International Migration: The U.S.-Mexican Border

PRÉCIS

The movement of people across national borders to resettle—immigration—is a major international phenomenon, and one that dates back to the beginnings of humankind. People move for a variety of reasons, from the hope of economic betterment to the fear of political repression or extinction; the common theme is and has been the attempt to improve the human condition. Today there are roughly 200 million refugees worldwide, with the majority being people from the developing world (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) seeking new homes in the developed world (Europe and North America). The case study application of the movement of Mexicans and Central Americans across the U.S.-Mexico border illustrates the underlying dynamics of worldwide immigration, while adding some unique variables in the form of drug trafficking and terrorism.

Migration is one of the oldest and most enduring aspects of the human experience. At some level of remove, essentially everyone is an immigrant or the descendant of immigrants; the only humans who can rightfully claim nonimmigrant status are direct descendants of the earliest humans from the Great Rift Valley in Africa (where the ancestors of today’s human population are believed first to have emerged) who still live there. The immigrant status is especially true for North Americans: even those peoples to whom the appellation “Native Americans” is applied arrived here from Asia, probably walking across the then land bridge between Asia and North America in the Bering Straits. Peoples moving from place to place are thus a very enduring part of history.
Immigration is a large, important, and controversial contemporary phenomenon. In 2005, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs reported that there were 191 million international immigrants (people residing in countries other than that of their birth). That figure fluctuates from year-to-year, as some immigrants are repatriated and others leave voluntarily or flee their native lands. The reasons they move are various and complicated, but the net result is a constant flow of people across borders. As Koser points out in a 2009 article, today approximately 1 in every 35 people in the world is an immigrant. The arrival of new peoples has always been a source of controversy of greater or lesser intensity depending on who was trying to settle where in what numbers and for what reasons. No two cases are identical.

The immigrant question has always been important for the United States. As the admonition to “bring me your tired, your huddled masses” on the Statue of Liberty heralds, the United States is a quintessential immigrant state, with waves of immigrants from various places arriving at different times in the country’s history to constitute one of the world’s most nationally and ethnically diverse populations. Sometimes the process of new immigrant waves has been orderly, open, and noncontentious, but as often as not it has been surrounded by considerable disagreement and rancor.

Immigration has, of course, become particularly contentious over the last two decades because of the large-scale movement of Mexicans and Central Americans across the U.S.-Mexican border. The actual numbers involved are difficult to estimate actively, because many of the immigrants have been so-called “irregular” or illegal immigrants who, by definition, are unaccounted for when they arrive. Using the 2005 UN figures, it is estimated that about 20 percent of immigrants in the world are in the United States, over half of which have entered across the U.S.-Mexican border, mostly illegally. The result has been an enormous political controversy in the United States over what to do about this problem, the dimensions and dynamics of which form the case application in this chapter.

While the American situation is the currently most public manifestation of concern over immigration, it is by no means the only place where the question sits on the public agenda. Europe, for instance, is host to a considerably larger immigrant population than the United States, especially in a few select countries like Germany. To understand the nature of the concern—and to place the current U.S. debate into a global context—it is necessary to look at the immigration question more broadly, which is the purpose of the next section.

PARAMETERS OF IMMIGRATION

Immigration is a normal, daily occurrence in much of the world. Some countries are more permissive about letting citizens leave (emigrate) or enter from other countries (immigrate), but some population movement is a regular part of international activity, and one that is arguably increasing in a globalizing world in which international commerce of all kinds is increasing. Employing an
accepted definition used by Koser that an international immigrant is “a person who stays outside his usual country of residence for at least one year,” the global total of immigrants today is around 200 million people.

Immigrants are often subdivided into more or less controversial categories. Regular international immigrants consist of those individuals who have migrated to a country through legal channels, meaning their immigration is recognized by the host government. Countries allow such immigrants into the country for a variety of reasons and in different numbers depending on the needs or uses they may have for such populations. Parts of Europe—notably Germany—have long admitted workers from places like Turkey to augment a shrinking workforce as its population ages (see discussion below), and the United States has historically given priority status to people with particularly needed education and technical skills, such as scientists and engineers from developing countries like India.

There are, however, other categories of immigrants that are more controversial. In the contemporary debate (and especially the U.S.-Mexican case), the most controversial are so-called irregular immigrants. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs defines this class of people as “those who enter a country without proper authorization or who have violated the terms of stay of the authorization they hold, including by overstaying.” Acronyms for irregular status include illegal, undocumented, and unauthorized immigrants. As Koser points out, “there are around 40 million irregular immigrants worldwide, of whom perhaps one-third are in the United States.” The most publicized, and largest, part of that total are irregular by virtue of illegal entry into the country; some of the most problematical, however, are individuals who have entered the country legally but have overstayed the conditions of their residence, as in not leaving after student or temporary work visas have expired. This latter category is troublesome because of possible connections to anti-American activities such as terrorism.

A special category of immigrants are refugees. Broadly speaking, refugees are the most prominent example of what the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) calls “forcibly displaced people,” who, according to 2009 UNCHR figures, number about 42 million. The largest numbers of people within this category are refugees (displaced people living outside their native countries) at about 15.2 million, internally displaced persons or IDPs (refugees within their own countries) at about 26 million, and asylum seekers (people who have sought international protection but whose applications have not been acted upon), who numbered 827,000 in 2008. The Refugee Act of 1980 in the United States borrows its definition from the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (and its 1967 Protocol), saying a refugee is “a person outside of his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-grounded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” Those who seek refugee status often come from developing countries where human misery is both economic and political, meaning that it is sometimes difficult to determine why a particular refugee or
group of refugees seek to migrate. As Koser points out, “though an important legal distinction can be made between people who move for work purposes and those who flee conflict and persecution, in reality the two can be difficult to distinguish.”

