



# Stop Border Deaths Now!

[www.rtfcam.org/border/border.htm](http://www.rtfcam.org/border/border.htm)

## **Border Working Group**

Brethren Witness/Washington Office

Church World Service

Columban Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation Office

Conference of Major Superiors of Men

Justice and Witness Ministries  
United Church of Christ

Latin America Working Group

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Medical Mission Sisters

Mennonite Central Committee,  
U.S. Washington Office

National Advocacy Center of  
the Sisters of the Good  
Shepherd

NETWORK, a National Catholic  
Social Justice Lobby

Oblates of Mary Immaculate  
Justice & Peace Office

Sisters of Mercy of the  
Americas

**Welcome!** We are glad that this publication found its way into your hands. *Stop Border Deaths Now* was conceived of as way to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Border Working Group's founding, and to bring together some of the resources the Border Working Group has assembled over the years. Our goal in creating this publication is to inform policy makers and the non-governmental community about the dangerous ramifications of deterrence-based policies such as building walls at the border and exponentially multiplying the number of border patrol agents.

These policies have been employed over the last ten years, and no noticeable decrease in the number of migrants crossing at the border has occurred. Instead, thousands of people have died trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. We propose comprehensive immigration reform that allows for legalization of the migratory flow across the Southern border. This would reduce the danger for migrants and acknowledge the important economic and social role migrants play in U.S. society.

*Who is the Border Working Group?* The Border Working Group is a coalition of faith-centered and human rights groups based in Washington, D.C. In dialogue and collaboration with our partners on the border, we come together out of concern for and in solidarity with migrants and those who live within the U.S.-Mexico border areas.

Through advocacy and education, we work to see that the policies of the U.S. government toward all migrants are created out of a sense of compassion, respect for human rights, and an acknowledgement of the vital role migrants play in our economy and society.

Please feel free to contact us if you would like to work with us to create a more just reality at the U.S.-Mexico border. Contact Sean Garcia at the Latin America Working Group for more information, [sgarcia@lawg.org](mailto:sgarcia@lawg.org), or 202-546-7010.

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## RELIGIOUS GROUPS' STATEMENTS ON IMMIGRANTS AND BORDERS

The call to welcome the stranger permeates scriptures. The Bible begins with Adam and Eve being sent into exile and ends with John in exile on the Isle of Patmos. Christians around the world have gained their salvation through the love of the refugee Christ, who fled Herod's wrath and crossed the border into the safety of Egypt. This same Christ reminds us, "When I was a stranger...you welcomed me..." In response to Christ's words, we are called to build a hospitable community for immigrants, refugees, and migrants in the United States. We never know when the stranger might be Jesus in disguise.

Some scriptures that refer to immigrants, refugees and borders: Leviticus 19:33-34, Galatians 3:28, Hebrews 13:14, Deuteronomy 24: 14, 17-18, Matthew 2:13-17, Matthew 25:35, Ephesians 2:11-22, I Corinthians 12:13, Hebrews 13:2, Exodus 22:21, Exodus 23:9, Deuteronomy. 27:19, Jeremiah 22:3.

### ***American Baptist Churches USA -***

Because of the Biblical mandate that we be a caring community, that we love our neighbors, that we establish justice and proclaim liberty; because we have a sense of Christian responsibility to serve human needs; because of our commitment to respect the human rights of all people; and because we are mainly a nation of immigrants, we ... shall continue our historical role as an advocate of human rights for immigrants, refugees, migrants and asylees.

### ***Mennonite Central Committee USA***

As Christians, we believe we are called to welcome these sojourners in our congregations and communities, especially as our government creates increasingly harsh immigration laws in the name of fighting terrorism. Our concerns about the status of immigrants in this country relate to how people are treated based on race, nationality, ethnicity, and religious identity. We reject our country's mistreatment of immigrants, repent of our silence, and commit ourselves to act with and on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters, regardless of their legal status.

### ***Presbyterian Church USA***

... [D]istinctions based on nationality and ethnicity have often functioned to legitimate injustice. For Christians, these distinctions must give way to Christ's commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. In fact, the hospitable reception of immigrants is a sign of the reconciling work of Christ in the world. ... In a Christian vision, diversity no longer divides and separates or serves as a basis for injustice, but is embraced and transformed through Christ's reconciling activity. Genuine reconciliation cannot take place without also doing justice; namely, ensuring that immigrants' personhood is fully respected, the immigrants' presence is acknowledged and welcomed, the immigrants' rights are fully protected, and immigrants are given the opportunity to be full participants in American life. In conclusion, a Christian perspective on immigration challenges us above all to love immigrants, to establish justice for them, and to seek to be reconciled with them in a new and transformed community.

