



Stop Border Deaths Now!

A project of the Border Working Group

Attn: Immigration Policy Aide

July 6, 2006

“While the initial immigration from Central America during the 1980s was largely political, the current economic crises have created a steady flow of migration to the United States. . . If a free trade agreement like NAFTA is implemented in Central America, we can expect more Central Americans to be forced by economic pressures to leave their homeland.”

Salvadoran-American National Network, “Statement on a Free Trade Agreement Between the United States and Central America”, May 28, 2004.

At a time when the United States is embroiled in a debate over illegal immigration and when Congress is discussing proposals to build fences and militarize the border, it is important to consider the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the potential effects of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) on immigration to the U.S. Some questions to keep in mind are: who are the winners and losers of trade and what impact do the “losers” have on migration to the U.S.? How do the effects of free trade agreements inform policymakers about what U.S. border policy should be?

It has been 12 years since NAFTA, a trade agreement between the United States, Mexico and Canada, was implemented. In 2005, Congress passed CAFTA, a trade agreement that expands NAFTA to include Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, though its implementation has been delayed. NAFTA eliminated many tariffs and removed non-tariff barriers to agricultural trade between Mexico and the U.S. CAFTA is expected to eliminate many tariffs on goods traded between the U.S. and the Central American countries listed above. The below facts about NAFTA address the questions posed above:

- The Mexican agricultural sector has been hit particularly hard by NAFTA, displacing the rural poor. Many agricultural jobs have been lost due to the low prices of Mexican agricultural products that could not compete with heavily subsidized U.S. agricultural products. There are currently no adequate government supports to help the displaced farmers.¹
- The Mexican manufacturing sector has not been able to produce enough jobs to keep up with the loss of jobs in the agricultural sector. Because of imports, there has been a decline in domestic manufacturing employment. Thirty percent of the jobs created in the maquiladora assembly plants in the 1990s no longer exist, partly because operations have moved to China and other lower-wage countries.²
- NAFTA has not been able to increase wages in Mexico. Real wages for Mexicans are lower now than pre-NAFTA and despite an increase in productivity, wages have not increased. Income inequality has increased between Mexico and the U.S. and Canada.³
- Undocumented immigration from Mexico to the U.S. doubled in the 1990s, with much of it occurring after NAFTA’s implementation.⁴

While the bulleted points above highlight the more serious effects of NAFTA on Mexico and on migration to the U.S., it is expected that CAFTA will have similar repercussions. In addition, since CAFTA essentially extends NAFTA to six other low-wage countries, it will increase competition with Mexico by providing new and cheaper markets to where jobs can be outsourced; this will further decrease employment opportunities in Mexico.

U.S. border policies have not been effective in deterring undocumented immigration. Rather than severely limiting the number of migrants who enter the U.S., an increase in border patrol agents and policies like Operation Gatekeeper to secure parts of the Mexico/U.S. border have only pushed migrants into harsh and dangerous areas of the desert and, as a result, 3,500 migrants have died since 1994. As history demonstrates, as long as there are strong “push” factors, people will continue to risk their lives to come to the U.S. Free trade allows the movement of goods, services and capital across borders, yet people are highly restricted in their ability to migrate despite their economic need. To be effective, U.S. border and immigration policies must address these “push factors”, which in part stem from U.S. trade policies like NAFTA and CAFTA.

¹ Polaski, Sandra. *Mexican Employment, Productivity and Income a Decade after NAFTA*. (2004). <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1473>

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Another America is Possible: The Impact of NAFTA on the U.S. Latino Community and Lessons for Future Trade Agreements*. (2004). <http://www.citizen.org/documents/LatinosReportFINAL.pdf>.

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For more information, contact Sean Garcia at 202.546.7010 or sgarcia@lawg.org

The Latin America Working Group, along with the Border Working Group, circulates letters to all members of Congress twice a month, focusing on the plight of real migrants. The letters include policy statements that advocate for immigration reform. This is one of our recent stories:

Age: 18 Years

Sex: Male

Nationality: Guatemalan

City of Residence: El Paso, TX

- 1. *When did you cross the border into the US? How? Did you come alone, or with family and friends?***
I crossed the border in January of this year. I hopped trains and walked from Guatemala through Mexico for 20 days, then crossed through the mountains outside of El Paso. I entered with two other men, one my brother in law and another we met along the way from Nicaragua.
- 2. *What were your reasons for coming to the US? What conditions in your home country had an impact on your decision to migrate?***
I came to the USA to work. There was work in Guatemala, but it did not pay enough to live.
- 3. *What difficulties, if any, did you have entering the US? Did you have any encounters or problems with the Border Patrol, with vigilante justice groups or with bandits?***
One of the most difficult experiences was the extreme cold in Mexico. My arms and legs froze to the tops of the trains that we hopped. We did not have adequate clothing, and we had never experienced that kind of cold before. There were also many thieves along the way. I was invited to stay at a home one night, and the people who invited me tried to rob me. But the owner of the house's wife was from Guatemala, and she intervened for someone from her country. We encountered on the other hand many good people who gave us food and water.

At one point we thought that the Border Patrol had spotted us, but we were able to hide. A Border Patrol helicopter circled for a while, but we remained still. When the Border Patrol seemed to give up and go away, we dashed down the mountain. The journey was difficult, but, with the help of God, here I am.
- 4. *Did you use a smuggler to enter the US? How much did you pay for their services?***
We entered without the help of a coyote. It would have cost me \$6,000 to pay a coyote from Guatemala, about 40,000 quetzales. It would have killed me to pay that much money; it is not easy to make that much money. I earned about 50 quetzales a day in Guatemala.
- 5. *Were you aware of the possible risks of crossing the border? If not, would you have crossed had you known the risks?***
I was unaware of the difficulties ahead when we started out. I would not have come if I had known the risks; it would have been easier to stay in Guatemala, even with the low pay.
- 6. *Have you crossed the border into the US before?***
We crossed successfully on our first try.
- 7. *Are you still supporting family or friends in your home country? If so, who?***
I plan to send money back to my mother, and I've already sent a little.
- 8. *Did you have the promise of a job before you came to the US? What is your job now?***
I had no work arranged before arriving. I am currently working in roofing in El Paso.