International and internal refugees are most prominently associated with conflict zones and especially civil conflicts. One of the world’s most well publicized instances of refugee dynamics is the Darfur region of Sudan and surrounding countries like the Central African Republic and Chad, as discussed in Chapter 8. In terms of sheer numbers, the largest concentrations of refugees are people fleeing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: 1.8 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, 1.1 Iraqi refugees in Syria, and 980,000 Iraqi and Afghan refugees in Iran.

The dynamics of immigration as a global issue requires looking at the phenomenon from at least three vantage points. The first is the motivation for immigration: Why do people emigrate from one place to another, and what roles do they fulfill when they become immigrants? The second is where the phenomenon of immigration is the most and least evident on a global scale. While it is generally true that the global pattern is one of people moving from the developed to the developing world, the pattern is selective and regionally distinctive. The third concern is immigration as a problem, both globally and locally. Are there distinctive problems that are created by current, ongoing patterns, and are these likely to get better or worse in the future? The answers to these questions, in turn, help frame the context of the problems associated with immigration across the Mexican border into the United States.

Immigration Motivations and Functions

People migrate for a variety of both positive and negative reasons, and immigration is more or less positively received by the people of the places to which they migrate depending on the role and need the receiving country has for the particular migrants that are arriving. Both the motivations for migrating and the reactions to being asked to receive migrants are sufficiently numerous and complex that it is difficult to generalize across the board.

The most obvious—virtually tautological—reason for international migration is to improve one’s living conditions by relocation. People decide to leave for both political and economic reasons: politically to avoid conflict or discrimination in their home land, and economically in the hope or promise of a materially better life in the country to which they immigrate. This basic statement of motivation has numerous variations, as Choucri and Mistree enumerate: “the most obvious patterns of international migration today include the following: migration for employment; seasonal mobility for employment; permanent settlements; refugees who are forced to migrate; resettlement; state-sponsored movements; tourism and ecotourism; brain drains and ‘reversals’ of brain drains; smuggled and trafficked people; people returning to their country of origin; environmental migration and refugees from natural shortages or crises; nonlegal migration; and religious pilgrimage.”
History’s most dramatic migrations have had political upheaval as an underlying theme. As Koser points out, “large movements of people have always been associated with significant global events like revolutions, wars, and the rise and fall of empires; with epochal changes like economic expansion, nation-building, and political transformations; and with enduring challenges like conflict, persecution, and dispossession.” While these dramatic kinds of events are still at play, the current surge of immigration has a more subtle economic theme that is part of globalization and modern demographic changes in the world.

The economic motivation, to move somewhere where economic opportunities are better than where one lives, is nothing new. As Choucri and Mistree summarize, “during good times people migrate to find better opportunities; during bad times people migrate to escape more difficult circumstances.” In either situation, the motivating factor is opportunity, which is manifested in the availability of jobs because, as Choucri and Mistree add, “To the extent that population growth exceeds a society’s employment potential, the probability is very high that people will move to other countries in search of jobs.”

Demographics enter the picture here. Population growth rates are highest in developing countries, and that means the numbers of rising job seekers is greatest in these countries relative to the number of jobs available. In the developed world, on the other hand, population growth rates are much lower (in some cases below levels to maintain current population sizes), the overall population is aging, and thus the percentage of citizens in the active workforce is diminishing. Goldstone explains the consequence: “the developed countries’ labor forces will substantially age and decline, constraining economic growth in the developed world and raising demands for immigrant workers.” Indeed, there are estimates that the developed countries that will be most successful in the future are those who are best able to augment their shrinking workforces with immigrant labor. This simple dynamic dictates pressure for population migration from developing to developed countries globally, and that pressure is often in fairly dramatic excess of immigration quotas and the like that many developed countries (including the United States) have. The United States is the only developed country with a direct land border with a developing country, making that interplay most obvious in the Mexican-American case.

The kinds of talents that immigrants can contribute come in different categories that make acceptance of immigrants more or less enthusiastic. The smallest and most welcome category of immigrants is what the United Nations refers to as “highly skilled workers.” These workers, generally highly educated and possessing scientific or engineering expertise at the cutting edge of the global economy, are the subject of so-called “brain drains” in one direction or the other. Countries of origins of these individuals are often anxious to restrict their emigration or, for those who have moved, to encourage their return (reverse brain drains, a phenomenon introduced with regard to India in Chapter 12). Countries like the United States that have historically been the beneficiaries of the movement of the highly skilled people make special provisions to make immigration possibilities attractive for these groups (see Martin for a discussion).
The far more problematical category of economic immigrants is those who have comparatively low skill levels. They are a double-edged sword for the countries into which they move. On one hand, they provide labor when it is in short supply, and particularly in areas that are low paying or undesirable. Koser refers to these kinds of jobs as “3D jobs: dirty, difficult, or dangerous.” He points out that “in the majority of advanced economies, migrant workers are overrepresented in agriculture, construction, heavy industry, manufacturing, and services—especially food, hospitality, and domestic services.” Martin adds that these kinds of jobs are “the work magnet that stimulates illegal immigration.”

Unskilled immigrants—especially irregular immigrants—pose a particular moral and practical dilemma for receiving states. These immigrants do jobs that the citizens are either unwilling to do or that they will not do at the lower wages that migrants will accept (especially irregular migrants). Thus, without a pool of such laborers, vital services either would not get done or would only be done at higher costs. The alternative to migrant labor is more expensive indigenous labor, which would demand higher wages (federal minimum wages in the United States at least), which would ripple upward through the wage system (there would be relatively fewer laborers for traditional jobs, making them more valuable). The dilemma is that quotas on legal immigration are far too restrictive to produce an adequate sized legal migrant pool to do the jobs migrants do, and if the current “underground” economy went above board and hired only legally registered immigrants, they would have to pay them higher wages, provide benefits, and do other things that would raise the costs of their labor. The moral dimension is that this situation often leads to a public denunciation of irregular immigrants by those employers who most depend on them and who would be most economically damaged were there to be no irregular immigrants.

