

# The immigration debacle

## POST-9/11 BORDER SECURITY

The Bush administration has been implementing increasingly restrictive policies toward undocumented or irregular immigration since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It responds to the negative perception of a still-porous and dangerous US–Mexico border and a public opinion constantly pressing to get more control over the country’s fragile national security. In response, the federal government and Congress approved unprecedented amounts of funds assigned to intensify the process of “rebordering the borders,” which has brought more institutionalized and sophisticated technology to border surveillance.

To get an idea of scale, in 1992, before the border operations were established by the Clinton administration, there were nearly 5,000 Border Patrol (BP) employees. By 2007, according to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), around 15,000 BP agents were listed and for 2008 there are expected to be 18,000 employees. Recently, US President George W. Bush proposed raising the DHS budget even more, up 19 percent from last year, for border security. It will be assigned to build more fencing along the southern border and install high-tech surveillance equipment and other infrastructure.

The border security measures have changed the direction of migrant flows to unpopulated, inhospitable, and dangerous places in an effort to ensure easy detection. Every year, immigration officials apprehend a large number of migrants—some of them several times. In 1994, almost a million people were apprehended at the border; and 1,700,000 migrants were apprehended at the peak of the 2000 economic boom, the highest number in the last 15 years. Nevertheless, since 9/11, detentions of undocumented migrants have dropped substantially every year. For example, 1,206,457 migrants were detained or removed during 2006, and 85 percent of them were Mexican.

BY MÓNICA VEREA

Mónica Vereá is a professor of integration studies and former founding director of the Center for Research on North America at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

The border security measures have changed the direction of migrant flows to unpopulated, inhospitable, and dangerous places in an effort to ensure easy detection.

## SECURITY AND THE CHANGING FACE OF MIGRATION

Crossing the border into the United States has become increasingly difficult, expensive, and dangerous. It has transformed the Mexican migration pattern from a circular movement of workers into a more permanent one. Many are reluctant to return to their places of origin, even temporarily, because going back and forth is too dangerous and costly. It has also raised the cost of migration. Several people are willing to pay expensive traffickers whatever sum is necessary to cross to “the other side.” Thus, human smuggling has become a very complex and lucrative business, from an estimate of US\$500 during the 1980s to nearly US\$3,000 today. And it has driven up human rights violations, injuries, and the rate of deaths during border crossing. The death rate has risen from 30 to 60 deaths at the beginning of the 1980s to more than 500 deaths annually in 2007. The attempt to make the border impermeable and resistant to the movement

of persons has not deterred Mexican immigrants from entering without documents to the United States, but it has kept them from going back home. It has dramatically accelerated the rate of Mexican population growth in the United States, while exacerbating the social and economic marginalization of the population.

Besides the impressive federal policy of enhancing border enforcement, the Bush administration has recently proposed that employer sanctions must be applied in a stricter way, as a response to the frozen *Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act* by Congress. The DHS has been implementing a program to enforce immigration rules at worksites by exposing undocumented workers with fake or stolen social security numbers to their employers. Their intention is not necessarily sanctioning employers, but deporting undocumented workers, which often is carried out through violent and inhumane raids. Dramatic situations are taking place in different states that receive migrants. Virtually every state legislature in the United States is discussing, and in some cases approving, tough new immigration control measures against the presence of undocumented migrants, creating a subsequent increase in anti-immigrant sentiment.

Consequently, the “enforcement-only policy” applied by the Bush administration with the support of some states has made life much more difficult for the 12 million undocumented immigrants. They are in a worse situation than before, and their contribution to the US economy has been poorly recognized. The fact that they are working and earning wages, paying taxes, and spending a good part of their salaries on goods and services is seldom mentioned.

