us. So Austin, welcome to Hope In Action.

Austin: Thanks for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

Ashley: Austin, you spend your career studying immigration data. When you step back from all the spreadsheets, the reports, and the government databases, what's the biggest story that the numbers tell that most Americans never hear?

Austin: Sure. I mean, I think that the story that most people don't understand isn't really about what the numbers say. It's about what the data that we have is and what's available. On the one hand, this administration has made some of the reporting worse than it's been in the past and less available. We're seeing for deaths in civil custody, for instance, the reports on those are shorter than they've ever

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

been, both the press releases and the what are called death reports that the agency is required to publish publicly and provide to Congress. Those are getting shorter, so we have less information about what happened to these tragedies in detention. An agency that was stood up over the past decade with tremendous effort from both Republicans and Democrats called the Office of Homeland Security Statistics. That agency has provided incredible, detailed, non-partisan data over the past several years that's been used by people across the political spectrum. That office has been gutted, their reports have been choked off, and in fact, just last week, my longtime colleague, Mark, who ran that agency, who's who's been an incredible immigration scholar and data analyst for a long time, stepped down because of frustrations with lack of independence from that office in the administration. And the most recent legislation that was passed along party lines that funded DHS also cut out a provision that required the agency to previously published data on people in custody, in detention.

So there are a lot of sources of data that are not being provided anymore. At the same time, we've never had better data than we've have right now. We've never had such detailed immigration data as what is available in the public domain. There are organizations like the one that I used to work at, TRAC at Syracuse University, which is no longer at the university, which has continues to produce reports and make data available on the immigration court system, immigration enforcement, the deportation data project is making enormous volumes of data available to us that allows us to really look in tremendous detail at what's going on.

And so the real story is that thanks to 20 or 30 years of academic research and litigation and organizations really starting to understand the power of data, we actually have more data than we've ever had before, and it enables, you know, folks like myself and others to paint a picture of what's going on in a way that we wouldn't have been able to five years ago if the data had been cut off from the

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

federal government. We couldn't do the work that we do now. So we're living in a period of contradictions in that regard. And so in some ways, one of the most important stories to tell isn't just about what the data says, it's about the incredible progress that we've made as a research community even at the same time that our legislators are and the current administration and agencies are producing less than they ever have.

Tracie: So, I guess my question to follow up with that is, what do you do with this data? How do you get it out to people and get them to care about it?

Austin: Yeah, I mean, the thing that I love most about the work that I get to do is, you know, from an academic perspective, you're not always interested in how you communicate findings to the public. You're really interested in doing very deep dive kinds of analysis, which I still do. But you know, that is less and less satisfying to me because that kind of work doesn't always create change, right? So one of the things that I've been motivated to do in the past several years across, again, Republican and Democratic administrations, is to get the data and to figure out, you know, what the story is here. And most often, I mean, there's so many stories that data tell and I think there's sometimes an artificial distinction made between like what the data says and what like happens in the real world or what, you know, stories or that kind of thing.

But the truth is that individual stories, including your clients, Tracie, you know, their individual experiences are part, they're partially captured by these administrative data sets. And so you can combine narrative storytelling with attorneys and organizers and family members and journalists, and you can put that in the context of data. And so, you know, that's a lot of what I try to do. So when it comes to, you know, looking at the data, it's a lot of information management, it's a lot of data management. You know, there's a lot of technical work that has to be

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

done on the back end because the data sets are huge, right? It's not just about opening up an Excel sheet. It's like managing millions and millions of records.

But really what it comes down to is having the experience of both understanding what these institutions look like from the inside. Most people don't know this, I'm actually a qualitative researcher, not a quantitative researcher. My background is in political and social theory and qualitative ethnographic interviewing. I spent several years across the US South interviewing sheriffs and police chiefs and law enforcement officials and attorneys to try to understand what immigration enforcement looked like and that was all qualitative. But what I realized in the course of doing that was when you get your hands on government records, whether it's paper records, files, or if it's actually, you know, data, is it allows you to do something that nothing else really allows you to do, which is to say, when the government says X and you look at the data, does the data say X or does the data say Y?