The acceptance or rejection of economic immigrants thus operates at two levels. Highly skilled immigrants are almost always welcome, because they augment the receiving country’s talent pool and add intellectual or physical capabilities that might not otherwise be present in adequate numbers or at all. It is estimated, for instance, that fully one-half of the scientists and engineers practicing in the United States are of foreign birth. Under the Immigration Act of 1990, the United States allows 140,000 immigrants with needed skills into the country annually. The country’s intellectual and technological base would be seriously compromised were they to leave or be evicted.

The system operates differently regarding less skilled immigrants, which, of course, includes most of the irregular immigrants. As suggested already, there is some hypocrisy that taints the question of such economic immigrants. For the most part, the immigrants themselves are impoverished people fleeing great economic deprivation personally and motivated to improve the lots of themselves and their extended families. Indeed, remittances from these workers back to their relatives in their countries of origin are a significant part of the economies of some of these countries. The fact that these workers lack proper documentation, however, means they are
here illegally, and this fact triggers sentiment against them. At the same time, their status leaves them particularly vulnerable to unscrupulous employers who can pay them at very low rates because they have no leverage against exploitation. Complicating matters is that since illegal employment typically also means that wages are not taxed (they are paid on a cash basis), any demands that this category of people makes on community resources (health care and education, for instance) is not offset by payments they have made into those systems. It is not clear whether the blame in this case lies with the workers or with employers who do not withhold and submit parts of earnings to appropriate government entities.

Refugees present a separate problem. Generally, they can also be divided into skilled and unskilled groups, with the skilled often constituting professionals from the country from which they flee, and the unskilled composed mainly of subsistence farmers and the like. The skilled parts of the population are more likely to be absorbed into the country to which they flee (although generally at much lower standards of living), while the unskilled generally cannot be absorbed and become a burden on the country or on international bodies like the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). Moreover, most refugees are from developing countries and flee to adjacent countries, which are also poor and thus lacking the resources to tend for their new citizens. Darfurians, for instance, have fled to Chad and the Central African Republic, both of which are desperately poor and incapable of providing much succor to the refugees.

There is another category of generally irregular immigrants that should be mentioned: criminals who move to new countries in order to carry out illegal activities of one sort or another. Human traffickers and smugglers are one instance of this form of immigration. Another is the movement of drug traffickers into the countries in which they do business or through which they transit. This form of irregular immigration is a particular problem along the U.S.-Mexican border and the source of a disproportionate amount of the concern with immigrants that anti-immigration forces mount. As will be suggested in the case study section, there is often not a great deal of effort within the anti-immigration movement to differentiate between criminal and purely economic immigrants.

The World Situation
There are two basic and overlapping trends in worldwide immigration. The first is that the burden of this immigration is shifting geographically from the developing to the developed world, and especially to Europe and North America. (Asian migration is actually greater than migration to North America, but it is intra-developing world movement.) The other trend is that immigration is increasing numerically: there are more immigrants worldwide than there have been. Part of this latter trend can be at least partially explained by the overall increase in world population. A significant element, however, is demographic, based in aging populations in the developed world and the
consequent need to import younger workers both to sustain economic activity and to support an aging and unproductive population.

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division presents a statistical summary of the immigration trends in its *International Migration Report 2006: A Global Assessment* (hereafter IMR). The report provides comparative data for 1990 and 2005 that are representative of the migration problem. Between 1990 and 2005, overall global migration increased from 154.8 million in 1990 to 190.6 million in 2005, a statistically small increase of from 2.9 to 3.0 percent of world population. The distribution of that migration, however, was significant. The IMR divides the destinations of immigrants between the more and least developed countries. In 1990, the more developed countries were the destination of 82.4 million immigrants (53.2 percent of the world total). By 2005, that number had increased to 115.4 million, or 60.5 percent of the total.

These destinations are geographically distinct. Europe and North America are the destinations of most of the immigrants to the developed world (not entirely surprising given that the two continents encompass most of the developed world). Europe bears the brunt of this migration, followed by North America. As the IMR summarizes, “the proportion of migrants living in North America rose from 18 percent in 1990 to 23 percent in 2005, and the share of Europe rose from 32 to 34 percent. In 2005, one in every three international migrants lived in Europe and about one in every four lived in North America.” The growth rate of international migrants is greatest for North America, where the “migrant stock” rose by an annual rate of 3.2 percent between 1990 and 2005. Most North American immigrants come from Mexico and Central America, whereas immigrants to Europe come primarily from Africa and Asia.

These figures are particularly noteworthy for the United States, which has the largest number of international migrants of any country in the world (20.1 percent of the world total in 2005, according to the IMR). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics provides estimates of the distribution and number of immigrants. For 2008, it reports that there were 1,107,126 immigrants with permanent legal resident status in the country, but also estimated that there were 11,600,000 “unauthorized immigrants.” Slightly over seven million of those residents were from Mexico, with approximately another one million each from El Salvador and Guatemala.

These trends are likely to increase in the future. As Goldstone points out, “the developed countries’ labor forces will substantially age and decline, constraining economic growth in the developed world and raising the demand for immigrant workers.” The rate at which populations are aging, and how governments respond to this problem, varies greatly, with different consequences. Japan, for instance, has one of the world’s most rapidly aging populations and has, for cultural reasons, been very reluctant to allow non-Japanese immigrants into the country. This is already having two effects.
First, it means that a shrinking portion of the population is part of the productive workforce that must, among other things, produce the wealth needed to support older, retired Japanese. Second, it means a contraction in productivity and also population. The cumulative effect of these dynamics is the projection of a smaller and less economically prominent Japan in the future. In contrast, the American population is aging more slowly, and the effects have been attenuated by the influx of younger immigrant workers to do jobs that aging Americans either cannot or will not do (3D jobs in particular). Europe also has this problem, which especially features low fertility rates, and is wrestling with acceptable rates or immigration to deal with it, a problem made more acute by the relatively high percentage of immigrants who are Muslim.

