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Gary Abernathy: Why a higher wall would lower crime

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To those who oppose President Donald Trump's declaration of a national emergency to build more border wall, the president and his supporters are racist, heartless opportunists who are merely appealing to bigotry and ignorance for political purposes.

To those who support building more barriers and cracking down harder, the verbal and statistical gymnastics in which many engage to play down the problems caused by our porous southern border are just plain bewildering.

Cable news networks, radio talk shows and bloggers have been quick to adopt predictable narratives on the subject. The liberal outlets highlight heart-rending stories of families trying to reach U.S. soil for a better life or to escape violence or political persecution.

Conservative outlets focus on the gangs, criminals and drugs crossing the border. Both story lines contain truth, but it seems to be a case of one extreme or the other, depending on whom or what you watch and consume for news. It's no wonder the two sides can't begin to understand what the other side is thinking.

It doesn't help that too many who oppose the wall paint Trump's base as a coalition of largely white Americans who, in their simple-minded bigotry, fear anyone not like them.

All I can do is explain what I hear most often here in southwest Ohio, a part of the Midwest where there are, admittedly, not a lot of people from elsewhere. Yet most people here, which is strong Trump country, recognize that they themselves are the descendants of immigrants. They fully support legal immigration and we welcome newcomers into our little rural town of about 7,000 about an hour east of Cincinnati.

The steady stream of stories and anecdotes describing the positive contributions of immigrants seldom makes clear that the fight is over illegal immigration, not immigration in general. Most people, left and right, empathize with people who want to reach the United States in search of a better life, even those who try to enter illegally. But they also understand that embedded within any large group are some criminal elements. We see it as logical to take tough measures — including walls and other barriers — to make it as difficult as possible for people to circumvent the legal means of entering the United States.

It is standard these days for Trump's critics to argue that his claims of a border emergency are diluted by the fact that, as The Associated Press has noted, "illegal border crossings are down from a high of 1.6 million in 2000." That number, however, represents not how many people

crossed illegally but how many were apprehended. By comparison, U.S. Customs and Border Protection statistics show apprehensions were down to just under 400,000 in fiscal 2018.

But if even “just” 400,000 people a year are crossing the border illegally, that’s still a lot of people! And that means from now through 2023, 2 million illegal more immigrants will enter the country; 4 million through 2028.

Another common argument, as the Post reported last year, is that “undocumented immigrants are considerably less likely to commit crime than native-born citizens.” For millions of Americans, the response is “So what?” Using Texas conviction rates from 2015, the Cato Institute study cited by the Post article indicated that about 1,800 of every 100,000 natural-born citizens are convicted of crimes, with about 3 of them in every 100,000 convicted of homicide. By comparison, only about 900 of every 100,000 illegal immigrants are convicted of crimes, including about 2.5 of every 100,000 who are convicted of homicide.

There’s not much we can do to prevent homicides committed by natural-born citizens, but if we can prevent, through better border enforcement, the hundreds of crimes, including homicides, carried out annually by illegal immigrants, shouldn’t we?

Opponents of Trump’s national emergency declaration insist there is no new emergency, and on this his supporters largely agree. To them, however, the emergency has been long-standing, with no previous president (or Congress) willing to seriously address it with the sense of urgency it demands.

Despite popular portrayals to the contrary, most Americans who support building more miles of walls and better securing the border in other ways are not driven by racism, hate or ignorance. They are instead motivated by what was once considered basic common sense. Just because statistics show threats already exist inside our borders is no reason not to use every legal means possible to prevent additional threats to our safety and security from outside.