

**‘Prevention through Deterrence’: An Assessment of Policing Initiatives at the
Mexico-U.S. Border**

An Abstract

Without a doubt, the fate of relation between Mexico and the United States, especially in the past century, has been marked, to a great extent, by the curse of the migratory trends towards the former country. Particularly, Mexican immigrant communities have taken stronger importance as they become more numerous, diverse and socially and politically aware. Mexico and the U.S are embroiled, since the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement, in a relation of greater interdependence that has reached a level of complexity that deems necessary the restructuring of policies pertaining to common issues like migration. Numerous studies have shown that migration from Mexico to the United States is very likely to increase in the coming years, regardless of social and economic conditions in either country. Moreover, mobility across borders will continue no matter the harsher restrictions to it imposed.

In trying to prevent the illicit transit across its southwestern boundaries, the United States embarked, since the mid-nineties, upon a series of law enforcement initiatives that increase, for instance, the number of agents patrolling the border. Those actions were originally geared at discouraging undocumented migrants from trying to enter by somewhat signaling them about the risk and difficulty of illicit entry. Such ‘Prevention through Deterrence’ policies, however, have not, according to experts and practitioners, met the results for which they were created. Furthermore, the final effects have been from deceptive to counterproductive; they

certainly have not stopped, neither substantially reduced, illegal entry practices. If anything they have provoked the displacement of clandestine points of entry, have prolonged the periods of stay of former temporary migrants, and, among the most important pervasive consequences is the nourishing of cross-border smuggling organizations.

Therefore, the hypothesis I examine throughout the three chapters of my thesis work is that “law enforcement policies have shown deceptive results; while these reaffirm territorial sovereignty with ample public acceptance, they fail at truly deterring the illegal entrance of aliens to their territory and consequently at ending the ‘push and pull’ forces provoking the massive movements of job-opportunity seekers.” To approach and further contest these premises, I first built a conceptual framework to overview the broad questions concerning my study, such are, security and migration. Chapter one revolves around the somewhat inaccurate/dynamic definition of security; I propose a definition of Border Security and from there move on to the study of the question of migration. I explain that Mexican migration to the U.S. is, primarily, economically motivated and further assert that it is a consequence of a transnational labor market. I then have a section in which I expose the physical and organizational features of the border. I point out the main functions of the agencies and institutions in charge of policing each side of the border. Having established that, I provide a first encounter with what I consider to be the main problems that the two countries face in terms of securing the area while allowing the safe, orderly flow of people across it.

Secondly, in Chapter II, I add a new element to my study, which is the question of the changing of the context in which ‘Prevention through Deterrence’ policies developed. I first revise the building of the border put into the perspective of the security needs of the United States. In doing that, the paradox of regional integration and interdependence, versus the escalation of law enforcement initiatives becomes evident, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War, when Mexico and the U.S. entered an age of greater economic integration. I specifically stop to examine the cases of drug smuggling and illegal immigration to illustrate the expansion of border enforcement not as a mere response to security demands but to political burdens and strong public demand.

Finally, the assessment of policing measures in the turn of the 21st Century, recognizes the appearance of new security threats common to the two countries. After the September 11 attacks, the undertaking of safeguarding the shared territory is more challenging. It has become clear to both Mexico and the United States that unregulated borders are unsafe and insecure. But, as I insist in this section, ‘Prevention through Deterrence’ policies are neither the only nor the optimal line of defense. Border policing in the present times requires a strong commitment to cooperate in the building of comprehensive transnational infrastructure that protects people from menaces, rather than concealing them under enforcement systems. Accordingly, the governments of Mexico, the U.S. and Canada have fashioned and started to put into practice several initiatives that take strong advantage of technology to cope with safer transit of goods and people throughout the territories of the three countries, with the proper infrastructure. Nevertheless, in the specific cases of Mexico and the United States, the broad issue of migration remains unsolved.

To conclude my thesis work, I emphasize the existence of new security paradigms that, once again, call for the rethinking of enforcement policies within a context of integration, in which, bilateral relations seem to be regaining strength. My final recommendations clearly refer to comprehensive policies that, with sensible, careful, gradual steps, move towards a more secure, orderly border management and immigration reform.

With this thesis work, I attempt to provide a clear understanding of one of the most urgent items in the bilateral agenda. I believe that the ongoing controversy regarding border security, or, to be specific, border security escalation is a reflection of the diversity in which this problem is conceived and thought to be solved. My work reconciles some of those differing positions while it is supported by the work of recognized academics in the field; therefore, my thesis contributes to the academic debate with an informed opinion.

Keywords

Border Security, Migration, Border Enforcement, Mexico and the United States, Immigration Policy