The scale of immigration, especially from the developing to the developed world, is not going to go away. If anything, it will increase in the future. As Goldstone suggests, “Current levels of immigration from developing to developed countries are paltry compared to those that the forces of supply and demand might soon create across the world.” The degree to which this likely trend is a concern depends on whether one views immigration as a problem or not.

The Immigration Problem
Most of the discussions of immigration in the popular debate tend to focus on the problems associated with the phenomenon. The breaching of sovereign national borders is one manifestation of the concern many have with immigration, and underlying many concerns is a sort of “nativism” that seeks to protect the racial or other purity of particular countries from the polluting of countries by the outsiders. The desire to “secure” borders, one of the most frequent ways in which immigration opposition is voiced, also collides with the dynamics of globalization. Both these factors are present in the American debate about immigration from Mexico.

The question of migration needs to be put in some historical perspective, especially in the United States, where the debate has become loudest and most shrill. The United States is, and basically always has been, an immigrant country, with different national groups arriving in waves during the over two centuries of the American experience. In the nineteenth century, for instance, much of the immigration was from Europe, as Europeans sought to flee physical (e.g., the Irish potato famine) or other economic and political distress (e.g., large Italian migration that, according to Martin, reached 285,000 in 1907 alone). Those immigrant waves have been selective and have provoked reactions: the National Origins Act of 1924, for instance, limited Italian legal immigration to 4,000 annually. The twentieth century saw the placing and then removal of bans or highly restrictive limits on Asian immigration. The current reaction to Latin American immigration must take into account that it is, in some important ways, part of a broader historical pattern of rejection and embrace of different immigrant groups.
Large-scale, and especially irregular, immigration does pose problems conceptually for governments. While the instances of truly effective “Great Wall” of China solutions to keeping borders sacrosanct are historically few, high levels of border porosity do pose the question of national control of their own territory. As Choucri and Mistree put it, “perhaps in no other arena is countries’ lack of effective control of borders and national access so striking as in the realm of international migration.” According to Koser, this is particularly a problem with illegal migrants: “One legitimate risk is irregular immigrant’s threat to the exercise of sovereignty.”

The result is an essential ambivalence. Breaches of sovereignty are a matter of concern in principle among those to whom national sovereignty is a particular obsession, but it is also a practical concern if those who may breach sovereign boundaries are individuals—such as terrorists—about whom the country has legitimate concerns in national security of other terms. The problem, of course, is that creating boundaries that cannot be breached—the most extreme form of making boundaries secure—is probably impractical or impossible (the direct American–Canadian border, excluding the Alaska–Canada border, is over 3,900 miles long) and would have other undesirable consequences. Chief among these would be the effect of slowing or strangling the flow of goods, services, and people across national boundaries, the essence of globalization. Choucri and Mistree, once again, capture the basis of the problem: “the evident inability to regulate and control access across national borders is one legacy of the current phase of globalization.”

This dynamic is most often overlooked in the debate over secure borders and immigration control. Restriction of movement across national boundaries is directly antithetical to the promotion of free trade which, as pointed out in Chapter 9, is the heart of globalization. While cutting off the flow of Mexican and Central American peasants across the southern border of the United States may seem to have no direct impact on global economic activity, the underlying dynamics of such a movement can have such an impact. The movement of labor from places where it is abundant to places where it is not is indeed part of the globalization phenomenon. Goldstone argues that the two forces need not be at fundamental odds with one another, however. “Correctly managed, population movement can benefit developed and developing countries alike. . . . Immigration to developed countries can provide economic opportunities for the ambitious and serve as a safety valve for all.”

The brunt of this discussion has been that international immigration is a large and complex phenomenon. The movement of people from one area to another began with the migration out of the Great Rift Valley that began human population of the globe, and it continues to this day. The growing size of the global population, the increased unacceptability of great disparities between people in the developed and developing world, and contemporary forces like those associated with globalization help shape the contemporary issue. Nowhere is that issue more poignant or prominent than in the case of the U.S.-Mexican border.
THE U.S.-MEXICAN BORDER PROBLEM

Immigration policy has always been a matter of disagreement and ambivalence among Americans. One pole in the disagreement is and always has been the self-image Americans have of themselves as a nation (and essentially a nationality) of immigrants who have escaped oppression from an otherwise tainted world and hold their arms open for others like themselves. The Statue of Liberty’s welcome to the oppressed captures this popular sentiment. The other pole, however, suggests a more selective attitude, the idea that some peoples are more welcome than others. Immigrant nationalities as widely disparate as the Irish and Italians from Europe and the Chinese and Japanese from Asia have been the objects of exclusion. In terms of the current controversy, it is symbolically significant that one of the derogations heaped upon Italian immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was to refer to them as “wops,” an acronym for “without official papers.” In important ways, the current reaction against Mexican and Central American irregular immigrants (or “wops”) is simply the contemporary manifestation of this historical strain.

The current crisis along the U.S.-Mexican border is also part of the global migration trend from the developing to the developed world already introduced. The basic dynamics that are causing a surge in African and Middle Eastern migration to Europe are present in the United States as well, and for most of the same reasons. The existence of an aging population that is not replenishing itself rapidly enough to sustain an adequate workforce to fill needed functions (especially 3D jobs) afflicts both North America and Europe, tying together immigration and prosperity in the process. The dictates of globalization, moreover, demand an increased flow of productive workers into the country if the national edge in the global economy is to be maintained.

The current crisis has its own unique, exacerbating characteristics as well. As a developed–developing world phenomenon, the U.S.-Mexican border case is intensified by the nature of the border. At 1,933 miles of mostly desolate, rural topography, it is a very long and difficult frontier to “seal,” as its proponents advocate, without debilitating levels of resource expenditure that might prove inadequate in the most optimal circumstances. At the same time, the U.S.-Mexico boundary is the world’s only direct land border between the developed and developing worlds. While G-20 member Mexico may chafe at its continuing designation as a developing world, the per capita income of Mexicans is only about 30 percent that of Americans statistically, meaning the economic lure of migration is present. Citizens from Central America migrate through Mexico and across the border, a more direct form of developing world migration. Migrants to Europe, in contrast, have no equivalent of the U.S.-Mexico boundary as a symbol of obstruction to their entrance.

