

Commentary: Fewer and fewer of Trump's 'bad hombres' are caught crossing the border

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President Donald Trump, our fearmonger-in-chief, often cites the specter of “bad hombres” – gang members and rapists among his most-cited – who cross the U.S.-Mexico border to create mayhem in American cities.

But the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute reports that as the number of Central Americans arriving at the border to seek asylum has been increasing significantly, the number of “criminal aliens” — the government’s term for those with convictions of any of a roster of crimes — has steadily decreased over the last four years both in real numbers and in percentage of border apprehensions.

Using Customs and Border Protection data, Cato says agents apprehended 19,117 migrants with criminal records in 2015; last year, it had dropped to 6,698, and so far this year there have been 2,034 apprehensions. In percentages, that’s a drop from 5.8 percent of total apprehensions to under 1 percent.

So the problem Trump keeps braying about is becoming less of an issue, which in defter political hands would be trumpeted as a victory.

Instead, and with an eye on his nativist base, Trump focuses his attention and wrath on people exercising their legal right to seek asylum at the border. And yes, people crossing the border without permission can be charged with a misdemeanor, but there’s tension between that immigration law and other laws granting the right for people to show up anywhere at the border and ask for asylum.

This is just further evidence that the president has no understanding of what’s happening at the border, of the contours of our history of dealing with illegal immigration, or even of how to play positive developments — and a decline in the number of people with criminal convictions getting apprehended at the border is positive from just about any perspective — into a political victory.

There are legitimate arguments that some of the crimes are less than they seem. More than half of the crimes involve previously crossing the border illegally, not the kind of infraction to conjure up Trump’s image of “bad hombres.”

Here’s the PR narrative Trump should be pushing: “Since I’ve been in office and demanded stronger border security to prevent dangerous elements from entering the country, we have seen a significant drop in criminal aliens crossing the border. Yes, there also has been a surge in asylum-seekers, and my administration is formulating new policies to deal with that.”

So who would he turn to for those policies? Heh. He fired them all.

As The Times' editorial board points out, "these personnel moves are likely to add even more instability and uncertainty to the nation's immigration enforcement apparatus. ... This is government by chaos."

So chaotic, in fact, the administration is incapable of taking advantage of even small victories.