### ***Catholic bishops of Mexico & the U.S.***

Now is the time for both the U.S. and Mexico to confront the reality of globalization and to work toward a globalization of solidarity. We call upon both governments to cooperate and to jointly enact policies that will create a generous, legal flow of migrants between both nations. Both governments have recognized the integration of economic interests through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It is now time to harmonize policies on the movement of people, particularly in a way that respects the human dignity of the migrant and recognizes the social consequences of globalization.

### ***Evangelical Lutheran Church in America***

We recognize the right of all countries to control their borders and their duty to protect their citizens from the illegal entry of drugs and criminals. But we have serious doubts about the rightness and effectiveness of current policy to erect imposing barriers between the U.S. and Mexico. We support the search for alternatives to this policy that would more appropriately reflect the relationships of two friendly nations whose peoples and economies are increasingly interdependent. Whatever the policy, border enforcement should always respect the human dignity of persons attempting to cross the border.

### ***From the Koran, CH8,V.73, 8:75***

And those who believed and left their homes and strove for the cause of Allah and those who gave them shelter and help, these indeed are true believers.

### ***Union of American Hebrew Congregations***

[We have] long supported a fair and generous immigration policy. Our people were and continue to be immigrants to this nation. We have benefited from its open doors, and suffered when they were closed... Our tradition demands of us concern for the stranger in our midst.



## THE FAILURE OF CURRENT BORDER POLICY

In the past seven years, more than 3,000 people coming to this country in search of a better life, have died trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border.

In 1993, the United States Border Patrol initiated a strategy to curb undocumented migration into the United States across the border with Mexico. Known as the *Southwest Border Strategy*, it aimed to effectively seal off urban areas, under the logic that migrants would not risk their lives to enter the U.S.

Ten years after this policy began, the consequences are clear. Migrants do risk their lives to find work in the United States. Because urban areas are now sealed, migrants are forced to travel through remote and dangerous stretches of desert that kills hundreds of people a year. ***In 2005 alone, the Border Patrol documented 460 migrant deaths – a staggering number.*** This does not include those migrants whose bodies have not been found.

The *Southwest Border Strategy* has increased dramatically the resources going to the Border Patrol, yet migration to the United States has not decreased as a result. Since 1993, the number of Border Patrol agents along the U.S.-Mexico border has more than tripled– ***there are now more than 11,000 agents patrolling 2,000 miles of border.*** The border patrol has also built over 78 miles of fencing in urban areas across the southwest border at a cost in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Despite these increased resources for deterrence of migration, these policies have not succeeded in decreasing the number of migrants who cross the border. ***The Immigration and Naturalization Service (now the Bureau of Immigration and Citizenship Services) has acknowledged that approximately 75,000 more undocumented migrants entered the U.S. per year between 1990 and 1999 than they originally projected.*** Current estimates put the number of unauthorized entries at over 350,000 per year.

Current Border Patrol policies along the southwest border are untenable. They have failed in their mission, and the only result of increased Border Patrol surveillance is the deaths of thousands of people. Recently, Congressman Jim Kolbe (R-AZ) acknowledged that 99 percent of the people crossing the Southwest border are not a threat to national security. He has acknowledged, as many are beginning to do, that the only way to reduce undocumented migration is to reform our immigration system. Comprehensive reforms will also reduce the number of migrant deaths each year by providing workers with a legal way of entry into the U.S and a pathway to citizenship.

In addition to a reform of our immigration policies, border security needs to be reoriented from a policy focused on deterring migrants to one focused on stopping terrorism. The strategies, tools, and resources going to border security do not address this problem in an adequate way. Rather than continuing to reinforce our current system, the Border Patrol needs to devise a new strategy that can address this mission, and reorganize its use of staffing, technology, and infrastructure to meet this new challenge.