The U.S.-Mexican case is also distinguished by its sheer volume and the accompanying complexity of the problem. No one, of course, knows exactly how many irregular immigrants are in the United States, and those who voice the greatest concern would argue that official estimates of 11.6 million cited earlier are probably too low (one sees estimates ranging from about 10–20 million
depending on the source). This is a larger number than for any other country, although there are several countries such as Germany that have a higher percentage of immigrants in the population than the United States. Moreover, the problem is geographically distinct within the United States: About one-quarter of all estimated irregular immigrants in the United States in 2008 were in California (2.85 million), followed by Texas (1.68 million), and Florida (840,000). Arizona, whose actions to restrict irregulars caused great political commotion in 2010, is fifth on the list at 560,000.

The issue is also a complex one. The concern about the U.S.-Mexican border not only pertains to immigration, although it is certainly that. In addition, however, the question of the integrity of the frontier has strong implications for the trafficking of illicit drugs into the United States. Indeed, it will be argued that much of the concern about criminality associated in the popular debate is not about immigration so much as it is about the U.S. “war on drugs.” In addition, the frontier is also important because foreign terrorists who are intent on doing harm to the United States must enter across the U.S. border in either Mexico or Canada. One irony of the current fixation with the Mexican border is that it may have the unwanted effect of making the Canadian border more permeable and thus easier for terrorists to penetrate than it was before.

This introduction suggests the direction of the rest of the case. The discussion will first move to describing the nature of the physical dimension of the American border and whether or how that border can be “secured.” With that rejoinder in mind, the discussion will then move to the nature of the various prongs of the threat itself posed by a porous border: illegal immigrations, drugs, and terrorists. Each discussion will include some analysis of whether making the border more or less impermeable solves each aspect of the problem and what other forms of effort might be equally or more effective. One suggestion that will be raised is the possible hypocrisy of some claimed solutions.

The Physical Problem

Almost all the solutions proposed for the U.S.-Mexican border revolve around some better way to “secure” it, which means roughly to make it more difficult for unauthorized people to come across the border into the United States. The most extreme advocacies call for “sealing” the border, which generally equates to making it impossible physically for unwanted outsiders to intrude on American soil. Before examining the desirability of such a policy and what it would entail, it is necessary first to examine the physical problem posed by the unique nature of the American border.

Border security is, of course, a problem for all sovereign states. How much and what kind of a problem depends largely on two aspects of the problem: whether the border’s function is to keep people from leaving (emigration) or entering (immigration), and the physical qualities of the border: its length and complexity, for example. Keeping émigrés from leaving the United States has never been a particular problem (except for criminals fleeing prosecution, for instance); the emphasis has always been on regulating who and how many
people enter the country. The U.S. problem has thus focused on the physical qualities of the border to be secured.

The territorial boundaries of the United States are among the most extensive, complex, and difficult to secure of any country on Earth. These borders can be divided into sea and land boundaries, each of which poses different priorities and problems. Moreover, the land borders of the United States are shared with two contiguous neighbors, Canada and Mexico. While the current dispute centers on the Mexican border, both are concerns: treating one as a problem and not the other is discriminatory and diplomatically untenable, and sealing the Mexican border but not the Canadian border runs the risk that some of the nefarious activity associated with a porous Mexican border would simply be transferred to the Canadian border (the entrance of terrorists or illicit drugs into the country, for instance).

The land and sea borders are extensive. The land border between the United States and Canada, for instance, is slightly more than 5,500 miles long (the boundary between Canada and the 48 contiguous states is 3,987 miles and between Canada and Alaska is 1,538 miles). Added to the 1,933 mile land border between the United States and Mexico, the total American land border is 7,358 miles. While not the longest in the world (Russia’s border with 14 other countries is approximately two-thirds longer), it is nonetheless a very long and forbidding stretch of territory to secure. In fact, most of the U.S.-Canadian border is hardly secured at all, particularly the extensive stretch between Lake Superior and the Pacific Ocean and the Alaska–Canada border. As a practical matter, it would be impossible to do so and, happily, for the most part such security is unnecessary.

The sea borders of the United States are even more extensive. Two measures are normally used to describe these borders: coastline and shoreline. The coastline generally refers to a line drawn along the intersection of the coast and the ocean, not allowing for bays, inlets, and other coastal features. The shoreline measures the topography of the coast, including the shores of bodies of water that empty into the oceans and seas. Using figures supplied by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the coastline of the United States is 12,383 miles, and the shoreline is 88,633 miles. Almost 42 percent of the U.S. coastline (5,580 miles) and 35 percent of shoreline (31,383 miles) are Alaskan and have not been a major concern since the Cold War. The 1,350 miles of Florida coastline and 8,426 miles of its coastline, however, are important security concerns regarding drugs importation and, to a lesser extent, the smuggling of irregular immigrants.

Effectively securing these borders is clearly a formidable task that is complicated by three other factors. One is the availability of assets to accomplish the task. The current effort concentrates on the 1,933 mile Mexican border and two forms of security: a border fence and larger numbers of Border Patrol and other human assets to monitor activity. It is not clear where the funds are to meet both these demands, and expanding the effort to include the Canadian and sea boundaries of the United States beyond current (and quite limited) proportions would be a further drain on available resources.
A second problem is whether such efforts can be entirely effective against determined attempts to breach the boundary. Illegal entry across the Mexican frontier is already largely orchestrated by illegal agents (so-called “coyotes”) who exact significant fees to sneak immigrants across the border, and the result of enhanced security efforts might simply be to increase their sophistication, as well as the expense and thus profit of their illegal enterprise. Moreover, it is not clear that an “immigrant-proof” solution is possible. As former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson has been quoted as saying, “If we put up a ten-foot fence, somebody is going to build an eleven-foot ladder.”

