

The United States-Mexico Border Region: An Overview

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Abstract

An overview of the U.S.-Mexican border region is presented. First, the historical development of the region is discussed, including establishment of the boundary through war between Mexico and the United States, emergence of border urban settlements, and border city development related to the expanding economy of the Southwest of the United States. Then, economic, population, and political features of the region are detailed, emphasizing the extremely dynamic growth of the region as well as significant economic and political asymmetries between U.S. and Mexican parts of the border region. Next, the major issues of the region are described. Finally, the recent trend in interdependence and transborder cooperation is noted.

Introduction

The territorial interface between the United States and Mexico constitutes one of the most dynamic and complex border regions of the world. It is an area characterized by rapid population growth, accelerated urbanization, political change, and economic change. Two very different systems meet at the boundary between Mexico and the United States. It is where the developed, industrialized world meets the developing world; it is where the North meets the South. It has the strongest contrasts in the entire world in terms of economic differences from one side of the boundary to the other. The border was established by a war in the middle of the nineteenth century and was characterized by conflict for many decades. Nonetheless, it is now a binational region distinguished by growing integration and increasing levels of transborder cooperation. The issues, problems, and opportunities present at the border are a microcosm of the interaction between Mexico and the United States, and, in recent years, the border has been key to the bilateral relations of the two nations.

Historical Development

The U.S.-Mexican border region initially was the northern fringe of the Spanish colony of New Spain and then, after 1821, of the newly independent republic of Mexico (Ganster *et al.*, 1998). Characterized by sparse settlements based on mining and ranching, the northern region was never effectively settled nor occupied by Mexico, a new nation that experienced nearly a half century of internal disorder after independence. Mexico lost much of its northern territories, first through a revolt of Anglo settlers in Texas in 1835, and then through a war between Mexico and the United States in 1846. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, that was signed in 1848 to end the war, ceded much of the north to the United States. This, along with the sale of parts of New Mexico and Arizona to the United States as a part of the Gadsden Pur-

chase in 1854, established the international boundary between Mexico and the United States that endures today (Griswold del Castillo, 1990).

As a result of the war with Mexico, a vast area was opened to the dynamic U.S. economy. Economic cycles of mining, ranching, and agriculture — in combination with the building of extensive railroad networks — led to rapid economic development of the Southwest of the United States in the late nineteenth century. Linking of transportation networks of the United States and Mexico encouraged the development of border cities. At every major transportation route crossing the international boundary, customhouses and service industries for trade developed on both sides of the boundary, giving rise to many of the population centers that eventually emerged as the twin-city settlement pattern that characterizes the region today.

The interdependence of the U.S. border region with Mexico was evident relatively early. Increasingly, trade was a factor, but also important was the fact that much of the labor for the development of railroads, mines, ranches, agriculture, and urban areas in the Southwest border region came from Mexico. The flow of labor was conditioned, of course, by the dual push-pull factors of lack of jobs in Mexico and labor needs in the United States. Mexico's north was isolated from the national economy; therefore, Mexican border urban centers developed in response to economic stimuli from across the border, and Mexican border city growth became dependent upon the U.S. settlements and regions to the north. These elements have been present in the border region for more than a century and continue in significant ways today.

For much of the second half of the nineteenth century, the border region was a frontier characterized by lawlessness, violence, and lack of strong governmental controls (Martínez, 1988). Relative peace and order finally came to the region by the 1880s with extension of railroads throughout the U.S. border region, economic development, and defeat and confinement to reservations of most of the marauding Indian groups (Spicer, 1981). In Mexico, a half century of internal disorder was brought to a close with the rise to power in the 1870s of Porfirio Díaz who was to dominate Mexican politics until 1910.

The violent upheavals in Mexico during the revolution that erupted in 1910 had a significant impact on U.S. border towns. Mexican revolutionaries often operated from safe bases in U.S. border settlements. Mexicans of all classes fled the violence and many settled on the U.S. side of the boundary and remained even after restoration of relative peace in Mexico by the 1920s.

