

MEXICAN BORDER ARRESTS FALL IN WAKE OF NEW ALIENS LAW

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Body

Just one month after President Reagan signed the **new** immigration control **law**, **arrests** of illegal **aliens** along the **Mexican border** have dropped dramatically.

Immigration officials said they could not be sure the decline was a result of the legislation, which for the first time imposes criminal penalties on Americans who employ illegal migrants. But they said they could think of no other reason that could fully account for it.

Arrests in some **border** areas have **fallen** by nearly 30 percent in comparison with the same period last year.

"We've noticed a lack of attempted entries, a lack of movement of **aliens**," said Jerry Hicks, deputy chief patrol agent for the **Border** Patrol in McAllen, Tex. His office covers 280 miles of the shallow, muddy Rio Grande, through which millions have waded or swum to enter the United States illegally every year.

Confusing to the Smugglers

"The word our agents have now is that the **alien**-smugglers are confused - they're not really sure what this **new law** includes," Mr. Hicks said. "They're afraid there's a lack of a market now for **aliens**." **Arrests** in the McAllen sector dropped by 28 percent, from 7,780 in November 1985 to 5,599 this November. It was the first time in three years that there had been such a decrease for any month.

In Washington, Verne Jervis, spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, said **arrests** along the entire Southern **border**, which stretches nearly 2,000 miles from Texas to California, dropped 19 percent in the first week after Mr. Reagan signed the legislation Nov. 6, and 29 percent the next week.

"We are not quite prepared to say what the reason is," he said. "But certainly the bill had something to do with it. We don't know how long it will last. We hope it will have a long-range effect when the **law** is in full force." Word of the **new law** has been given widespread publicity by newspapers and television in Mexico.

Apprehensions of **aliens** are not necessarily a direct indicator of illegal immigration. The tally varies according to **Border** Patrol staff levels and priorities. But fluctuations in the number of **arrests** offer at least a crude gauge.

Possible Factors Offered

Immigration officials say several factors contributed. In some areas, mainly near El Paso, the Rio Grande has been unusually high this year and the weather cold, making passage across the river difficult. Moreover, the **new law**

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requires agents to obtain a warrant to search for aliens on farms and ranches, and that has deterred enforcement in some areas.

Also, the provision offering amnesty to aliens who were in this country illegally before Jan. 1, 1982, has made agents a little reluctant to approach some suspects. Finally, Border Patrol efforts have been diverted to interdiction of drug smuggling in some areas, such as McAllen.

But immigration officials say none of this fully explains the drop in arrests. The drop is well beyond what normally occurs this time of year, when the weather gets colder and many Mexicans go home for the holidays.

The long Mexican border, much of it crossing barren desert and subtropical farmland, is notoriously difficult to patrol. It has long served more to bind the United States of America to the Republic of Mexico than to separate them. For decades millions of people, including many from Europe and Asia, have crossed that border in search of economic opportunity and political sanctuary without the blessing of the law.

Dramatic El Paso Contrasts

According to Mike Williams, chief patrol agent for the El Paso sector, there were 15,553 arrests in November, as against 30,786 in October and 19,808 in November last year. He said that, even with the high water, the new law was "a major factor." It was passed on Oct. 17.

Mr. Williams added that his agents were finding fewer illegal aliens on freight trains going north, boarding airplanes at El Paso and passing Border Patrol checkpoints along highways leading north.

Apprehensions of aliens in remote southwest Texas in the Marfa sector of the Border Patrol are down to their lowest level since 1982.

An apparent exception to the trend is the San Diego area, a 60-mile-wide stretch of the border south of that city, and crossing point for Mexicans seeking work in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles and San Diego.

Apprehensions of aliens in November there were down only 2 percent, to 32,411, from last year, according to Gene Smithburg, assistant chief patrol agent. He added that arrests were down to 807 from 932 for the first four days of December. There was no immediate explanation why the California area differed from the rest of the border.

An Apparent Contradiction

The new figures on arrests of aliens appear to contradict, at least for the moment, arguments that the new law would spur illegal immigration by aliens anticipating another amnesty at a later date.

Illegal border crossings tend to take two forms. In the border cities like Brownsville, Laredo and El Paso in Texas, thousands of "commuters" cross daily to take jobs as maids, gardeners, retail clerks and the like, returning home to Mexico every night. Others enter hoping to stay permanently, or at least for the season, and they usually take trains and buses to Middle Western and Northern cities.

The entry of both types normally slows down at this time of year. Immigration officials said the true test of the new bill would not come until January, when a surge normally occurs. "We'll be better able to judge after the first of the year," said Mr. Smithburg of the Border Patrol in San Diego. "January is when we would have our huge increase."

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