Finally, there is the question of unintended consequences of increased security. These are most marked in the case of the impediment to movement of goods and peoples across the borders, a question of the impact of border security on globalization, raised earlier. As Flynn has noted, an attempt to better control the border between the United States and Canada (especially the bridges between Detroit and Ontario) a decade ago had catastrophic effects on U.S. productivity, and any serious attempt to screen effectively something as simple as truck traffic at major crossing points with either country would create an enormous economic dislocation. This, of course, is a major problem regarding both the land and sea borders, and one that is generally under-emphasized in discussions of border security.

The Border Threats
As already noted, the question of the U.S.-Mexican border is really more than one threat. Its most prominent feature has been the level and consequences of irregular immigration across the border, and that aspect will be most prominently examined. It is also, however, a question of the movement of illicit narcotics and the consequent criminal behavior they bring with them and of the possible penetration of the United States by terrorists. It is not entirely clear that the most extensive and most important of these threats are the same thing.

The Immigration Problem. Immigration is, and always has been, an integral part of the American experience. While for most times and purposes, it has been one of the proud elements of the American heritage, it has had its dark side in the form of negative reactions to the migration of some people to the United States at some times. Throughout American history, what is now referred to as illegal immigration has always been a part of the pattern, and the history of immigration politics is largely an attempt to regulate both the quantity and quality (measured both in point of origin and skill levels) of immigration to the country. In the current context, the immigration problem along the U.S.-Mexican border is the most dramatic and contentious manifestation of a worldwide pattern of international immigration which, if authorities to which allusion has already been are correct, will only increase in the future.

The sheer volume of irregular immigrants in the United States is the heart of the perceived problem in the American political debate. There is some
minor disagreement about the terms of legal immigration into the country as it affects the flow of highly skilled and talented people into or out of the country, largely reflected in immigration quotas and the like. The heart of the debate, however, is about irregular immigration by Mexicans and Central Americans into the countries in numbers that exceed 10 million and may be much higher. Efforts to secure the border are aimed at reducing or eliminating the flow of irregulars into the country; efforts to apprehend and deport irregular immigrants already in the country are aimed at reducing those numbers.

Why is this immigrant flow a problem? Generally speaking, two reasons are cited, which help illuminate the actual parameters of the concern. One concern is the criminality that is associated with illegal residents. Whether crime is greater in places where there are concentrations of irregular immigrants is contested, but those who hold this concern point particularly to greater incidents of violent crime, normally by members of the irregular immigrant population against other members of that community, but sometimes spilling over and affecting the broader communities in which they are located. The other concern is the demands on social services (e.g., schools and medical facilities) made by irregular immigrants and their families, a concern accentuated by the fact that most irregular immigrants pay only user taxes (e.g., sales tax) but do not contribute to the social security fund or through payroll deduction, for instance.

These are two distinct problems that point to a basic division within the irregular immigrant population. There are, in essence, two groups that make up that community. By far the most numerous are economic immigrants, individuals who migrate to the United States in the same manner and for the same reasons that people in the developing world generally migrate to the developed world: the hope of providing a better life for themselves and their families. There is no systematic indication that their participation in or contribution to crime is any greater than that of the population at large; indeed, the knowledge that their arrest can lead to their deportation probably inhibits much criminal activity toward which they might be drawn. The other group is comprised of criminal immigrants, individuals who enter the country to engage in criminal behavior. Most prominent within this group are people engaged in narcotics trafficking in one way or another. This group brings with it the violent crime that has ravaged Mexico in particular, and is the source of virtually all the concern over the impact of immigration on crime.

Dividing the irregular immigrant community into these two categories helps understanding the problem and what to do about it. One must begin by asking the question, why do immigrants come illegally to the country? In the case of the vast majority—the economic immigrants—the answer is economic opportunity; jobs. This should not be surprising, given the disparity of wealth between the United States and Mexico and Central America, but this is also why economic immigrants migrate worldwide. In the case of irregular immigration into the United States, one explanation of why this has occurred—and especially why it has occurred to the extent it has—is found in the impact that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had on Mexico.
As discussed in the third edition of this book (Chapter 9, “Evaluating Globalization: The Case of NAFTA”), one of the perverse effects of that agreement was to flood Mexico with cheap, subsidized American corn the price of which undercut Mexican peasant growers, bankrupting them and forcing them off their farms. Many of these displaced peasants have become part of the flood of irregular immigrants to this country. Before NAFTA came into effect in 1994, there were an estimated 4.2 million illegal Latin American immigrants in the United States, compared to current totals.

The irony of this situation is that NAFTA was supposed to have exactly the opposite effect: it was supposed to create jobs in Mexico that would reduce the need of Mexicans to come north seeking employment. As Governor Richardson put it, “The whole idea that NAFTA would create jobs on the Mexican side and thus deter immigration has just been dead wrong.” In a 2005 Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) report, Krikorian argues that what happened was virtually the result of American politics that forced acceptance of agribusiness-friendly farm subsidies as a part of gaining acceptance of NAFTA (that included corn subsidies). As Krikorian puts it, “the massive growth of immigration pressures was not a failure of NAFTA, but an inevitable consequence.” Why? “Economic development, especially agricultural modernization, always sets people on the move, by consolidating small farms into larger, more productive operations. . . . The problem with NAFTA was that neither country did anything meaningful to make sure the excess Mexican peasantry moved to Mexico’s cities instead of ours.”

All of this, of course, took place within the context of the global economy of the 1990s and how that economy affected North America. Martin suggests the dynamics at work: “The economic situation in both countries in the 1990s—a boom in the United States, a very slow recovery from a 1994 bust in Mexico—led record numbers of Mexicans to enter the United States during the second half of the decade.”