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Prohibition in the United States from 1919 to 1933 provided stimulus for economic growth in Mexico's northern border cities as they became the sites of tourism development centered on gambling, entertainment, and alcohol (Machado, 1982). Although during the 1920s Mexican border towns grew and their economic bases broadened with the creation of agricultural industries and other activities, development was still very much dependent upon the twin city across the border in the United States. With the end of Prohibition in 1933 and the deepening Great Depression, the Mexican border towns were hard hit, revealing extreme dependence on their U.S. counterparts. Mexican border cities did not recover until the World War II era brought prosperity that continued with the Sunbelt expansion of the U.S. Southwest in the postwar period. Mexican border cities expanded rapidly, so that by 1960 their populations had grown enormously: Mexicali (281,333), Ciudad Juárez (276,995), Tijuana (165,690), Matamoros (143,043), and Reynosa (134,869) (Martínez, 1975).

Beginning slowly in the mid-1960s, the *maquiladora* (assembly) industry became the great engine of growth for Mexico's northern border cities. Maquiladoras, or largely foreign owned assembly plants that transformed imported components into final products with inexpensive Mexican labor for sale in the U.S. market, were part of the globalization of the world economy. Under this new economic regime, sophisticated components requiring high technology and capital intensive operations were manufactured in developed countries and shipped to developing countries for labor intensive assembly. The maquiladora industry, through job creation and investment, helped the northern border become one of the most economically dynamic regions of Mexico. By 1998, there were some 600,000 workers employed in maquilas in Mexico's northern border cities ("Maquila Scoreboard," 1998).

For decades, the most visible element of border economic integration from the perspective of the U.S. border communities was through retail purchases made by Mexican shoppers on the U.S. side of the border. Beginning in the mid-1980s, U.S. border communities began to see significant opportunities in expanded economic relations with Mexico. This was particularly true in the smaller U.S. border communities, especially along the lower Rio Grande in Texas where regional economies were narrowly based on agriculture and Mexican retail purchases and were subject to agricultural cycles and Mexican currency devaluations. These communities viewed maquiladoras as an opportunity to broaden the regional economic base and actively recruited companies to locate across the border in nearby Mexican cities (Mendoza Higuera *et al.*, 1993).

Mexico, the United States, and Canada negotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that took effect on 01 January 1994. Debate over approval of NAFTA in the United States focused national attention on environmental conditions in the border region and potential impacts of the treaty on border communities. In response to strong criticism of existing governmental efforts on the border environment, U.S. and Mexican authorities initiated side agreements to NAFTA to establish the Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC) and the North American Development Bank (NADBANK). The BECC analyzes border environmental issues and certifies priority infrastructure projects for funding to be arranged by NADBANK. In addition, the two governments developed the Border XXI Program, a process to identify and address border environmental issues through public participation and coordination of federal agencies on both sides of the border to insure the long term sustainability of the border region.

The recent history of the border region, culminating with the NAFTA process, has seen a fundamental change in the role that the border region plays domestically in Mexico and the

United States and also internationally in the bilateral relationship. The NAFTA process helped transform the border from a region that merely received policy from Washington, D.C., and Mexico City to a region that began to initiate actions that became national and bilateral policy. The border was a key to the passage of NAFTA and today is viewed by the foreign relations departments of both countries as a region where most of the issues on the bilateral agenda appear first and thus merit increased federal attention.

Major Features of the Border Region

Historical forces have produced a border region of some diversity from east to west. On the U.S. side, the eastern half of the border is poorer, more Hispanic, and with a more narrow economic base than on the western end that is wealthier, has a broader economic base, and is more Anglo in population and culture. On the Mexican side, there is also some east-west differentiation, principally with respect to economic development. The western end of the Mexican border is more dynamic economically than elsewhere along the border. There are also strong contrasts from north to south across the border.

While the natural systems extend seamlessly across the border, the international boundary is a very clear dividing line between two very different human systems. Some features of these systems do not extend across the border; others demonstrate a surprising degree of transboundary interaction. A review of the different components of the Mexican and U.S. systems that meet at the border will serve to provide a basic understanding of this complex region.

Political and Administrative Systems

The juxtaposition at the border of the highly centralized Mexican political system with the decentralized federal U.S. political system has broad implications for the binational region. The differences in the two political and administrative systems historically have made bilateral cooperation problematic. Mexico's centralized public administration has typically controlled power and resources which have then flowed to the states and, finally, to the municipalities. Thus, local governments in Mexican border cities have limited financial resources and restricted authority for many matters, including providing infrastructure and urban services. For example, in 1996 the Municipality of Tijuana had a budget of about \$54 million and lacked authority to issue revenue bonds or raise taxes for infrastructure. The same year, the City and County of San Diego had combined budgets of \$3.4 billion (Ganster, 1996).