## BORDER POLICY FOSTERS SMUGGLING INDUSTRY

Rosie sat in her beauty shop in Agua Prieta, Mexico. “In 1987 my husband and I walked across the [U.S.-Mexico] border—right down the street,” she said. “We didn’t pay anything. We caught rides to Phoenix where we met the rancher from Idaho where we went to work. We came back in October after the harvest and the livestock sale. We did this three more times.”

These stories are common among Mexican border residents, and reflect a different reality – one before such actions as Gatekeeper, Operation Rio Grande, and Night Smuggler were instituted by the Border Patrol to reduce undocumented migrants from crossing the border to find work in the U.S. These programs, that include elaborate fences, stadium lighting, high tech surveillance equipment, and increasing numbers of personnel, have done little more than:

- Force migrants to enter through more dangerous routes, causing ever-increasing deaths and apprehensions in the dessert without reducing the number of migrants reaching their goal.
- Increase the reliance of migrants on paid networks to help them cross the border’s obstacle course with consistently higher costs for each migrant.
- Increase organization of the smuggling networks from the small, community-based “Mom and Pop” operations of the 1980s-90s to highly organized and sophisticated operations of the past few years.
- Reduce the number of migrants who eventually go home.

Rosie continued, “The last time we crossed in 1994, we had to pay a *coyote* [smuggler] to help us because we could not just walk across the border anymore because of the fences and increased surveillance. We were fortunate that it was only \$300 each.”

Border enforcement has failed to deter illegal border crossings significantly, but it has symbolically affirmed the resolve of the government to protect our borders. Current border policy is a matter of political expediency - not a practical or successful policy by any measure. People on the U.S. side see longer and more impenetrable fences, many more agents, and budgets that have risen 30-40 percent from 2001 to 2003 and think that the government is doing something to stem the flow.

Instead of achieving the goals stated by the policy, namely, the reduction of undocumented migration and enhanced homeland security, the policy has caused an increase in large, well financed, and sophisticated smuggling networks without reducing the number of undocumented migrants. A migrant does not need a smuggler to walk alone across the border, but they do need sophisticated help to evade the Border Patrol’s obstacle course of fences, lighting, and patrols.

The Department of Homeland Security calls the organized smugglers public enemy number one. In fact, the increase in the amount of money, manpower, and fencing appears to be directly proportional to the increase in organized smuggling networks. Whereas Rosie paid \$300 ten years ago, smugglers routinely charge ten times that amount now – roughly \$3,000 for one crossing. As the money in smuggling increases, criminal elements have been anxious to get in on this lucrative business.

Rosie went on, “Now it just costs too much and is too dangerous for older people like us. But it doesn’t seem to stop the young people. More and more try and more and more succeed. Sadly, now when they go, they almost never come home. Young people see their dreams and often die trying to reach them.” She begins to weep.

We can stop the senseless deaths and the increased criminalization of immigration by reforming the system President Bush calls broken. We cannot return to the days of open borders, but we can provide new ways for migrants to cross legally by passing comprehensive immigration reform legislation. With legal ways to enter the U.S., we can eliminate the demand for smugglers and resolve one of our top security concerns at the border.



## HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES ON THE BORDER

*The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love the stranger as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Leviticus 19: 33-34*

Recently, hundreds of U.S. citizens have given up between a week and several months of their summer in an attempt to save the lives of migrants crossing the Southern Arizona desert. They have lived in Arks of the Covenant, which are welcoming stations that provide food, water, clothing, and medical care to migrants who cross in dangerous desert corridors, in large part due to border enforcement policies that have closed off urban crossings. They distribute shoes and water, ramen noodles and toilet paper that church members and others have donated in an effort to stop these deaths in the desert, which the GAO and several academic studies have linked to U.S. border enforcement strategies. These welcoming stations promise to host even larger numbers of volunteers this summer, and will help even more migrants to survive the blistering heat.

Arks of the Covenant form part of the No More Deaths campaign, which is co-sponsored by a multi-denominational coalition of churches, Peace Brigades International and local and national human rights groups. Volunteers who are motivated by faith and conscience have traveled to be part of this effort from all over the country. They believe that we, as citizens, cannot let any more people die in the desert because of our government's policies. This is one facet of the growing faith-based response to the tragedy that strikes our border with Mexico each summer.

