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Opinion - Porous border not so scary

By Steve Chapman

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From listening to the more vigorous critics of illegal immigration, our porous borders are a grave threat to safety. Not only can foreign terrorists sneak in to target us, but the most vicious criminals are free to walk in and inflict their worst on innocent Americans.

In xenophobic circles, this prospect induces stark terror. Fox News' Glenn Beck has decried an "illegal immigrant crime wave." A contributor to Patrick Buchanan's Web site asserts, "Every day, in the United States, thousands of illegal aliens unleash a reign of terror on Americans."

Sure they do. And I'm Penelope Cruz.

There is a surface logic here. If people are willing to commit the crime of slipping into the country without permission, it might stand to reason that they have no respect for our laws and will break even more once they're here. Add in Mexican drug lords and Central American gangs, and it looks like we should all be fleeing to Canada to save our hides.

Chicago's Latino residents have risen to 28 percent of the population, and among that population are many people who came illegally. So why doesn't it feel like we're fighting the battle of the Alamo?

Simple: The things that would happen if the alarmists were right simply have not happened. A continuing inflow of violent, predatory Latinos would produce an unprecedented epidemic of larceny and slaughter. In reality, as the illegal immigrant population has grown, crime has, well, gone south.

Since 1986, the year of the infamous amnesty for illegal immigrants, the U.S. murder rate has plunged by 37 percent. (In Chicago, the number of homicides last year was 460 from 747 in 1986.) Forcible rape is down 23 percent. Drunken driving fatalities are off by more than half. You are safer today than you were before all those undocumented interlopers arrived.

Much is made of the alleged fact that 30 percent of federal prison inmates are illegal immigrants. Actually, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the correct figure is 14 percent, and many are in just for violating immigration laws. In prisons at the state level, where most violent crime is prosecuted, illegal immigrants account for less than 5 percent of all inmates.

How can all this be? It's partly because native-born Americans are less prone to senseless mayhem than they used to be. But it's also because people who come here from other countries are actually more law-abiding than the norm.

A 2007 report by two scholars for the Immigration Policy Center noted that "for every ethnic group without exception, incarceration rates among young men are lowest for immigrants, even those who are the least educated. This holds true especially for the Mexicans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans who make up the bulk of the undocumented population."

Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson, who has focused his research on Chicago neighborhoods, documents that felonious behavior is less common among Mexican-Americans, who constitute the biggest share of Latinos, than among whites. Second- and third-generation Latinos, contrary to what you might expect, fall into more crime than immigrants. But Sampson says that overall, "Mexican-American rates of violence are very similar to whites."

The phenomenon is so evident that it was even recognized in a recent article in *The American Conservative* — a magazine founded by the lusty nativist ("we're gonna lose our country") Patrick Buchanan. It was written by Ron Unz, who made some enemies among Latinos by pushing a California ballot initiative to sharply limit bilingual education in public schools, but who knows better than to regard Latinos as the enemy.

Unz points out that in the five most heavily Hispanic cities in the country, violent crime is "10 percent below the national urban average and the homicide rate 40 percent lower." In Los Angeles, which is half Hispanic and easily accessible to those sneaking over the southern border, the murder rate has plummeted to levels unseen since the tranquil years of the early 1960s.

This is not really hard to understand. Today, as ever, most foreigners who make the sacrifice of leaving home and starting over in a strange land do so not to mug grandmothers or molest children, but to find work that will give them a better life. Coming here illegally does not alter that basic motivation.

In other words, they want to become full-fledged Americans, and they're succeeding. Is there something scary about that?