And very often, again, across, you know, it's not really a partisan thing. Very often the story is saying, look, the government's saying it's doing this, but it's doing that, and then trying to write that up and make that legible, as well as just trying to bring people into the story of data. People who might be, you know, be a little nervous around numbers. You know, a lot of lawyers are like, well, I didn't go to law school to like learn math, right? But, you know, bringing people and showing people, actually, you are able to do this yourself. You don't have to just trust me. Let me show you how to sort of find those answers for yourself as well. And that's a big part of what I try to do.

Ashley: Austin, I'm so curious. You mentioned that the government isn't providing as much data as they used to and so you and others like you, organizations have stepped up in the last couple of years. So I guess in some way we can almost thank the government for not giving us as much because it's really beefed up our, you

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

know, maybe underground system or researchers like you. But where are you getting data from? If it's not available from the government, how are you finding it? How are you pulling it together?

Austin: Sure. So, I would say the more government the data produces, the more we understand and the more we can ask for more. So, you know, whether it's feast or famine, we always stay busy. The records that we're looking at, the data that we're looking at are in government databases, right? And government databases are public records. But they're a specific kind of government record that we call administrative data. So if you think about your cell phone, you probably have an address book in your cell phone with names and numbers and maybe you have a note about where you met someone, email address, maybe, you know, the address, maybe that kind of thing. And you aren't putting that information into your contact book into your address book in your phone so that you can analyze it. You're doing it because it enables you to know who's calling for you to be able to call someone else and all of that, right?

So that's what government databases are. We wouldn't have an immigration system in the modern era if there weren't data systems, you know, that the government could rely on to know which detention center people are in and how many people are here, how many people are there. It's all for functional, you know, operational purposes. But they're still public records. So we can still get that data and it's data that they didn't necessarily intend for us to see, but it's also not data they didn't intend for us to see. It's not like that. It wasn't created, you know, for that purpose.

And so that data can come to us through two main ways. The government can proactively release it, or, I guess a subset of that, Congress can require the government to release it, which I believe that they should. Or we can request that data through public records requests. And if the government doesn't comply, we can litigate. We can take the government agencies to court and get a court to tell

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

them to release that data. And that's basically the method that has been pioneered by TRAC for decades and that increasingly other organizations are realizing, aha, this is a really important thing to do. It might not seem very exciting to try to just take agencies to court to get public records, but we've also realized that, you know, there's no sense in filing a lawsuit over detention conditions if you don't even know how many people are in detention and where they are and what the basic facts are.

So, you know, for a lot of folks, and this is something I'm doing with relevant research is supporting organizations, you know, who needs some outside expertise in this kind of process to say, you know, before you try to do this, you might actually want to try to get records first. And so that's leading to a lot more really helpful work. I mean, the one thing I would say is a lot of organizations who are doing this are not making their data public, unfortunately, because there's always a little bit of territorialness and protectiveness around records. So one thing I would say for anyone listening, if you are at one of these organizations, uh, you don't need to keep those records under lock and key, make those available to folks so we can have more public conversation about them. But yeah, that's that's kind of how we do it.

Tracie: Very cool. Thank you for that. And I want to say as a practicing immigration lawyer, I relied on TRAC to get information on asylum grants from specific immigration judges. Am I going to get someone who has a 40% denial rate or someone who has a 94% denial rate? And that was so helpful so that I knew what I was getting into going into that courtroom. And now I look at data and I see the number of people who are detained in civil detention centers and we're at record numbers over 60,000. And I know that there's been a breakdown of the number of people who have criminal arrest. It's not that many of them in reality. And I am curious from your perspective in the last year and a half or so, are there

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

certain numbers that give you pause or concern or have been surprising in this administration?

Austin: Yeah, it's a great question and that's one of the topics I've written about the most. You know, the administration has claimed that it's going after the worst of the worst, that the people it's arresting, that the agency is arresting is for national security and public safety reasons. And this is what justifies mass deportation. And so, you know, a big question on my mind, of course, as a researcher is, is this true? Does the data bear this out? And the short answer is no, it just it simply doesn't. And so this is one area where the data can do a lot for us, simply by saying, okay, if you're going after the worst of the worst, does that mean everybody the agency is arresting and detaining has a criminal conviction? The answer is no. In fact, what we've seen, the way that ICE tracks it is they have three categories of people. People who have no criminal history whatsoever, other than maybe an immigration violation or suspected immigration violation. One thing that I think surprises a lot of people, and again, this is the beauty of getting into data and why I love teaching students, even when it's a qualitative course, why I force students to get into the data is it forces you to define your terms because the data has very specific definitions and you have to know those definitions to make sense of it.