The different public administration systems mean that direct administrative counterparts often do not exist across the border in the Mexican and U.S. twin-city pairs. Usually, local government agencies in the United States are able to initiate projects independently and develop financing. Mexican local agencies are not usually able to initiate large urban projects and also suffer from restricted financial and technical resources and trained human capital (Metzner, 1988). Another difference in the political and public administration systems of the two countries that has important implications for local border relations is the nature of public service and office holding. In the United States, the majority of local, state, and federal government employees fall under various sorts of civil service systems. This assures that the professional staffs most responsible for the day-to-day running of agencies will remain in place even when there is a change in the elected officials. In Mexico, with the change of administrations — whether federal, state, or local — government employees at all levels are replaced by new political appointments. Hence, continuity and institutional memory are much more fragmented in public administration on the Mexican side of the border (Nalven, 1984).

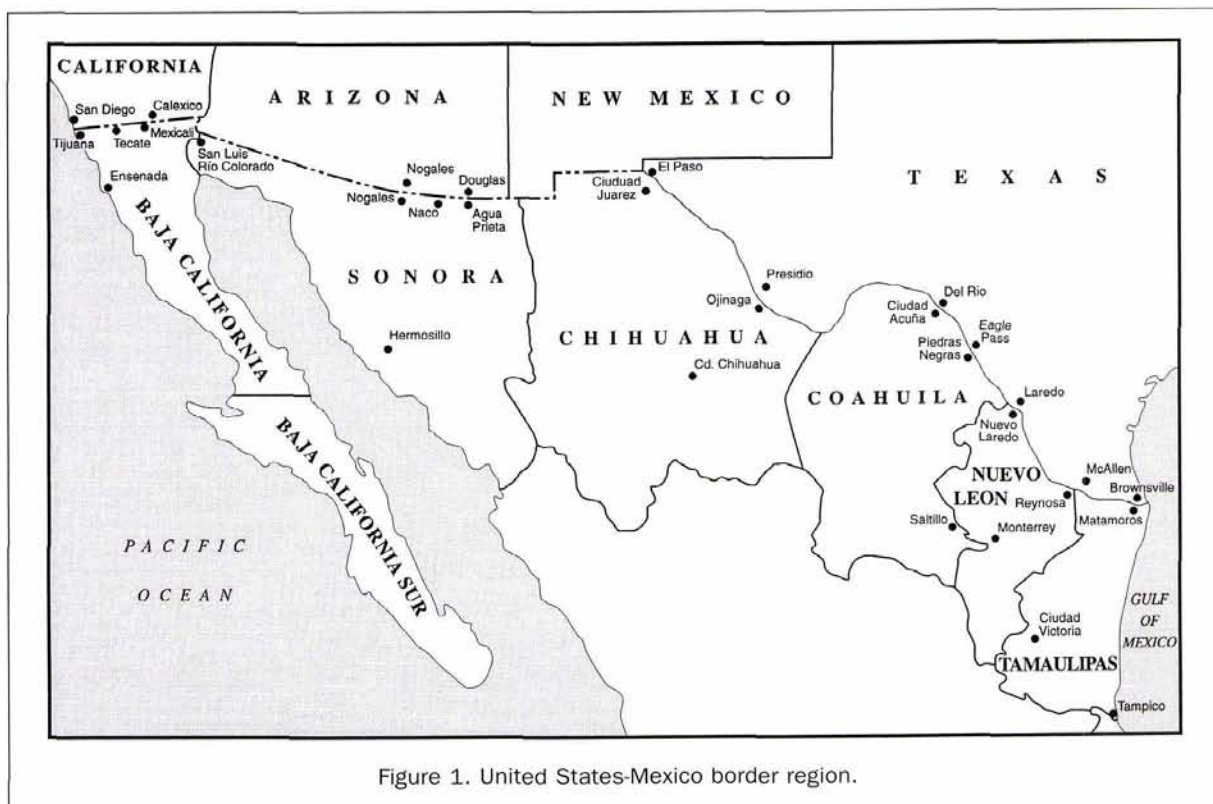


Figure 1. United States-Mexico border region.

An added layer of complexity along the border is the structure and organization of local governments. In the U.S. border states, local governance is most often shared by a combination of incorporated cities and counties. Within the county, then, government services are provided by both city governments and the county government. In Mexico, the basic governmental unit is the municipality that governs both urbanized and rural parts of the unit (Sparrow and Walshok, 1993; Guillén, 1993).