More than 3,000 individuals have perished in the desert, in the mountains, and in rivers and waterways along the U.S.-Mexico border since Operations Hold the Line, Gatekeeper, and others were implemented in the mid 1990s. Additional border fencing and other infrastructure projects promise to push this number even higher. It is important to note that the deterrence based strategies which encourage migrants to take dangerous routes into the U.S. have not decreased the number of undocumented immigrants entering the county, and that this number has risen substantially since these policies were introduced.

People from many faith perspectives believe that, regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary. As people of faith, we believe that U.S. government policies that endanger human life by pushing migrants into punishing stretches of desert are contrary to our faith.

Approximately 10.5 million Mexican-born persons currently live in the U.S., about 5.5 million of whom reside legally, and the remainder of whom have undocumented status. Each year, an estimated 150,000 Mexican migrants enter the United States without authorization, working in such industries as agriculture, service, entertainment, and construction. The majority of these people have endured the arduous desert trek in search of a better life for their families. Their motivations are no different than the motivations of many of our ancestors – Irish migrants fleeing famine, English, Scandinavian and German migrants fleeing the dislocation of industrialization, and countless others looking for a better life.

According to Judaic-Christian teachings, we judge ourselves as a community of faith by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us. The treatment of migrants challenges the consciences of elected officials, policymakers, enforcement officers, residents of border communities, and providers of legal aid and social services, many of whom share our faith. A broad immigration reform would help to immediately address the humanitarian crisis in the desert, as migrant workers would not be forced to risk their lives in the desert if they are allowed to enter legally. Our faith tells us to welcome the stranger – we support government policies that reflect those values.



## UNACCOMPANIED MINORS AND MIGRATION

Enrique traveled over 8,700 miles from Honduras to the United States over seven attempts to reach his mother in North Carolina. Unaccompanied, he was seventeen years old at the time of his crossing. During his trip, he endured hunger, robbery, beatings, and six deportations at the U.S.-Mexico border. His mother could not risk leaving the U.S. to visit him for fear of not being able to return to the modest job that supported her family back home in Honduras. So Enrique traveled north to be with her.<sup>1</sup>

An unintended consequence of the build-up of border enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border is the increased number of young children who cross the border alone - most often in search of family reunification. As border security has tightened, the circular flow of migration - where migrants would return home to visit family on a regular basis and then return north for seasonal labor - has been broken. Too many migrants realize that if they leave the country, the expense of hiring smugglers to cross the border again is often too high to make such casual trips. As a result, families which used to see each other every Christmas, during birthdays, and for other special occasions now rely on telephones for their only communication. This new phenomena is driving young children, often without the knowledge or consent of their parents, to run away from their caretakers in search of reunification with their parents. As they cross, these children are at great risk, in the hands of smugglers, border guards, and detention facilities. Enrique is one of these children.

In 2003 more than 9,800 minors under the age of 17 were repatriated to Mexico. Of those more than 1,300 were under the age of 13. Not all unaccompanied minors are from Mexico. In 2003 the Mexican government detained more than 2,900 minors from Central America who were traveling illegally with smugglers. In addition to these children, thousands more reached their goal of finding their parents.

Amnesty International reports that the number of unaccompanied children detained in the United States on migration charges has more than doubled over the last five years, rising to over 5,000 in 2003. Not charged with committing any crime, these unaccompanied minors may be held for months, or even years, in punitive conditions alongside juvenile offenders.

Practices of handcuffing, shackling, placement in isolation wings, food deprivation, and arbitrary physical punishment prevail in detention centers despite persistent public criticism. These children are not entitled to legal representation, designated representatives, or interpreters. The process is especially distressing to refugee children who have been traumatically uprooted from their homes.

Children's need for care, protection and family reunification should be a priority in current or proposed legislation. Some recommendations are: Children in detention should be assigned professional child welfare advocates. They should be entitled to counsel. Interviews of children should conform to child-friendly methods designed to minimize trauma.

While the situation of these children is dire and needs to be addressed immediately, the longer-term push-and-pull factors of migration should also be acknowledged as causes of this phenomenon and should be taken into account when fashioning solutions. Allowing parents to move back and forth between work and family situations, for instance, instead of sending for their children, would likely reduce the number of unaccompanied minors. Three possible options are: labor friendly guest-worker programs, an increase in the number of working visas, and regularization of undocumented immigrants already working in the United States.