So in the immigration data, there's this category of other immigration violator, people with no other criminal history. What a lot of people don't know is that category, even that description is not really adequate. You can be in an ICE detention facility and have never violated any immigration law at all because there's so much discretion over people's immigration status and legal status in the country without any violation, you can still have that status revoked and that can make you deportable even if you may have actually not have, you know, violations. The second category are people with charges but not convictions, and then the third category is people with criminal convictions. And what we find is that last group,

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

the group that is the least threat to national security and public safety, that is the group that has grown tremendously under this administration.

In fact, over the past eight months, we've seen the other two people who actually have criminal history of some kind, they're basically flat. They haven't grown at all. All of the growth has come from this other category. Now, I would want to add here too that when the agency says criminal conviction, we're talking any criminal conviction, like stealing a candy bar all the way up to murder. Now, are there people who have been arrested and detained who have serious murder convictions or other types of, you know, assault convictions that I think most people would find reprehensible? Absolutely. I did a very careful study on Delaney Hall, which is a ICE detention facility that's received a lot of controversy recently, in which the DHS secretary said, we need this facility because, you know, we've got to get terrorists and the worst of the worst out of here.

I checked and I found, okay, about 0.9%, a little bit under a percent of people who have ever passed through Delaney Hall in the past year since it reopened, a little less than a percent do have what I think most people would consider pretty serious convictions. Whether or not that justifies deportation in each case, I'm not a judge or an attorney, but that's what the data says. Over 90% of those people don't have anything that comes close to anything that would amount to a public safety or national security conviction. And so it just helps you to put those claims in context when you're able to break it down.

Ashley: I feel like that's something maybe we should speak into really quickly too. When we think about the 90% who have no criminal convictions, and I can hear the voices of people I've heard before in my head and they're saying, well, they broke the law by coming illegally. You know, they overstayed a visa or they crossed the border and they shouldn't have. And, you know, they're here illegally and that's a criminal conviction, right? That's why they're being detained. And I

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

just want to speak quickly to that and say that crossing the border, I mean, Tracie, feel free to jump in here, but I believe it's just like a misdemeanor, right? It's not a felony, it's not a crime, it's not anything that's a criminal conviction.

Tracie: Right. So being in the United States without permission is not a crime. There are some exceptions, for example, if someone reenters unlawfully after a deportation order, then that can be criminally prosecuted. But for the most part, immigration, like you said, is a civil violation just like maybe speeding. So think about that, going into a detention center for who knows how long with possibly no chance of bond because you went five miles over the speed limit.

Austin: And I'd like to add something to that too, I think is super important is actually to stay for a second on that criminal breakdown because what I've said, look, my number one priority and I think the number one priority of all Americans, in my view, I hope, across the political spectrum is, I want our government to be honest and transparent. If you support this administration and you support these policies, you know, we can have that conversation, but let's at least agree to live in a world of fact. And so one of my arguments is, that's fine. If the administration, if this is what the administration is doing, that's fine. But then they have a responsibility to say to not on their social media page make it look like every single person that they're arresting is a violent criminal offender. If they're representing 5% of the people they're arresting, but they're only representing the most serious, then what I want to say is, fine, have those pictures up there of people with serious criminal convictions, but then 70% of those pictures need to be moms on their way to school, the guy who cleans the dishes in the back of the restaurant with no criminal history. I want the husband of a US citizen who's been here for 30 years and is an electrician in North Carolina, you know, working at a public school. I want, you know, put him up there too. At least show the American public the actual breakdown of what the agency is doing. My feeling is the agency doesn't

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

want to do it because they know that would be unpopular. The vast majority of Americans do make a distinction between, you know, serious national security threats and people just living here and have families and trying to get by.

Ashley: I think what we're seeing is that misrepresentation of the facts. And that is the concern that all of us have. It's that, yes, if the administration says we're going after the worst of the worst and they are actually doing that, we could probably agree on that, right? Like we don't want to see the criminals, the worst of the worst, the gang members on our streets. But what we're seeing misrepresented is that they're not going after the worst of the worst. You said those numbers haven't changed. And that's really interesting to me because we are seeing, especially in our communities, people who are connected with immigrants, migrants, undocumented people that it is the moms, it is the kids, it is the working families that are being picked up. Especially now, I'm curious if you could speak to this too about how we're seeing the administration create more undocumented immigrants with the ending of TPS. We just saw 300,000 Haitians and Syrians lose their legal status overnight. We see those numbers increase. I'm curious, what are you noticing from that data and is there anything that concerns you about it?

