

The Social and Economic Costs Of Trump's Wall

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Photo by Colin Deeds

Public art display by Taller Yonke Artists in Nogales, Sonora.

Mexico and the United States have a long, complicated history of conflict, cooperation, and economic integration. Culturally, socially, and strategically the two countries are in many ways co-dependent and intertwined. Trade between them makes the border the second most important bi-national corridor in the world, with millions of jobs dependent on the production and trade networks that transcend national boundaries. The issues of migration and drug trafficking are complicated and cannot be fixed with a wall or a border policy that does not focus on the roots of each problem. Both countries share a responsibility to find answers to the respective issues that exacerbate the problems and cooperate in implementing solutions.

As 2017 begins, a new challenge to the relationship between Mexico and the United States has emerged: a proposed

expanded border wall, the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and threats of potential tariffs on Mexican trade (earmarked to pay for new security infrastructure). As a candidate, President Trump stated, “We will build a big beautiful impenetrable wall to divide Mexico and the United States, one that will be paid for by Mexico.”¹ Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto countered that Mexico would never pay for the wall, while former-President Vicente Fox responded with even harsher words. *El muro* and the militarization of the border, but more importantly the stipulation by President Trump that Mexico pay for the wall, are deeply offensive to most Mexicans, who see the demand as a symbolic betrayal of the Mexican-U.S. partnership. For many U.S. citizens as well, these provocations appear inappropriate and misguided. A 2016 CBS poll found that a majority of U.S. citizens were opposed to extending the wall, especially without details on funding sources or total cost.² Startlingly, many U.S. Americans are not even aware that 700 hundred miles of barriers have already been built with their taxes. In this article, we review the history of mil-

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itarization of the border as well as the monetary and social costs of extending the border wall. While many U.S. Americans are concerned about the fiscal expenditures, most people are not aware of the potential social costs of border militarization, despite their potentially devastating effects. Social costs encompass the impacts on individuals and families from forced separation and the fear, anxiety, illness, and death that accompany the struggles to re-unify families.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BORDER AND THE WALL

The first military outposts, checkpoints, and infrastructure along the border were established in the wake of the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War—or the American Invasion, depending on perspective. With the threat of a disruptive social revolution at its doorstep, the United States set up military bases along the border in response to the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Fears of German invasion during World War I provided the impetus for investing in even more military build-up and infrastructure along the border. Historically, xenophobic fears in the United States have intensified during times of economic hardship. A clear pattern can be traced of mass deportations following the Great Depression of 1929, the oil crisis in the 1970s, the dot-com bust of the 1990s, and the Great Recession that began in 2008. Scapegoating of migrants over the centuries is as much a part of the U.S. American fabric as are romantic notions of the melting pot. Whether directed against Germans in the eighteenth century; Irish, Italians, and Chinese in the nineteenth; Japanese in the early twentieth; or Mexican and Central Americans in 2017, U.S. citizens have found convenient and relatively powerless immigrants as “whipping boys” to blame for economic ills.

Times of economic turbulence and enhanced cooperation have also contributed to a rise in the militarization of the border. In conjunction with the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) granting “amnesty” to millions of economic migrants, President Ronald Reagan stepped up deportations and workplace enforcement, along with the addition of new infrastructure. Although many associate these trends with conservative governments, it is important to remember that some of the largest investments in militarization along the border occurred under Bill Clinton’s presidency. In the run-up to the signing of NAFTA (which conveniently excluded regulations related to migration and labor), Clinton began an unprecedented build-up of security forces in urban areas

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of El Paso and San Diego, under the auspices of Operations Hold the Line (1993) and Gatekeeper (1994). Despite vigorously advocating a comprehensive immigration reform package in his campaign, President George H. W. Bush quickly retreated to a policy focused on security concerns in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. President Barack Obama deported more people (over 2.5 million) than any other previous president. In response to the events of 9/11, the U.S. Congress approved the Real ID Act, allowing the government to ignore 37 federal laws that protect land, air, water, wildlife, public health, and religious freedom, to enable construction of a border wall. This legislation constitutes the largest waiver of laws in U.S. history.