<sup>1</sup> "Enrique's Journey" is a Pulitzer Prize-winning series published in the *Los Angeles Times* in October 2001. The series, which documents his seventh trip to the U.S., can be found at <http://www.latimes.com/news/specials/enrique/>



## ECOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF BORDER POLICIES

The U.S.-Mexico border is a physically imposing and beautiful area. It is a distinctive habitat, and is one of the most fragile wilderness areas in the country. Soaring summer temperatures and freezing winters make it a deadly place to travel, distinctly inhospitable to humans who do not have the resources to handle the climatic extremes. In the past 10 years, thousands of people, forced by tightened U.S. immigration policies into these dangerous regions, have died due to exposure and dehydration. Undocumented migrants, however, are not the only group negatively affected by U.S. border policy: the increased militarization of the southern border threatens jaguars, owls, pronghorn sheep, and many other local species, and greatly intensifies stress on soil and water systems that cannot adjust to human use.

Ecological damage to the area is likely to increase. The U.S. Border Patrol has numerous proposals on the table to increase infrastructure and patrols in the area to deter migration. Many of these projects aim to fortify isolated stretches of desert that include some of the most pristine wild areas in the nation. Recent passage of the REAL ID act could exempt the Border Patrol from conducting appropriate Environmental Impact Studies of the area. In addition to pushing migrant flows into even more inhospitable terrain, these construction projects could cause devastating damage to the fragile ecosystem in the borderlands.

In November 2004, the Border Patrol issued a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for operations in southern Arizona. It details the infrastructure to be built along the state's 380-mile border: a 253 percent increase in remote surveillance video cameras; a 223 percent increase in the number of miles of fencing along the border; a 340 percent increase in the number of miles of the border lit with 24-hour lighting (nocturnal animals will be particularly affected by this incursion); and a huge increase in the number of new roads built in sensitive desert areas.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity ([www.sw-center.org](http://www.sw-center.org)), the Border Patrol's "on and off-road patrols, road construction, aircraft overflights, military training, ... stadium-style lights, construction of walls and fences, and intrusive remote sensing and surveillance operations ... damage legally protected natural resources, disturb rare and endangered wildlife, and threaten the survival of the already imperiled plants and habitats on which they depend."

Several animals native to the Sonoran Desert are already critically endangered, and will be significantly impacted by the proposed Border Patrol projects. For example, due to habitat loss and over-hunting, the jaguar is threatened throughout the U.S.-Mexico border. The American jaguar has been virtually eliminated from its entire U.S. range, and is just beginning to stage a comeback. A conservation strategy is planned for the species, and will rely on protecting and maintaining migratory patterns from Mexico into the U.S. According to the Border Action Network (BAN), proposed migrant control projects, such as expanded fencing, "will be built directly across the portion of the border that these animals are almost certainly using as a migration corridor. This will effectively prevent any future migration into the U.S. and will jeopardize the survival of the entire species."

In May 2005, Congress passed H.R. 418, the REAL ID Act, which allows for the expedited construction of roads, walls, fences and other barriers along U.S. borders by providing DHS with authority to waive any federal or state law, including those that protect public health, safety and the environment. This bill would apply to all areas along and "in the vicinity" of boundaries with both Mexico and Canada. Federally protected lands, including national parks, wildlife refuges, forests and wilderness areas, could be subject to this provision.

Infrastructure proposals that harm the environment in the fragile southwest should be measured carefully. Current data shows that despite the massive buildup of infrastructure in California, Arizona, and Texas over the past 12 years, the Border Patrol has not succeeded in effectively deterring migration. Rather, it has revised its estimates of undocumented entries into the U.S. upwards since 1993 – from an average of 250,000 entries then to almost 500,000 today. Before engaging in the construction of massive infrastructure projects in environmentally sensitive areas like the Sonoran desert in Arizona, the Border Patrol should evaluate the effectiveness of such infrastructure. To continue on its current path is to waste resources on failed security models and destroy a unique wilderness area that people have treasured and enjoyed for over a century.



## TRADE AND MIGRATION

With the passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement in 2005, it is worth examining the impact that past trade agreements have had on migration. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), implemented on January 1, 1994 by Canada, the U.S., and Mexico, immediately removed non-tariff barriers to agricultural trade between the U.S. and Mexico, cancelled many tariffs, and slated all tariffs to be phased out over the course of five to fifteen years. Before its passage, NAFTA was billed by its proponents as a job creator for Mexico which would substantially reduce the rate of migration of Mexicans to the United States.