Austin: Absolutely. I mean, again, I think the distinction for so long has been between legal and illegal or documented and undocumented. And I just want to say at the outset and, you know, Tracie, you know this as a lawyer, there is nowhere in our immigration laws anywhere that defines or labels anyone as legal or illegal or document. There is no such thing. Those terms are terms of convenience. They're a way for us to say, you know, basically people who can or might be able to be deported from the country. That's basically what we mean. And when you look closely at cases, that distinction breaks down because there's, you know, there's people who entered unlawfully but have very good reasons for staying and are allowed to stay. There's people who entered lawfully and then, you know, are

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

forced to leave through deportation or other means. So it doesn't always map on to this simple framework that we allow. But for a long time, that distinction more or less held.

In the past couple of years, that's really broken down. The distinction between people who are really in the country lawfully versus people who are not in the country lawfully, it's so much more of a spectrum now because we've known for a long time that the immigration system is full of discretion. The government can change its mind at any time. But because there is a practice and a belief in the Western legal canon that governments shouldn't just, you know, roll the dice every month and sort of change the laws and change the policies, things have been relatively stable. This administration, you know, I would say even in contrast to the first Trump administration, has taken much more liberty with throwing out that book and just pushing the limits on all of this. So what's happened now is there's an entire universe of people who are what we sometimes call undocumented, to use a mouthful, which are just people who could lose their status and be deported tomorrow if the administration wanted.

And so we're seeing that with TPS, is certainly TPS is one of the biggest groups because it's hundreds of thousands of people from countries that are really unstable right now, politically, ecologically, economically, places like Haiti. Also, these are populations who have well integrated. They've been in the country for 10 years or more. They're well integrated into our communities, our churches, our, you know, our faith communities, our economies, our cities, all of that. And play a really even, you know, we just - I'm from Ohio. We just saw Governor Mike DeWine, you know, last week say, whoa, canceling TPS is a bad idea. This is Ohio. People, you know, kids are graduating high school and leaving. You know, Haitian TPS holders are coming and they're giving to our economy. And this is, you know, and

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

he's a Republican, very staunch Republican. And so we're seeing, you know, arguments made against this, but it's not just TPS.

We've seen the administration cancel, they just announced yesterday, they canceled over 170,000 visas. This means people went through very serious, rigorous vetting process to get a visa. You know, and so when people say like, just get in line or just come the right way. These are people who came the right way and have had their visas revoked, which the State Department can do, and are in that category of people who are undocumentable. They're here, they're documented, they're doing, you know, but they're having that pulled. And I would say, let's not forget, this can be pushed even further. Currently, the Department of Justice is going after people who came all the way. They came, they got in line, they came the right way. In fact, they even became citizens. And the Department of Justice has a new and expanding program to go back and revoke citizenship from people who already got it. And so it just shows you how vulnerable so many people are.

Ashley: Austin, do you have numbers for that off the top of your head for the denaturalizations? I think it used to be like seven a year and now it's like hundreds. Is that what we're looking at?

Austin: Yes, it's a little difficult to quantify because the process of denaturalization, as it's called, as you said, denaturalization, there's more than one way to do it. And so you can go through the criminal courts, you can go a couple different paths. And so getting numbers all together on that, I think is a little challenging. I think what we're see, what I'm seeing, what I'm kind of following the closest is what the DOJ is putting out. They are actually, you know, listing some of those cases and putting some numbers out with it. I would like to get more information. This is a great example of where FOIA public records requests and litigation is really powerful. This is absolutely a topic that I am requesting data on and I'm sure others are requesting and probably preparing to litigate on so we can really actually get the

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

full universe of numbers because the press releases I've looked at, Ashley, a lot of them are people who, you know, if the DOJ is to be believed, probably did, you know, use fraudulent means to get citizenship and there is a mechanism if you obtain citizenship using fraudulent or unlawful means, that citizenship can be revoked. As a general policy or law, I'm not enormously opposed to that. But the question is, if it's like the other patterns that we've talked about, we're seeing two or three really serious cases, but what about the rest? Are those really legitimate cases or are they going after vulnerable people who, you know, without what we might agree is really just cause?