Many have called the U.S. immigration system broken. Yet the system has been fine-tuned over the years to create countless winners in our society, with relatively few losers beyond the migrants themselves (who cannot vote and do not have equal rights or protections under the law). Consumers in the United States enjoy lower-cost goods and labor in the marketplace. Corporations have access to cheap, expendable labor. For the Mexican government, out-migration creates a convenient pressure valve release for an economy that does not provide enough jobs for its citizens, as well as a much-needed source of revenue in migrant remittances. Mexicans living in the United States are active participants in the economy, pay taxes, and contribute to programs they will never benefit from, such as Social Security. Large banks profit from transferring remittances from migrants’ savings accounts. The last several decades have seen an exponential increase in the growth of the Prison-Industrial Complex, as the apparatus of police, lawyers, and prisons built to prosecute migrants has been increasingly privatized.

Immigrants’ impact in the United States cannot be quantified solely by their economic footprint without considering their social and cultural contributions. The fabric of U.S. American culture has been enriched by the language, cuisine, and art of newcomers to this country over the centuries. Migrants and their children contribute to society as civil servants, educators, health care professionals, and as overall productive members of the community.

THE ECONOMIC COST OF THE WALL
AND BORDER MILITARIZATION

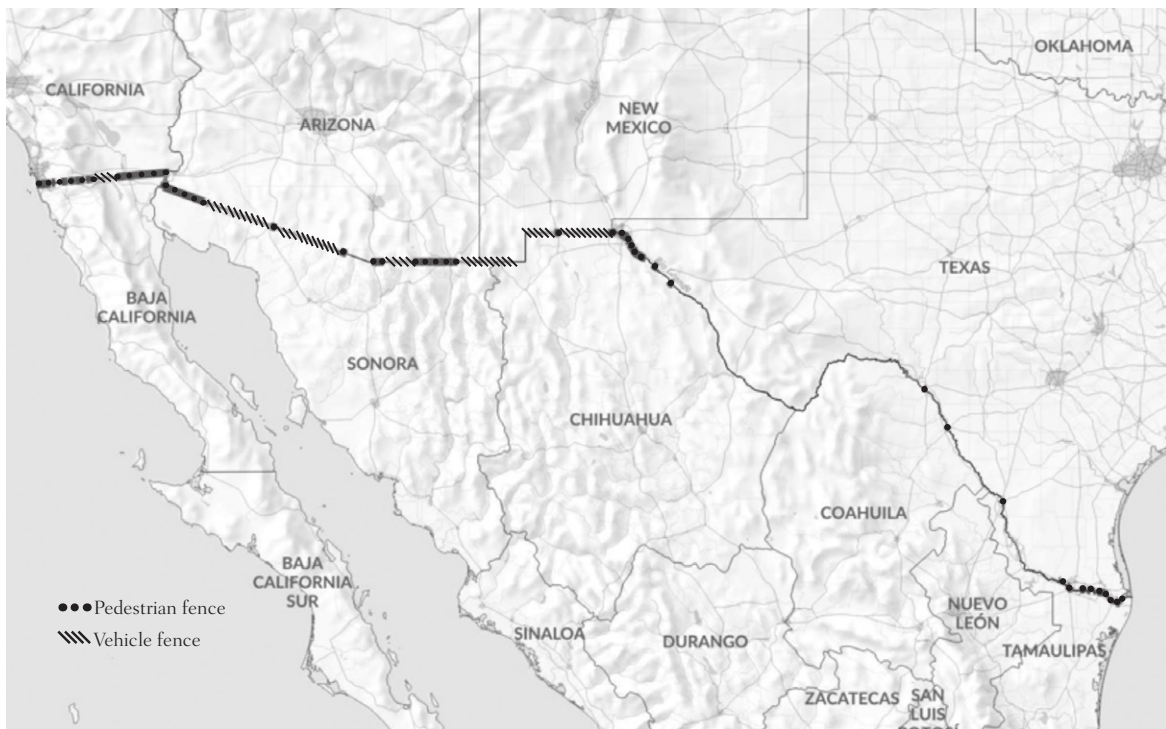
Militarization and the definition of the wall have multiple meanings and interpretations. It is now understood by many as enhanced enforcement of the border, in the name of security, often at the cost of increased civil and human rights violations. During the last 20 years, the borderlands have been transformed from open countryside and generally cooperative twin cities into areas of intensive surveillance by 20 000 border patrol officers and high-tech equipment, including drones and other sophisticated military hardware.

