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Trump created the immigration crisis out of sheer ignorance and cruelty

Jennifer Rubin

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The Trump presidency is one of incomplete sentences, sneers and slogans: “*Catch and release!*” “*Zero tolerance!*” If you quizzed President Trump or many of his supporters, chances are that they’d be hard-pressed to explain what these things mean.

“Catch and release” does not mean asylum-seekers are set loose, never to be heard from when their immigration hearing comes around. To the contrary, the alternatives to detention (ATD) programs in effect before Attorney General Jeff Sessions and senior White House adviser Stephen Miller decided it was a great idea to incarcerate those who committed the misdemeanor of entering without documentation were working extremely well.

Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute explains:

ATDs usually take at least one of three forms. The first is electronic monitoring devices whereby migrants have to wear a tracking device like an ankle bracelet. The second is assigning caseworkers to periodically check up on the migrants. The third is monetary incentives, such as bonds. Many ATD programs mix these three. [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] runs the ATD program because they are responsible for apprehending, removing, and detaining immigrants inside of the United States. Detention costs about \$170 per day for long stays and about \$30 for short stays. The proposed tent cities to house migrant children would have cost about \$775 per person per night. As far as I can tell, about 100 percent of them comply with court orders as they are in government detention and therefore have no choice. The tradeoff for this extra effectiveness are the various costs of detention.

Under the Intensive Supervision Appearance Program, for example, which used “electronic ankle monitors, telephone checkups that used biometric voice recognition software, unannounced home visits, employer verification, and in-person reporting to supervise participants,” 99.6 percent of the immigrants showed up for their hearings. The Family Case Management provides “caseworkers to help migrants meet their legal and judicial obligations, such as reporting to ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) check-ins, appearing at court hearings, and departing the United States when ordered by the courts.” Trump discontinued

this program, although “100 percent made it to their court appearances, and only 2 percent absconded into the black market after receiving removal orders.” Groups such as the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church run similar programs, with about a 97 percent appearance rate.

In short, Trump’s insistence on locking up people fleeing their home countries was based on the notion that “catch and release” was a disaster. In fact, a variety of programs have been in place and could be expanded upon — ones that are, as Nowrasteh argues, “far cheaper, more humanitarian, and less of a political disaster for this administration” than incarcerating families is.

Trump’s hand may be forced by the courts since the Flores Settlement, which prevents migrant children from being held more than 20 days, remains in effect. If Trump cannot persuade courts to allow indefinite detention of families (and good luck with that), the administration might finally return to programs that work.

Moreover, the notion that desperate families with little kids trek through the desert to get to the United States so that they can go on a crime spree is preposterous to begin with. Here is what one study found looking at 10 cities with “the most refugees relative to the size of their population between 2006 and 2015”:

Rather than crime increasing, nine out of 10 of the communities actually became considerably more safe, both in terms of their levels of violent and property crime. This included places like Southfield, Michigan, a community just outside of Detroit, where violent crime dropped by 77.1 percent. Decatur, Georgia, a community outside Atlanta, experienced a 62.2 percent decline in violent crime.

The only place where crime went up was West Springfield, Mass., which was simultaneously hit by an opioid epidemic.

In short, refugees were not a risk to Americans’ safety to begin with. Before Trump came along, we had a system that cheaply and effectively monitored immigrants until their cases could be heard. It is almost as if Trump created a problem out of thin air by demonizing a group of people, then cruelly separating babies and toddlers from their families and ultimately deciding to lock up families indefinitely at enormous cost. Gosh, it sure looks like Trump is not out to solve a problem, but rather to stir up his low-information voters, whose xenophobia helped elect him.