Tracie: I think something that you said earlier, Austin, really resonated with me about the shifting policies. I feel like I'm working on quicksand right now. Nothing is stable, not even the sanctity of citizenship. And like you said, there are arguments to be had on that. I think we probably have time for two more questions and thinking back to something you said earlier in the conversation about how your work started doing interviews and thinking about stories and the storytelling. And I think one thing that I love about this conversation is that data informs storytelling and vice versa. So if someone's only following the headlines, which are going to have their own bias and skewed depending on the words that they use, right? Illegal versus undocumented, for example. But if someone's only reading the headlines, based on the data that you're seeing, what parts of the stories, what are they missing in the immigration context?

Austin: So much. So, first of all, I want to say, as someone who has gradually in my career come to have moved from a position of not really respecting the media that much to working more closely with the media and developing more respect, actually, for our journalists and our reporters. I would say there's so much really good reporting that's happening out there. And of course, everyone is clamoring for attention. So headlines are, you know, have to be more sensational, I think than

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

even some reporters would prefer if we lived in a different ecosystem. And so I think it's really good to, you know, the first thing I would say is, if you are just following the headlines, click through and read from top to bottom. Those articles are often very, very good with good context. And if you only focus on, you know, the first 100 words, you're doing yourself a disservice from the beginning.

But the second thing I would say is, I am a huge advocate of, if you really want to understand what's going on, you need to pick up a book. Because there's so much good, in-depth, accessible writing out there that touches on a variety of themes. And the thing that a good book will give you that news headlines will not give you is context and a framework. And so the thing that I struggle with mostly isn't, you know, is someone aware, just aware of this number or aware of this policy, but do people really have a context in which to situate what they're seeing and to make sense of it all? Because if it's not, it's like someone throwing 100 baseballs at you. It's like, how do you keep up with everything? How do you make sense of it? It's too much and it's overwhelming. And part of our media saturation, media burnout is we don't know where to put things, right? And if you, you know, I grew up doing construction work, my dad was a contractor, built houses, room additions, stuff, right?

If you're not a contractor or a construct, if you've never built a house and you show up on a job site and you see all of the materials, you can't make sense of it. You don't know where anything goes, right? But if you have a framework, if you have a blueprint, you show up and you go, oh, look, those are the trusses for the roof. That's the foundation material. Those that's the plywood for the, you know, right, the flooring and there's the Tyvek that goes on the outside and you have a place to put it. So I would say, step back, have a look at, get some good resources. I try to write about that in that way on my Substack. I try to not, I'm not a journalist, so I don't try to do that. I really try to provide a framework. And that framework for me

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

is, let's think about immigration in a broader context. Immigration does not stand on its own. We have to think about the way that there's ecological and climate crisis happening around the world that's shaping where people can live. It's the biggest driver today of global uh a human migration is climate change and ecological change. Huge source. We have geopolitical change.

When we're talking about the Haitian TPS, we're talking about a country that has experienced political instability for a very long time and is still experiencing that in part because of the history of the Western hemisphere and the opportunities that Haiti were and were not afforded because of their position in that colonial period. We've got to look at our economy. Look, we have a global economy. Almost nothing, you know, on my desk was 100% made in the United States. And so we have objects and we have goods moving around the world. And yet we're living in a time where people are less able to be mobile than ever.

And so I think thinking about what's going on in that context is also a way for us to say, you know, it's easy to be distracted by what's out there. But, you know, for everything that feels very sensational, I always encourage people to ask, by drawing our attention here, what is our attention being taken away from, right? And I think for folks, for you, I think we share this kind of value and for folks who are listening, one of those things that we're being distracted from is our values. It's very easy to feel scared and under attack if your idea of immigration is people coming to take something from you and, you know, we don't have borders and we don't have a secure state. I think it's really important to step back and say, hang on, am I letting that come first? Is am I letting fear come first? And then I'm trying to work my values into my fear, or am I leading with my values first and then saying, here's my values, here's here's where and here's where my values come from. Now, let me have a look at the world and see how I responsibly apply that uh framework uh to what to what I'm seeing around me.