Without suggesting that NAFTA is the only reason that a large number of economic immigrants have entered the United States, nonetheless the vast majority of irregular migrants have been displaced Mexicans and Central Americans who have come to the United States in the pursuit of economic advancement, including the accumulation of enough money to send remittances back to their local communities and families at home, as already noted. Their migration is like economic migration everywhere, moving from where there is no economic opportunity (jobs) to where such opportunities exist.

The immigration problem and its solution take on a different complexion put in these terms. If there are jobs available that irregular immigrants fill, then there must be a labor need that these immigrants fulfill. Generally, this means low-skill, low-paying jobs, often with one or more of the 3D characteristics of being dirty, dangerous, or difficult. If there were Americans willing to do these jobs at wages that employers were willing to pay, there would not be jobs, and there would be no incentive for migrants to immigrate. That they have done so and continue to do so indicates not only that such opportunities exist, but that they have not been sated. That is simple supply and demand.
Moreover, the dynamics suggest that there is not only a market for immigrant labor but also a continuing market for irregular immigrant labor. Given the reaction against irregular immigration, this assertion seems anomalous, but it is nonetheless true. The simple fact is that illegal workers have advantages to employers over legal immigrants: They will work at lower wages (they have no bargaining ability on wages), they will work longer (they are covered by no labor laws or contracts), and they do not require employers to pay benefits like social security taxes or health insurance. For highly labor-intensive work like lawn care, roofing, or garbage collection, hiring irregular laborers has economic advantages for employers that allow them to maximize profits while minimizing costs. Moreover, if the kinds of jobs that irregular immigrants typically perform became part of the regular economy, labor costs would increase (to minimum wage, at the least), which in turn would drive up the wages of other lower end jobs.

This places the problem in a different context than those who simply call for expelling irregular immigrants like to frame the question. Do all the advocates really want to get rid of irregular immigrants? Since they are doing jobs that either would not get done at all or only at higher labor costs otherwise, the answer is not clear. If all employees, including current irregulars in the underground economy, were to enter the mainstream, then suddenly these workers would be paying all taxes (rather than just regressive levies like sales taxes), thereby contributing to things like social security and Medicare/Medicaid and making themselves less of a social services burden. But doing so would mean employers would have to increase their own efforts and expenses, which they clearly are reluctant to do. There is a high level of hypocrisy in the contention that people oppose illegal immigration but employ irregular immigrants.

If irregular economic immigrants are the heart of the border problem, then any solution aimed at reducing or eliminating them must begin with the incentives they have to migrate and to stay. That means an emphasis on the elimination of the illegal jobs in the underground economy that are the mainstay of and magnet for irregular immigrants. Assuming the country is willing to bear the consequences of such a policy succeeding (which is not clear), then the heart of border policy should have a significant component that seeks to reduce the numbers who seek to breach the border. A core part of such a strategy necessarily involves reducing the availability of jobs that irregulars occupy. An avenue to do so already exists in American law and could be implemented simply by enforcing penalties against those who hire irregular immigrants. Reducing the number of available job opportunities would probably not, in and of itself, eliminate irregular immigration (it would, for instance, take a while for the word to circulate to potential immigrants), but it could reduce the flow, thereby making efforts to secure the border by other means more plausible.

This solution is so obvious that one wonders why it is not more prominently mentioned in solutions to irregular immigration. The reason at least partially reflects a certain degree of ambivalence, even hypocrisy, in the debate.
Many people oppose illegal immigration on the grounds that their actions are illegal, that they represent an assault on national sovereignty, and that they are a burden on social services. At the same time, however, many of these same people support the functions these same workers perform (3D labor at low costs,) and some even benefit personally from the presence of these workers (primarily employers). It is particularly this latter group that may be enthusiastic denouncers of illegal immigrants but not want to prosecute those who hire them, since they are the lawbreakers in this part of the problem.

There is some indication that the same demographics that combined to create the immigrant surge may also alleviate it with time. In a June 7, 2010 Newsweek article, Campos-Flores points out that fertility rates in Mexico have declined dramatically “from 6.7 children per woman in 1970 to 2.1 today,” according to World Bank figures. The result will be a gradual reduction in the number of young people entering the Mexican labor market, from over 850,000 per year in the early 2000s to about 300,000 per year in 2030, a number the Mexican economy can more adequately absorb. Some of this is already occurring (projected new members of the labor force this year are down to 750,000), but with a rub: “Mexican migration will taper off further just as baby boomers begin retiring in 2012,” according to Campos-Flores.

The other form of irregular immigration for which no one has official sympathy is criminal immigration, the movement of individuals into the country who are parts of criminal enterprises and whose reason for immigration is to further their criminal activities. In some cases, such immigrants may be associated with things like human trafficking, but the most prominent form that criminal immigration takes on the U.S.-Mexican border is the illicit drug trade, which is the second prong of the border problem.

The Narcotics Problem. The drug trade across the U.S.-Mexican frontier is both an immigration and narcotics policy problem. Most of the illegal drugs that enter the United States are shipped through Mexico and then across the border, making it a border issue. At the same time, many of those who carry drugs into the United States (so-called “mules”) are irregular immigrants who are more or less reluctantly brought into the trade. As Shifter explains, “Mexico is the transit route for roughly 70 to 90 percent of the illegal drugs entering the United States.... Along the U.S.-Mexico border, the kidnapping trade, clearly tied to the drug trade, is flourishing.” Andreas points out that increased American border security efforts exacerbates the drug problem: “adding thousands new Border Patrol agents has had the perverse effect of entrenching smugglers rather than deterring immigrants since the problem of breaching the border is more difficult and requires help for some immigrants,” some of which is provided by drug traffickers. Moreover, the drug and immigration efforts come into conflict with one another, since they are conducted by different government agencies (e.g., the Border Patrol and the Drug Enforcement Agency) with different priorities and different cultures. Adding National Guardsmen to this mix, as was begun in 2010, can only add to the jurisdictional confusion.
The drug and immigration issues intersect when members of the various drug syndicates move across the border into the United States to better control their illicit operations. There is considerable evidence that Mexican drug cartels are now active in most large American cities and that they bring with them the drug-related violent crime that has become endemic on the Mexican side of the border. The numbers of immigrants who are part of criminal immigration are quite small compared to the economic immigrants, but their presence is amplified because of the spikes in violent crime that occur where they are present. This violence is mostly between members of various drug cartels, but inevitably it spills over into broader communities, inflaming anti-immigrant sentiments that are at least partially misdirected. These kinds of problems have already destabilized Mexican national and local politics, and there is a fear that the same thing could happen on the U.S. side of the border.

