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Unauthorized immigrants are overwhelmingly law-abiding. But it won't stop Trump.

Editorial Board

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UNDER THE Trump administration, deportation agents have arrested unauthorized immigrants with no criminal records at more than three times the rate they were arrested during the final two years of the Obama administration. That may be surprising given the White House's relentless and sweeping characterization of such migrants as dangerous criminals, gang members and, in the president's own words, "bad hombres."

Or maybe not so surprising. Multiple studies have shown that immigrants generally commit crimes at a lower rate than native-born Americans. New data — the most comprehensive to date — suggest there is also no correlation between illegal immigrants and higher crime rates. Notwithstanding the president's inflammatory rhetoric, most undocumented immigrants are law-abiding, which may help explain the growing percentage of those picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents who have no crime on their records.

The new data come from studies undertaken by the Pew Research Center and the Marshall Project, both nonpartisan outfits. Crunching the numbers, Pew broke down changes in the number of unauthorized immigrants in each of some 180 metropolitan areas in the decade that ended in 2016. Using those figures and places, the Marshall Project compared them with local rates of violent and property crime from the Uniform Crime Reporting program, published by the FBI.

The results showed that crime declined in the large majority of those metro areas, as it has for more than 20 years throughout the United States generally, whether the number of undocumented migrants increased or decreased in a particular place. Anna Flagg, a senior data reporter for the Marshall Project, wrote that "changes in undocumented populations had little or no effect on crime in the various metro areas under survey." There was some data, albeit inconclusive, suggesting that crime fell even more in places with greater numbers of illegal immigrants.

As is often the case, the facts fly in the face of the Trump administration's agenda, which is to convince Americans that undocumented migrants are a frightening threat. Nonetheless, the new data dovetail with several previous studies — from the libertarian Cato Institute; from Governing Magazine; and from Criminology, an academic journal — that also show no correlation between unauthorized immigration and crime rates. As The Post's Fact Checker, Glenn Kessler, wrote this year, "the available research indicates that, when compared to U.S. citizens, illegal immigrants commit fewer crimes."

By bending the data — or, in this case, ignoring facts to suit their own cynical political narrative — Trump administration officials have engaged in demagoguery and scare tactics, the better to whip up xenophobic hysteria. President Trump himself has made it clear he believes that strategy was critical to his electoral success in 2016; there is every indication he will revive and amplify it in the 2020 cycle.

This is Trumpism at its ugliest: turning truth on its head; vilifying the “other”; sowing hatred and fear. It is un-American at its core; it’s also the president’s stock in trade.