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

Ashley: That is all so good. And it reminds me, we did an episode in our first season that was about how to read the news, how to respond to the news. And a lot of that is starting, especially as Christians, starting with our faith and taking a moment to breathe, maybe taking a moment to pray and ask for discernment and how to read those news, how to find good articles, I mean, reputable news sources, we would say. So much of that is important. I think like you said, the objective of this administration has been to overwhelm us and to say like, okay, you're so anxious and nervous about everything. You're so afraid that you can't respond to anything now. That has felt like a tactic all along. So one way we can respond to that is to take a step back, to center ourselves, to take a moment, and then to actually approach those headlines and also to find maybe then like one local thing you can do. We are going to have some advice about that later.

And it's so important to think about the immigration system as a whole, the history as a whole, where are things located. It's not just isolated events. It helps us like, like you said, to center this argument and what it's connected to. And as you've said that analogy about the house, I was like, this is really perfect. This is going to go great with our last question here. We're thinking about how our immigration system might look different in the future. If we could start over from scratch, for example, maybe that's too big of a thing to think about, but if we could just change our immigration system to something that works better for us as a country, better for us as humans, what would that look like? And I'm curious to hear your thoughts as we've had this conversation, if you could change one thing, let's start with one thing about our immigration system, what would it be?

Austin: Sure. So, you know, let's just go back to values. I think something I had a conversation with some policy experts at the American Immigration Council recently who put out a framework that was really a values-driven framework as opposed to a policy-driven framework. And I really appreciated that. One of the

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

things that has stuck with me is they have as one of their values compliance. And when I saw that, I had a really negative reaction because the idea that immigrants, that it's simply on individual immigrants to just comply with the law and do whatever the law says and is part of the problem. That's not actually a strategy. But when I talk to them and when you read what they actually mean, what they really are saying is, what they're very explicit about it. That was my misconception when I, my first reaction, that's why reading matters.

But when you read what they're saying, what they're saying is, we need a system where people are able to comply and that incentivizes compliance. That's very different from immigrants just need to get in line. That is a vision of a system that is functional and workable and where we are able to say, yes, people need to do what they need to do, but they should have the ability to do that. You know, back to the speed limit example, it's a bit like, I can't remember who said this recently, you know, gave this analogy of the immigration, I think it was Hiroshi Motomura, who's a tremendous colleague out in California, just a brilliant immigration scholar. And he said, basically our immigration system works like this. We set the speed limit at 15 on the freeway of our immigration system, we set the speed limit at 15 miles per hour, and then we choose who to pull over. In other words, we've built an immigration system where it's almost impossible to comply in any meaningful way. Everything is discretion on the enforcement side.

And so, if I could change something, I think it would be that. I think it would be, look, it's 2026. We're going to have an immigration system. We're not going to abolish borders or abolish an immigration system. But if we're going to have an immigration system, it needs to be one that people can comply with and that they're incentivized to comply. There should be rewards for people for complying for the system. And right now, just to emphasize, there's not. People who are showing up at their ICE check-ins, going to their immigration court hearings, doing everything

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

that they should do, they're showing up and getting arrested. They're showing up and getting punished. And that's in my view, that's not a system that rewards compliance.

Ashley: So maybe our reward system should be when they do everything right to get the visa, they get to keep the visa maybe, or they get to keep the citizenship that they've applied for.

Austin: That's right. So, I think that you're also thinking as we all should be about what people can do, really, like next steps. And, you know, I'm very mindful that not everybody is in a position where they are in their journey or where they are in their job or their family to get super, super hands-on involved. And I think people should if they can to really get involved in hospitality and the practice of welcome, and the practice of community building. We'll say it again if we've said it a thousand times, get to know your neighbors, like have a conversation. But the thing that I would also say for folks who are a little bit more on the fence and are just don't quite know, I would say get to understand the immigration system in your backyard. There is an immigration court near you, there's an immigration detention center near you, there's an ICE office near you. It might be a detention center or an ICE office where someone has died.

We just published the detention mortality dashboard today. We've already had over 50 detainee deaths during this administration and many more before, by the way, this is not just about this administration. What I try to do and what I try to do with my team is to make that data available so that people can look at that and they have a way to get started and learn more. So, even if you're not ready to act, you know, learning is action. Taking care of your brain and getting good information in there is action. So, I would just encourage folks to start in your state, start in your county, and just try to understand what's around you because if you start there, I

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

promise you'll find a place that you feel like you can fit in and do the work that's meaningful to you.