Responses to the drug and immigration problems are similar. The major response to the drug problem has been interdiction—trying to stop the transit of drugs across the border—but that is a largely impossible tack. As Andreas suggests, “The amount of cocaine necessary to satisfy US customers for one year can be transported in just nine of the thousands of large tractor-trailers that cross the border every day.” The logic of globalization contained in instruments like NAFTA make detailed monitoring of cross-border traffic more difficult and, because such monitoring and inspection takes time, is clearly counterproductive in globalization terms. It is not at all clear that such “supply-side” approaches to the flow of drugs across the border can be effective.

A more comprehensive view of drugs breaching the border includes an emphasis on reducing the market for drugs in the United States. Just as the availability of jobs has fueled economic immigration, so too has the demand for drugs among Americans fueled the growing flow of drugs into the country. If the demand for illegal drugs among Americans were to decrease (analogous to drying up jobs for irregular immigrants), then the supply coming across the border would also likely decrease, since there would be a decreased market. During the height of the so-called “war on drugs” during the late 1980s and early 1990s, this approach was known as “demand-side,” and while hardly anyone suggested it was a comprehensive solution to the problem, it could help by making the volume of trafficking across the border more manageable.

The Terrorism Problem. While there is some analogy between the immigration and drug problems, this comparison largely does not extend to the problem posed by the penetration of the United States by terrorists. For one thing, the terrorism threat is not a specifically U.S.-Mexican border problem. Terrorists can enter the United States from Mexico, but also from Canada or at airports or seaports anywhere in the country. Indeed, it is arguable that the greater emphasis placed on the Mexican border may mean a diminution of personnel and effort at other points of entry, making them more likely transit points than they would be in the absence of an immigration emphasis.

The terrorism threat, unlike the other two, is also more of a qualitative than a quantitative problem, and one that is managed in a distinctive way.
Irregular economic immigration is a question of a very large volume of people breaching the border, but where each individual poses little if any threat to the United States or its citizens. The problem that people perceive is the result of the overwhelming numbers of irregular immigrants and the collective burdens and problems they create. In contrast, there are relatively few terrorists against whose entry the United States must prepare, but the potential havoc that any one poses means that efforts must be essentially airtight or they can yield disastrous results. Thus, for instance, a boundary system that reduces the flow of economic immigrants across the Mexican border by 90 percent would have an enormous impact on the border issue, but the same effectiveness against terrorist penetration might be entirely unacceptable.

Because the goal of terrorist interception is absolute, the methods employed to prevent the entrance of terrorists into the country is multilayered and more extensive than it is for irregular economic immigrants, as suggested in Chapter 16. The U.S. government operates elaborate intelligence networks to monitor the movement of potential terrorists toward the U.S. border, something it does not undertake for the movement of Mexican peasants. This means, of course, a high level of interaction between government agencies to coordinate antiterrorist activities that are present to some extent in the pursuit of criminal immigrants but not for economic immigrants.

CONCLUSION

The question of irregular immigration across the U.S.-Mexican border has become an explosive, emotional political issue in the United States, where emotions have arguably oversimplified and distorted the nature of the phenomenon. The purpose of this case study has been to place the American situation in its global context and to point out that the U.S. problem is more variegated and complex than simple depictions suggest.

Migration is and has always been a global phenomenon. As noted, 1 in every 35 people alive today is an immigrant in one sense or another and for one reason or another. In many cases, the motivations are economic, and in others they are political. In the most extreme cases, people are forced to flee their regions or countries and to become refugees. People have been migrating since humankind’s forebears left the Great Rift Valley of Africa, and they have done so for a variety of reasons. Escaping a less favorable condition in hopes of finding a better situation has always been the deep underlying motivation.

The U.S.-Mexican border situation mirrors many of the broader global trends. People have been coming across this junction between the developed and developing worlds in large numbers since the early 1990s. Most have been irregulars—the people without official papers (“wops”)—of this generation. They have come for the variety of reasons that immigrants always move, but their situation has been complicated because this form of immigration has been augmented and admixed with criminal immigration associated with the flow of illicit narcotics into the United States and the fear of terrorist penetration of the country’s borders. Each of these sources of breaches of American
national sovereignty as represented by a porous border has different bases and probably different solutions. While an understanding of immigration as a global problem may not offer the solutions to all these problems, it does at least provide some context within which to consider them.

**STUDY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is immigration? Into what categories are immigrants normally placed? Especially describe the categories of “irregular immigrants” and refugees.
2. Discuss immigration in terms of why people immigrate, where they immigrate (and why), and why these patterns represent a national and international problem.
3. What are the basic categories of economic immigrants? Why is the distinction important in understanding the current controversy in the United States?
4. Summarize the world situation in terms of immigration. What are the basic trends? Why are they likely to continue? What dilemmas do attempts to restrict immigration present and face?
5. Discuss the general parameters of the physical border security problem facing the United States and the unique problems of the U.S.-Mexican border in that context.
6. What are the three distinct aspects of the U.S.-Mexican border threat? Discuss each, including how each might be solved.
7. Is the United States truly sincere about ending and reversing irregular immigration? What would the consequences of that success be economically and otherwise in the United States? Are Americans really willing to accept these consequences?

**READING/RESEARCH MATERIAL**

Andreas, Pete R. “Politics on Edge: Managing the U.S.–Mexico Border.” *Current History* 105, 695 (February 2006), 64–68.


CHAPTER 14 International Migration: The U.S.-Mexican Border


