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Column: Immigrants in the U.S. illegally make us safer

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From the beginning of his campaign for president, Donald Trump portrayed illegal immigration as a forest fire that threatens to spread rapidly and engulf us all. Mexicans, he charged, are “bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” He thought Americans should be afraid.

He’s still blaring that message. Last month, he tweeted angrily that a “caravan” of Hondurans was marching northward through Mexico to pour across the Rio Grande. “Getting more dangerous,” he warned.

In San Diego on Monday, Attorney General Jeff Sessions echoed the alarm. Raising the specter that we could be “overwhelmed” by a “stampede” of invaders, he vowed to “finally secure this border so that we can get the American people the safety and peace of mind that they deserve.”

When these two are done in Washington, they can go into the business of making horror movies — which, like these claims, are not rooted in reality. The “caravan” is more scared than scary, consisting of a bedraggled, footsore group of unfortunates who fled violence and poverty in the hope of gaining asylum in the United States.

Irineo Mujica, who works for an advocacy group that is helping them, told The New York Times: “There are 300 kids and 400 women. Babies with bibs and milk bottles, not armaments. How much of a threat can they be?” Besides, they don’t have to stampede over the border. They are legally allowed to arrive at immigration checkpoints and apply for sanctuary.

But for Trump and Sessions, anyone who comes here without a visa evokes fear and hatred. The president and his attorney general ignore the real dangers posed by most foreigners here illegally: They will fill jobs that Americans don’t want, learn English, pay taxes and stay out of trouble. Chilling, huh?

The president relishes lurid tales of the criminal gang MS-13. Last year, he said: “They stomp on their victims. They beat them with clubs. They slash them with machetes, and they stab them with knives. They have transformed peaceful parks and beautiful quiet neighborhoods into bloodstained killing fields.”

No one disputes that MS-13 is a violent gang, but it’s just one of many that plague American cities. All that distinguishes this one is that many of its members came from Central America,

some without documents — allowing Trump to blame its villainy on illegal immigration. He thinks immigrants in the U.S. illegally are criminals by definition and therefore a hellish danger.

But he's railing against a threat that exists largely in his mind. Trump failed to notice that the big wave of illegal immigration that came in the 1990s coincided with a plunge in crime and violence.

In 1990, there were about 3.5 million foreigners living in this country illegally, and the national murder rate was 9.4 per 100,000 people. When the population of immigrants here illegally peaked at 12.2 million in 2007, the murder rate was 5.6 per 100,000 — a decline of 40 percent — and it has fallen more since then.

Far from generating crime, this group appears to suppress it. A groundbreaking new state-by-state study covering 1990 to 2014 by sociologists Michael Light of the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Ty Miller of Purdue in the journal *Criminology* concludes that “undocumented immigration over this period is generally associated with decreasing violence.”

In another study, Light, Miller and Brian Kelly (also of Purdue) found that “increased undocumented immigration was significantly associated with reductions in drug arrests, drug overdose deaths, and DUI arrests.”

The question Light and his colleagues examined, he told me, is: “Does undocumented immigration make us less safe?” The answer: “No.” If anything, he says, the evidence “suggests the opposite.”

Policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh of the libertarian Cato Institute examined the evidence on crime from Texas. He found that foreigners living in the U.S. illegally were about half as likely as native-born Americans to be convicted of a crime and one-quarter less likely to be convicted of murder. Their overall arrest rate was 40 percent below that of people born in this country.

What this all shows is that Trump and Sessions are peddling myths. Central American refugees are not about to mount a mass assault on the border. And on the whole, far from posing a danger to public safety, the presence of foreigners here illegally *enhances* public safety. MS-13 is as representative of them as John Wayne Gacy is of Illinoisans.

This alleged menace is much like the monsters that small children fear. It's scary until you turn on the light and look under the bed.