The nature of federal, state, and local government on the Mexican side of the border along with the chronic turnover of professional staff has implications for researchers. The lack of continuity and weakness of agencies means that data collection has been somewhat sporadic and data often are not collected and maintained in digital form. Often, data standards are different from those in the United States so that constructing comparable transborder data sets is difficult. Moreover, Mexican political tradition views information as proprietary to the particular office and office holder and not to be made available to the public as a matter of course. Thus, knowing what data have been produced and gaining access is often difficult or impossible (Brown and Wright, 1995).

Economic Asymmetries

A key characteristic of the economic relationship between the two neighbors, and one that is especially apparent in the border region, is economic asymmetry. The 1994 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the United States was 6,600 billion dollars, approximately 18 times that of Mexico's GDP of 373 billion dollars. The Gross Regional Product (GRP) of the greater Los Angeles area exceeds the GDP of Mexico, but with one-tenth the population. At the border regional level, the County of San Diego now has a GRP of over 80 billion dollars and that of the Municipality of Tijuana is probably around 5 billion dollars. Minimum wages in the United States are

about ten times greater than those in Mexico. These enormous economic asymmetries make transborder cooperation by government entities difficult due to the great differences in physical and human resources available to each side.

Demographic Features

The United States-Mexico border region, for purposes of population studies, is best defined by administrative units adjacent to the border: 25 counties in the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas; and 35 municipalities in the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Baja California. The demographic picture for this region is complex, for not only are two countries involved, but the border zone is one of the most dynamic regions demographically and economically in each country (Weeks and Ham Chande, 1992).

Both U.S. and Mexican border populations are highly urbanized, with most border municipalities and counties having over 90 percent of the population in the urban core (Weeks and Ham Chande, 1992; Lorey, 1983). In addition to urban concentration, border populations have been, and continue to be, distinguished by rapid growth rates. Swift demographic expansion has produced a continuing infrastructure and urban services crisis in border cities, particularly in the Mexican cities that had fewer resources and ability to cope with the burgeoning demand. Table 1 clearly demonstrates this urban dynamism.

The populations of both the Mexican and the U.S. border zones have, over the long run, exceeded natural growth rates. Migration is the most important factor shaping the demographic picture of the binational border region. For example, Tijuana's population grew 6.9 percent between 1987 and 1988; 1.9 percent was natural increase and 5 percent was the result of immigration. During the same period, Ciudad Juárez saw a 1.8 percent natural increase and a 7.5 percent increase from migration (Lorey, 1990: Table S129). In

TABLE 1. ANNUAL GROWTH RATES OF TWIN CITIES BY DECADE

City	1940-50	1950-60	1960-70	1970-80	1980-90
San Diego	6.4	7.1	2.1	2.6	2.4
Tijuana	13.4	9.8	6.4	4	5.0
Calexico	1.9	2.4	3.3	4.3	2.6
Mexicali	12.8	10.4	4.4	2.5	2.5
Nogales, Arizona	2.0	1.8	2.3	7.5	2.2
Nogales, Sonora	7.7	6.3	3.4	2.7	4.9
El Paso	3.5	11.2	1.6	3.2	1.9
Ciudad Juárez	9.4	7.5	5.1	3.3	3.8
Eagle Pass	1.3	6.6	2.7	3.9	-4
Piedras Negras	7.6	7.6	-0.04	7.2	3.6
Laredo, Texas	3.1	1.8	1.4	3.3	3.0
Nuevo Laredo	7.0	4.9	5.0	3.0	0.8
McAllen, Texas	6.9	6.3	1.5	7.6	2.4
Reynosa	3.4	8.1	6.6	3.4	3.2
Brownsville	6.1	7.5	9.1	6.2	1.5
Matamoros, Tamaulipas	11.0	7.3	4.2	3.1	3.5

Sources: Reich, 1983; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1983; Margulis and Turián, 1983; Lorey, 1983.

1980, 48.9 percent of the population of the border counties and municipalities consisted of migrants. Of the 48.9 percent, 8.4 percent were from a foreign country. The 1980 population of the Mexican border municipalities had 31.8 percent migrants while the figure for the U.S. border counties was 58.2 percent. Eleven percent of the migrants in the Mexican border municipalities were foreign born while the figure was a much larger 20 percent for the U.S. border counties (Reich, 1984; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1983).