Despite this optimistic projection, Mexico-to-U.S. migration has increased dramatically since NAFTA's implementation. The number of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. labor force almost doubled from 1990-2000 from 2.6 million to 4.9 million. As of March 2004, roughly 11.2 million Mexicans resided in the U.S.; about 5.2 million of them held regular immigration status. Currently, regional trade agreements such as NAFTA mean that goods and capital move more freely across borders than in past years. People, however, are highly restricted in their movement.

NAFTA meant that Mexico's tariffs on corn (maize), the center of Mexico's cultural and economic life, would be dropped over the next few years, while U.S. agricultural subsidies remained in place. Estimates show that U.S. corn was sold in Mexico from 1999 until 2001 for a price 30 percent or more below the cost of production. In the 10 years since NAFTA, U.S. corn exports to Mexico doubled. Mexico's rural poor – whose homegrown staple maize was replaced with cheap U.S. corn - bore the brunt of adjusting to NAFTA. Provided little government support, many small farmers were forced to sell their farms and leave their land.

More than 1.3 million Mexican agricultural jobs were lost after NAFTA. These job losses were offset by a 1.3 million job increase in the *maquiladora* sector, producing no overall job gain. Given that one million people have entered the work force each year, Mexico has had insufficient job creation to absorb new workers. Additionally, the number of *maquiladora* jobs has fluctuated significantly over the course of the past 10 years, and, as this sector has proven to be a fickle one, future cycles of job losses and gains will continue to displace workers. Increased reliance on the *maquiladora* sector means that the Mexican economy is even more strongly tied to the U.S. business sector and is vulnerable to rising and falling with it.

Workers increasingly move in response to global factors over which they have little control, yet, they have no right to migrate legally at the international level. Economically disadvantaged workers are least likely to migrate legally because their immediate economic needs do not afford them the time to go through lengthy visa application processes that, in the end, offer no guarantee of success. As a result, migrants often sacrifice their health and safety to find jobs when work can no longer be found in Mexico, but which are still needed to feed families left behind. Thousands of people have died attempting to make the journey and countless more have sustained permanent injuries and other bodily harm.

U.S. immigration policy will continue to fail to deter undocumented migration until it reflects the reality that the U.S. economy draws workers, thus fueling migration. Furthermore, our trade policies must reflect the fact that U.S.-led trade agreements such as NAFTA, CAFTA and others fuel the displacement of the rural poor in our trade partners. When home economies cannot absorb these displaced workers, they are left with no choice but to move where jobs are being created. Most times, this means the U.S., where economic growth continues. Labor is an essential component of trade, and freeing the flow of goods and services while limiting the flow of labor ignores this reality.

The recently ratified CAFTA treaty follows in the footsteps of NAFTA, ignoring the labor component of trade. With the lessons learned from our Mexican trade experience, we should expect to see an increase of Central American migrants, moving from the economic displacement that the trade agreement will create as the rural poor again lose out to U.S. subsidized agriculture. Without a comprehensive immigration reform in the U.S. that recognizes the intrinsic ties between the flow of goods, services, and labor, these Central American workers will join the tide of Mexicans that cross our southern border in order to feed their families from afar when they can no longer do so at home.



## **U.S.–MEXICO BORDER MYTHS**

**Myth #1: It's too easy to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. The border used to be much harder to cross.**

**Reality:** The border in many places looks like a militarized zone, with huge fences (double and triple fences in some areas), stadium lighting, infrared cameras, motion sensors and watchtowers. There is one Border Patrol agent for every thousand feet of border with Mexico. Over 2,000 migrants have died while crossing the border in the past five years. Before the current border strategy was implemented 10 years ago, there were far fewer migrant deaths. Many migrant workers have abandoned their cyclical patterns of migration, opting instead to stay permanently in the United States because the costs of border crossing are too high.

**Myth #2: Border strategies are effective in deterring migrants from entering the United States.**

**Reality:** In the 15 years since U.S. border policy emerged in its current form, the estimated numbers of migrants attempting to cross has not decreased. The current border strategy only pushes migrants out of populated areas into the harshest areas of the desert. Tighten security in one area, and the flow of people will cross elsewhere.