President Trump and his followers seldom acknowledge that an extensive wall already runs over 700 miles along the border between the two countries. While it is uneven in coverage of the nearly 2 000-mile-long boundary, the United States has already invested more than US\$2.3 billion in construction alone, not including an annual maintenance budget of around US\$500 million.³

The cost varies by sector, ranging from US\$3.9 million to US\$16 million per mile,⁴ depending on terrain, cost of land, building materials, wall design, and scale of the barrier or barriers (in some areas, they are triple-layer fences). Although what exactly he is calling for is not presently clear, President Trump is on record proposing to raise the height of the existing wall and to extend it the full length of the border, at an estimated cost of around US\$12 billion (although a recent GAO estimate obtained by Reuters puts the cost closer to US\$21.6 billion).⁵

How the extension of the wall will be paid for is still being debated early in the Trump presidency. The president steadfastly maintains Mexico will pay for the extension of the barrier and has proposed policies that include taxing imports from Mexico at 20 percent, in effect transferring the burden to the U.S. American consumer/taxpayer. He has also suggested taxing migrants' remittances and has already encouraged the transfer of jobs from Mexico to the United States by publicly strong-arming manufacturers like Ford and Carrier.

THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER FENCE SYSTEM TODAY



Source: Reveal Research, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, OpenStreetMap, Allison McCartney, in Michael Corey, “The Wall: Building a Continuous US-Mexico Border Barrier Would Be a Tall Order,” Reveal Center for Investigative Reporting, <https://www.revealnews.org/article/the-wall-building-a-continuous-u-s-mexico-barrier-would-be-a-tall-order/>, accessed February 2, 2017.

Such measures are punitive, ineffective, and, in all likelihood, unconstitutional.

THE SOCIAL COSTS OF THE WALL

The imposing monetary cost of transforming the border wall or walls, coupled with more sophisticated electronic surveillance equipment and larger deployment of border patrol personnel, comes with a social cost. *Like taxes, not everyone pays social costs equally.* The negative social consequences of the wall and border enforcement are paid for by thousands of families living in U.S. cities and in communities throughout Mexico. As stated above, social costs encompass the impacts on individuals and families caused by forced separation as well as the fear, anxiety, illness, and death that accompany the struggles to re-unify families. International migration without visas, forced by violence, poverty, or the desire to be with family living in another country, implies a social as well as financial cost. When a parent or a child of a mixed-status immigrant household is deported in the middle of the night, all the family members, U.S. citizens and undocumented, are traumatized.

The wall in its current embodiment has forced many people desperate to be reunited with their families to migrate through the harshest terrain of the borderlands, leading to thousands of deaths and serious injuries. More than 2,533 migrant bodies were recovered in Southern Arizona between 1990 and 2014, reflecting the period of intensification of enforcement and the building of the wall. Most of the bodies were never identified.⁶ Meanwhile hundreds of missing person reports have been filed with the Colibri Center for Human Rights in Tucson, by families desperate for information on their missing relatives. Migrants who have survived the ordeal tell of being left in the desert by their guides and the tragedy of others who could not continue. The death toll rises by the hundreds every summer, taking the lives of members of Central American and Mexican families living on both sides of the border. The unstated goal of the militarization of the border is to reinforce this catastrophic image—so that only those migrants most desperate for family reunification will risk the high social cost of the crossing.

The imposing topographical physical barriers are not the only dangers migrants encounter on the journey through borderlands. Those who have found ways to cross the border into the United States also confront a gauntlet of potential violence, kidnapping, robbery, and abuse from drug cartels,

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bajadores (bandits), or even their *coyote* (human smuggler) guides. Women and children anxious to be unified with their families living in the United States are the most vulnerable. In one survey over 12 percent of them said they had been raped, beaten, or even forcibly disappeared.⁷

The possibility of apprehension by the Border Patrol, detention, and deportation looms large for every migrant. Those detained by Border Patrol encounter a system that uses a “prevention through deterrence” strategy.⁸ Before they are placed in detention they are stripped of all belongings except the clothes they are wearing. Their money, identity documents, cell phones, and medications are confiscated and stored until they are deported. Often these belongings are never returned, creating severe safety and communication problems after deportation. The whole process is intended to be psychologically devastating, regardless of age, gender, or nationality. The experience imposes an extremely high social cost on the entire family, whether migrants survive or not. A more militarized border with extended walls forces people to take greater risks and more dangerous routes, but not to abandon the trip.