## THE BENEFITS OF MIGRATION

Even though Mexicans are aware that the US economy is slowing, and that

The immigration debacle, page 37

thereby making it feasible to import directly into the country of assembly with no extra duties on the way through. Hence, Mexico was able to keep its maquiladora industry but lost the opportunity it had bargained for under NAFTA to turn Mexico into the manufacturing hub of parts for the maquiladora industry. This is not just Mexico's misfortune; it is a North American problem to the degree it has caused the exodus of Mexican migrants fleeing the consequences of a failed NAFTA.

## The solution to this regional conundrum is to recreate the original NAFTA proposal.

### A POST-BUSH SOLUTION

The solution to this regional conundrum is to recreate the original NAFTA proposal. This could be accomplished by means of a combination of cooperative measures: for example, pledges on the part of companies to source their intermediary goods in North America; proactive regional industrial policies to promote regional production of intermediary goods; and time-frames within which Mexico would re-establish its general tariff on select "third-party" intermediary goods, which would not entail breaking any trade agreements because these tariffs were lowered unilaterally within the context of temporary programs. Taken as a whole, this would be a practical policy to solve a tandem of regional problems: production would be encouraged to return to North America, with Mexico as its preferred low-cost alternative site. Such a strategy would enable Mexican employment to grow to the point where, eventually, salaries for Mexico's hard-pressed millions would rise, and immigration would finally start to fall. There is no other logic that would address Mexico's deep-seated structural problems. ❁

## The immigration debacle continued from page 33

sectors that rely on undocumented labour will be affected, the incentives to migrate and the demand for cheap labour still exist. In other words, there are some US states, in real need of labour, considering temporary worker bills. In agriculture, for example, the Bush administration is now taking action to streamline the existing guest agricultural worker program, through H-2A visas. With respect to non-agricultural low-skilled labour, some lawmakers are under growing pressure to increase the supply of 66,000 seasonal-worker H-2B visas annually. Different local legislatures are working with employers to provide a legal mechanism to deal with labour shortages. Simultaneously and contradictorily, authorities are conducting violent raids in suspected workplaces in order to detect illegal immigrants. This situation reflects the inefficient program that exists for hiring agricultural guest workers and the need for more visas for non-agricultural low-skilled labour in construction, hotel and hospital services, agriculture, and mining industries, to name a few. Migrant labour with or without documents has been important for keeping these industries healthy and competitive.

### THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Immigration has become a divisive issue in this year's presidential campaign. Nevertheless, the two main candidates support immigration reform with a path to legalization. Both of them seem to understand the urgency of reforming the immigration system. They also support the establishment of a verification system for employment. Individually, their positions are:

- Barack Obama promises to push for immigration reform during his first year in office. He is in favour of a guest worker program and is in favour of tougher worksite enforcement. He would like more visas for highly skilled workers, but

thinks family ties should remain the basis of legal immigration. He supports driver's licences for illegal immigrants.

- John McCain, the likely Republican presidential nominee and architect of the Senate's failed "McCain-Kennedy" Comprehensive Immigration Reform bill, has supported a guest worker program and a legalization process. Lately in his campaign, he has shifted the emphasis, promising to control the borders before implementing measures that were part of his reform bill.

### THE EMPOWERED HISPANIC VOTER

In the middle of this rancorous immigration debate and almost a year after the immigration reform failure, most lawmakers at Congress are discussing different measures to improve border security and the enforcement of immigration laws. Some are also concerned about business demands for more foreign workers. Few are working on the challenge of what to do with undocumented migrants already living in the country.

More than ever before, US citizens of Mexican origin have an opportunity to make their vote count and support a candidate who would try to really push comprehensive immigration reform, including more visas and a path to legalization. An increasingly institutionalized and organized Mexican American community must lobby—with the support of the Mexican government—local governments and legislatures, in order to diminish the anti-immigrant initiatives and change the growing harassment and negative sentiments toward Mexican migrants. ❁

**From Polity Press September 2008,  
*Defiant Publics: The Unprecedented  
Reach of the Global Citizen*  
by Daniel Drache**