**Myth #3: Migrants are terrorists who are a threat to the United States; that's why we have to protect the border.**

**Reality:** Not one suspected terrorist has been apprehended on the U.S.–Mexico border since 9/11. U.S. border strategy has been the same since 1993. The only thing that changed after September 11, 2001 was the insertion of the “terrorist” into the justification for the buildup of resources and surveillance along the border. Undocumented immigrants are tax-paying members of this society, forced to live in the shadows. They are our neighbors, our co-workers, and our children's friends in school, in every city and many towns in the United States.

**Myth #4: Things would be better if the border were just sealed completely.**

**Reality:** New immigrants make up to 60 percent of labor force growth between 2000 and 2002, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies, often filling jobs that aging and increasingly well-educated, U.S.-born workers are unwilling to take. An estimated one million small farmers in Mexico have been displaced since NAFTA went into effect, leaving them with few other options but to migrate north. The average immigrant annually contributes \$1,800 more in taxes to the U.S. government than he or she receives in services, according to the National Academy of Sciences.

**Myth #5: Building more fences and employing more agents along the border is the only way to make us more secure.**

**Reality:** True security comes from economic opportunity, political stability and protection of human rights for all people. Only by addressing the root causes of migration, working toward justice in U.S. trade and foreign policy, and by reforming the U.S. immigration system, can we attain security for migrants and citizens everywhere.



## U.S. MIGRATION POLICY: 1880-PRESENT

The United States did not restrict migration until the end of the 19th century. Growing anti-immigrant sentiment occurred concurrently with the largest migratory flow the U.S. has experienced. Between 1880 and 1914, 20 million Southern and Eastern Europeans arrived, and several hundred thousand Chinese, Japanese and other Asian laborers migrated to the Western part of the U.S. In the 1880s, there was a public outcry to stop Chinese migration through Mexico. Anti-immigrant sentiment grew to include Asians of other nationalities. Those forming part of nativist groups claimed that the newer migrants were so culturally different from those who arrived in previous migratory flows that they would simply never be able to assimilate. This declaration was first made regarding Asians, and then with respect to the Irish, Italians, and Eastern Europeans. Eventually, anti-immigrant advocacy focused on immigrants of all but English and German descent. In the 1920s, immigration to the U.S. began to be sharply limited; by the late 1920s, restrictionist immigration policies had reduced the migratory flow to a mere trickle through quotas.

The *Bracero* Program was implemented by the U.S. government between 1942 and 1964, providing a legal way for more than 1,790,000 Mexicans to enter the United States and work in the agricultural sector.<sup>1</sup> This program responded to requests from U.S. farmers for a legal mechanism that would supply them with the labor needed to plant, grow, and harvest crops. Efforts by former *Bracero* workers to access funds that were withheld from their paychecks continue to this day.

Along with this legal flow came an undocumented population of Mexican migrants. In 1949, 280,000 undocumented immigrants were detained. By 1954 the number had grown to 865,000. Because of pressure to do something about this “problem,” Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) of the U.S. government began Operation Wetback in 1954. The commissioner of the INS at the time, Gen. Joseph Swing, mobilized the Border patrol, state and local officials and the police in order to catch “illegal aliens” – however, this campaign ended up focusing on those of Mexican descent in general. Mexican American neighborhoods were targeted, and Mexicans were arrested and deported in the southeastern states, causing some to flee back across the border. In 1954, more than one million irregular immigrants were rounded up, and, often, the American-born U.S. citizen children of undocumented immigrants were deported as well. The agents involved in this effort stopped many “Mexican-looking” citizens and requested identification. This caused a major outcry in both Mexico and the United States by people who complained that these were “police-state” methods, and eventually Operation Wetback was ended.<sup>2</sup>

Some interesting lessons can be learned from these two efforts by the United States government toward regulating migration: even as businesses needed and desired immigrant workers, and the United States encouraged a wave of such migration through the *Bracero* Program, there was a concurrent outcry from the U.S. public about undocumented migration. This echoes today’s policy realities and public dialogue. Businesses call for the creation of legal means of entry for immigrants, while many anti-immigrant groups demand that the border be closed.

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Sandros and Harry E. Cross, “National Development and International Labor Migration: Mexico, 1940-1965,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18(1983): 43-60.

<sup>2</sup> Timeline of U.S./Mexico Border History produced for the Public Broadcasting System, <http://www.pbs.org/kpbs/theborder/history/timeline/20.html>.