Border Culture

The presence of Hispanic populations on both sides of the international boundary, stimulated by important transboundary economic ties, has encouraged strong social and cultural linkages. Although difficult to quantify, these social and cultural aspects of interdependency are nonetheless real and growing. Historian Oscar Martínez (1994) discusses the emergence of groups of *borderlanders* who participate in a vibrant border culture that is firmly linked to Mexico and to the United States. These individuals, who are able to function in both cultures and to participate in activities on both sides of the border, in some ways represent the future of the border. The percentage of these persons in the total border population is not large, but, as the region moves toward more advanced integration, the number of specialists who are fully functional on either side of the border will increase.

Border Issues

The border location makes the ordinary business of public administration and resolution of routine issues much more difficult and complicated than might otherwise be the case. Concerns that might have a relatively simple domestic solution often become quite complicated in a transborder, international framework. The next section provides an overview of the most important issues that affect border communities.

Environmental Issues

Water Quality and Supply Problems

The U.S.-Mexican border region is characterized by its aridity, particularly along the central and western parts of the border, and many of the regions of the border find water in short supply for the growing urban populations and agricultural enterprises (Metzner, 1988). San Diego currently imports about 95 percent of its water from the Colorado River and

from northern California; Tijuana increasingly depends upon water imported through an aqueduct from the Colorado River (SANDAG, 1997). El Paso and Ciudad Juárez rely on underground water supplies that are shared, but not regulated, and are projected to last only another 15 to 20 years. The major population centers of the border do not have a secure supply for this basic resource.

Because all surface waters in the border region are fully allocated by international treaties and because groundwater deposits are very limited, there is simply no more new water available for future growth. Water reclamation, demand side management (conservation), and development of water markets that would permit transfer of water from agriculture to urban uses are all being examined and tested as ways to provide adequate water for future growth in the border region.

The two major river systems of the border region are the Colorado River and the Rio Grande. Both of the basins have in the past been subjected to intensive development through irrigation, storage, and flood control projects. Those on the Colorado River include the Hoover Dam that provides management primarily for production of hydroelectricity. Release of runoff downstream occurs according to the needs of electric power generation or when the storage system is at capacity; release of water is not timed for the benefit of downstream users, including Mexico (Weatherford and Brown, 1986). The water resources of the Rio Grande are also well developed. The part of the water course shared by Mexico and the United States has seen the development of a series of international dams, jointly constructed and administered by the two countries (Mumme, 1986).

Surface and groundwater supplies are threatened everywhere along the border due to raw sewage dumping, fertilizer and pesticide contamination of agricultural runoff, and industrial and hazardous waste pollution. There are important problems of contamination of surface streams and rivers by sewage in all of the border twin-city pairs from Brownsville-Matamoros to San Diego-Tijuana. In most cases, this contamination has transboundary impacts. With the advent of NAFTA and Border XXI, agencies such as the bilateral Border Environment Cooperation Commission have begun to address these problems in cooperation with local authorities. By 1998 a new binational International Wastewater Treatment Plant came on line to treat Tijuana's sewage, and work was moving forward in Mexicali, Nuevo Laredo, Nogales, and Ciudad Juárez with wastewater treatment projects. The level of transborder collaboration on these projects is impressive, and they will bring significant benefits to the border communities. However, the rapid growth of border cities threatens to overwhelm the new capacity as fast as it is constructed.

Hazardous and Industrial Waste

With the growth of manufacturing and the maquiladora industry, there has been a great increase in industrial waste in the border region (HAZTRACKS Web Page n.d.). Largely because of the lack of infrastructure and regulatory and enforcement capacities in the border region, particularly in Mexico, only a small percentage of hazardous waste from border maquilas is being disposed of in a fashion that would meet generally acceptable international standards (Newman, 1996). The rest is being stored (often improperly), dumped in municipal landfills, or discharged into the wastewater collector system.

Air Pollution

As the size of border twin-city pairs increased, air quality became an important transborder problem. Only in the past few years have good air quality data become available through a monitoring network established in some of the

twin city pairs (CICA Web Page n.d.). The most serious cases are in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez region and in the San Diego-Tijuana region. In these areas, air pollution is generated from sources in two countries and is transported by winds to affect the entire air basin. Mobile sources are the largest source of air pollution although agriculture is important on both sides of the border and point sources, unpaved streets, and open burning are significant problems in Mexican border cities. At every border town, long lines of idling vehicles at the border crossings, in part due to drug interdiction policies of the U.S. Customs Service, contribute significantly to air pollution.