Tracie: The power of proximity is real, absolutely. So, Austin, thank you so much for joining us. You know, I think about little taglines I hear like facts over fear or facts over feelings. And I think what this conversation has really helped me with is to understand they're not siloed. They all belong together. We want facts to help explain away sometimes the fear or why the fear exists. And we have values which feed into our feelings, but then we also have the facts to help us understand where that all comes from. And so thank you for bringing all of that together in today's conversation with us. I think we need to understand that the data shows us more than just numbers, right? It shows us somebody's family, someone's future, someone's lived story. And this has been really helpful with that. So thank you.

Austin: Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for all the incredible translation work that you're doing, connecting these stories and this really controversial issue to faith communities that need it and have so much to give on this issue.

Ashley: You know, one thing I kept thinking about while Austin is talking is how easy it is to mistake familiarity for understanding. I've heard terms like criminal immigrants and detention for years now, but hearing what those numbers actually measure and what they don't changes how I hear the news.

Tracie: I had the exact same reaction. As an immigration lawyer, I'm in the system every single day, but even for me, it's helpful to step back and remember that the statistics we're describing, it's much bigger than individual cases. And these are describing choices that we've made as a country over decades. They are deliberate choices. And once you understand that, I think it's harder to accept simple answers to these really complicated questions.

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

Ashley: So on Hope In Action, we like to give you a conversation tip and an action step every week. So here's your conversation tip for this week. The next time immigration comes up, resist the urge to debate the latest headline. And instead ask, I wonder how we got here? That simple question shifts the conversation from arguing about today's politics to exploring the history and the decisions that shaped the system we're talking about.

Tracie: One of the biggest lessons from history is that today's debates rarely start with today. Looking for the pattern instead of just reacting to the moment can change how we understand the conversation and the people at the center of it.

Ashley: And when we start with curiosity instead of certainty, people are often much more willing to stay in the conversation.

Tracie: And then, thinking back to something that Austin talked about, I want to lead us into our small action. And actually two small actions for this week. First, take a few minutes to talk with someone in your family about your own immigration story. Maybe your family arrived generations ago and that history is lost in the midst of time, but start that conversation. Maybe your family came more recently and you can ask the person who immigrated. So I think that is a really good starting point. Ask, how did our family, how did I become part of the American story?

Ashley: Yeah, it's important because I think when we know our own stories, it's easier to approach someone else's story with empathy and curiosity. And our small action this week isn't about changing anyone else's mind. It's about growing your own understanding. And I think that's what Austin told us too, that learning is action. It may feel like you're not doing anything just by learning, but learning is the first step to maybe doing something later. So we encourage you as our second action step this week to learn about the immigration system in your own backyard.

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

Is there a detention center near you? Is there an ICE office? An immigration court? These are things that you can learn about that help you learn what is the immigration system like in your own backyard. We often focus so much on the national immigration system and that can feel pretty disempowering, right? If I think about the national immigration system, what can I in my solitary context do anything about? But when I think about the local spaces, the local detention centers, the local offices, that might be something that I can later, after I've learned about them, think about what I could do. So these are important steps as you think, what is doable for me in my context? And the first step is just learning sometimes.

Tracie: Absolutely. I mean, real learning doesn't mean always changing your opinion. It can, but not always. And sometimes real learning is just realizing the issue is more complex than you first thought. And that's a meaningful step towards having more thoughtful conversations, which is honestly what we need today.

Ashley: It is. And history reminds us that every generation inherits a conversation about immigration. We've heard about some of those in the podcast today, and we hope that you'll look up some of the other ones that we didn't get a chance to mention. But we hope this podcast helps you step into that conversation with a little more context and a lot more curiosity.

Tracie: And we would love for you to help shape the conversation too. Our season finale will be an Ask Me Anything episode where we'll cover your questions about immigration law, policy, history, or anything else we will cover this season. So send us your questions on Facebook or Instagram, and we'll choose as many as we can for that episode.

Ashley: And until next time, thanks for listening. Thanks for learning with us, and thanks for being part of Hope In Action.

Ep #14: Immigration History, Data, and the Stories Behind the Numbers with Dr. Austin Kocher

Tracie: This podcast is to inform, educate, and entertain and does not constitute legal advice. If you are making decisions related to immigration or any legal matter, please consult a licensed attorney in your state of residence.