Caught in the maze of migration, violence, and deportation are mixed-immigrant families, households that include both undocumented and legal residents.⁹ Although no exact figures exist on the demographics of American/Mexican mixed-status immigration households, estimates of their numbers are in the range of 15 million living in communities throughout the United States.¹⁰ The number of U.S. citizen children is over 5 million. In the United States, mixed-status immigrant household members pose a challenge to state policies that seek to neatly divide those who belong and those who do not.¹¹ At the same time, mixed-status families are the targets of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) sweeps searching for undocumented people to deport, a pattern that is repeating itself with explosive frequency under the Trump administration. The nightmare of having family members suddenly arrested, placed in detention, and deported, puts children, working parents, and neighborhoods at risk. For these families, their supporters, and communities, this social cost makes the wall a symbol of fear and alienation, be they Mexican or U.S. citizens.

A more militarized border with longer walls forces people to take greater risks and more dangerous routes, but not to abandon the trip.



Photo by Murphy Woodhouse

Migrants at a soup kitchen in Tijuana, Baja California.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The costs of building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border are incalculably high in both dollar amounts and social costs, while benefits to the security and the economy of the region are unclear at best (and in reality very likely to have negative effects). Border myths are often used to distract voters from the real issues and provide a quick fix solution, while history and facts are disregarded. The sustained flow of people and drugs northward across the border illustrates that migrants and drug kingpins alike are capable of digging longer and deeper tunnels than any wall or police force can deter. It has never been more important that the United States and Mexico work together for the benefit of their over 440 million people,

all of whom are Americans in this hemisphere. Economic growth and prosperity depend on collaboration and working together as neighbors. Ensuring security and human rights are not contradictory, but interlinked. The economic and social costs of extending the wall and further militarizing the U.S.-Mexico border will create a heavy burden for everyone. An alternative route exists, one that has both humanitarian and economic benefits. At this crucial juncture the United States and Mexico must position themselves to build a new era of economic cooperation, improved standards of living on both sides of the border, and a deeper cultural appreciation of what citizens of both countries share as neighbors. **NMM**

NOTES

¹ Kirk Semple, "Trump and Mexican President Speak by Phone Amid Dispute Over Wall," *New York Times*, Jan 27, 2017, p. A14.

² Sarah Dutton, "Eight in Ten Americans Think U.S. Will Pay for the Wall on Southern Border," CBS News, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/eight-in-10-americans-think-u-s-will-pay-for-u-s-mexican-border-wall/>, accessed February 2, 2017.

³ *Arizona Daily Star* Editorial Team, "Why We Don't Need Trump's 'Great, Great Wall,'" *Arizona Daily Star*, http://tucson.com/special-section/beyond-the-wall/why-we-don-t-need-trump-s-great-great-wall/article_f87fd116-399c-11e6-ad53-ab5ac295e9b0.html, accessed February 2, 2017.

⁴ Wayne Cornelius, "Does Border Enforcement Matter? U.S. Immigration Policy from Clinton to Obama," *Global Innovation and Immigration*, San Jose State University, 2011.

⁵ Julia Edwards Ainsley, "Trump Border Wall to Cost \$21.6 Billion, Take 3.5 Years to Build," Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-immigration-wall-exclusive-idUSKBN1502ZN>, accessed February 9, 2017.

⁶ Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Celestino Fernández, Jessie K. Finch, and Araceli Masterson-Algar, eds., *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La vida no vale nada* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017).

⁷ Jeremy Slack, Daniel E. Martínez, Alison E. Lee, and Scott Whiteford, "The Geography of Border Militarization: Violence, Death, and Health in Mexico and the United States," *Journal of Latin American Geography* vol. 15, no. 1, 2016, pp.7-32.

⁸ Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Melissa McCormick, Daniel Martinez, and Inez Magdalena Duarte, "The 'Funnel Effect' and Recovered Bodies of Unauthorized Migrants," research from the Binational Migration Institute in *Report Submitted to the Pima County Board of Supervisors*, October 2006, <http://bmi.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/The%20Funnel%20Effect%20and%20Recovered%20Bodies.pdf>.

⁹ Anna Ochoa O'Leary, Colin Deeds, and Scott Whiteford, eds., *Uncharted Terrains. New Directions in Border Research, Methodology, Ethics and Practice* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Joanna Derby, "How Today's Immigration Enforcement Policies Impact Children, Families and Communities: A View from the Ground" (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2012).

¹¹ Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, *Becoming Legal: Immigration Law and Mixed-Status Families* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).