Topography and other features have combined to make El Paso almost continually in noncompliance with EPA standards for air quality. In large part this is due to pollutants produced in Ciudad Juárez and to high levels of pollutants associated with the border crossing lines (Gray *et al.*, 1986). Consequently, until an international air basin pollution control authority is established, little can be done to alleviate the situation in this twin city pair. The El Paso-Ciudad Juárez region is leading the way with an innovative effort to develop an air basin management authority, where both cities and countries would cooperate to protect a common resource (Emerson *et al.*, 1993).

Bioresource Issues

The impressive growth and development of the borderlands over the past decades have produced significant negative impacts on the native flora and fauna and ecosystems of the region. Expansion of urban areas, destruction of native habitats through grazing activities or agriculture, lowering the water table through excessive pumping of water deposits, and impacts of recreation on fragile ecosystems have all had important consequences on the border region. While efforts have been made to protect certain endangered species, it has been difficult for U.S. and Mexican authorities to adequately cooperate to establish transborder biosphere reserves to protect habitats of species that live on both sides of the border (Ganster and Walter, 1989).

Resolution of Border Environmental Issues

As mentioned above, NAFTA produced an environmental side agreement that created the Border Environment Cooperation Commission and the North American Development Bank. These new, unique binational institutions are now established and beginning to have an impact on border environmental infrastructure problems. By mid-1998 BECC had certified some 24 projects and NADBank has arranged funding packages for some of them (BECC Web Page n.d.). More importantly, NADBank, by combining its loan capital with grant funds from EPA, has been able to arrange subsidized loans that border communities can afford. NADBank can also use these funds in Mexico where financial resources are much more limited. Both BECC and NADBank have now worked through the issues associated with establishing unique binational institutions and are beginning to have an important impact on the border region.

Another product of the NAFTA process was the creation of Border XXI by EPA and its Mexican counterpart agency, the Secretaría del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP). The *Border XXI Framework Program*, issued in October 1996, establishes a process to analyze and address border environmental problems. Based on principles of community participation in establishing priorities and solutions, sustainable development, and cooperation of all relevant federal agencies on both sides of the border, Border XXI is a systematic approach to dealing with the growing environmental problems of the region. The work of Border XXI is carried out by nine binational work groups consisting of federal agency

representatives, but with increasing state and local participation. These work groups and the coordination by EPA and SEMARNAP have institutionalized binational cooperation on border environmental problems.

Immigration Issues

A major area of conflict between Mexico and the United States has been international migration. Migration issues are very much border issues because border communities and states are most heavily impacted by population flows. Both push and pull factors, both supply and demand, are evident in this phenomenon. Over the past several decades, the costs and benefits of this arrangement increasingly have been critically examined in the United States to the point that they have become the subject of a continuing national debate. Construction of physical barriers along the border by the United States and increased enforcement through internal checkpoints have impacted U.S. border communities in many ways. It should also be pointed out that continuing massive migration from central and southern Mexico to Mexico's border cities has been a challenge to local administrations in terms of providing urban services.

Border Crossing Issues

As border cities have grown in size and as bilateral trade has expanded, particularly under NAFTA, border communities have experienced increasing flows of commercial and non-commercial traffic across the border. Bilateral trade was valued at \$75 billion in 1992 and had grown to \$150 billion in 1997. Approximately 75 percent of the bilateral trade is carried across the land border in trucks, and this has overwhelmed the border crossing infrastructure of many regions. By 1997, Laredo, San Diego, and El Paso each had more than 2,000 trucks crossing from Mexico each day, and the figure for Nogales was 1,500 (Bureau of the Census, 1998). Noncommercial vehicle and pedestrian crossings have also grown, although not as fast as commercial traffic. As interactions have increased between the Mexican and U.S. parts of the twin-city pairs along the border, more and more border residents have been inconvenienced by excessive delays at crossing due to saturated infrastructure, inadequate staffing of border checkpoints by U.S. Customs and the Border Patrol, and inspection policies that emphasize drug interdiction and determining the migratory status of crossers. The perception of many local people is that this is another case of a federal responsibility not being discharged properly and local border residences are forced to suffer the consequences. Although both Mexico and the United States benefit somewhat from the increased trade flows across the border, border residents receive the negative impacts of saturated infrastructure.

Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Issues

Law enforcement and criminal justice issues are a continuing problem for most U.S. and Mexican border communities. Very different administrative and law enforcement structures interface at the border, and use of the border by criminals for illegal activities makes the administration of justice and maintenance of law and order particularly problematic. The large number of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies involved make matters more complex and difficult to coordinate. In the Imperial Valley in California, for example, there are at least 14 U.S. law enforcement agencies operating and just across the border in Mexicali there is an equivalent number of Mexican agencies (Wilhelm, 1987).

Transborder auto theft (Miller, 1987) and burglaries are ongoing and chronic problems, but most serious border crime issues relate to smuggling of undocumented immigrants and drug trafficking. Drug interdiction efforts are re-

sponsible for some of the congestion at commercial and non-commercial crossings at the ports of entry. Internal checkpoints that inconvenience citizens on both sides of the border are related to immigrant and drug smuggling activities. A dramatic rise in homicides in Mexican border cities in the last five or six years is linked to drug trafficking and considerable other criminal activity on both sides of the border is related to illicit drugs. Smuggling of arms and consumer goods into Mexico is an ongoing problem for Mexican authorities.

The NAFTA era has brought better transborder cooperation on criminal justice and law enforcement matters. There is a better spirit of teamwork on both sides. Professionalization of law enforcement agencies is improving in Mexico and there is increased attention to training and continuity of personnel. U.S. agencies have become more sensitive to their counterparts' capabilities and shortcomings and tend to take a more realistic approach in addressing day-to-day matters. While over the past five years transborder law enforcement cooperation has improved, economic asymmetry realities and concerns about sovereignty, as well as the very complexity of the issues, will continue to produce concerns for border residents in this area.

Growing Transborder Linkages

Located far from Washington, D.C., and Mexico City, over the years border residents have evolved a whole range of informal arrangements to deal with transborder aspects of their daily lives. Examples that come to mind are the informal, but regular, cooperation of fire departments, health authorities, and police to deal with emergencies without the intervention of either federal government. This sort of interaction has begun to influence the national policies of each country and to redefine the nature of the relationship that exists between the United States and Mexico (Duchacek, 1986). Transboundary linkages, both informal and formal, reflect the increasing interdependency of the two nations, particularly in the border zone. To some degree, on the microlevel, interdependency offsets aspects of asymmetry, producing more collaborative, parity relationships at the local level.

The border region of 1998 is very different from the border region of 1980 in terms of transborder interdependence and cooperation. The great burst of activity stimulated by economic linkages between the two neighbors and NAFTA built upon slow progress made over many decades. The economic forces in the border region, first the maquiladora industry and then the opening of the Mexican economy that culminated with NAFTA, have driven broad changes elsewhere in the bilateral relationship, particularly as manifested at the border. NAFTA made the border region a priority for both countries, particularly the United States. Beginning at the time of the discussion about the NAFTA treaty in 1993, many U.S. federal agencies began to pay greater attention to border-related issues within their areas of competency. This has had several effects. First, all this activity has raised the visibility of the border in Washington, D.C. Second, the clients and constituents of these agencies in the border region have participated in greater levels of activity. Finally, these agencies have tended to renew relations and establish new linkages with counterpart Mexican agencies, and some part of the activities have border components.

At the regional level along the border, particularly within the framework of the twin-city pairs, transborder interactions have demonstrated a remarkable florescence due to the processes and circumstances described in this essay. In the San Diego-Tijuana region, for example, the micro-regional expansion of transborder contacts and linkages has been significant over the past decade or so, particularly since 1993 and the NAFTA discussions (Ganster, 1993). The growth of collabora-

tive relations has been across the board, including local and state government agencies, higher education, non-governmental organizations of all sorts, private businesses, chambers of commerce, and civic and cultural groups. While many of these transborder relationships go through a predictable process of initial contacts and activities, disillusionment, and decline, there is clearly an increase in solidly grounded projects and endeavors by participant groups. These usually bring measurable benefits to both sides by establishing mutually advantageous interactions. The sum of all these small efforts has been to significantly expand the number of actors in the two communities that are involved in transborder activities and to move the entire binational region farther along the path toward increased interdependence and integration.

Anecdotal information suggests that this process is ubiquitous along the border. Despite short term setbacks associated with economic cycles and political difficulties, the level of transborder interaction is increasing over the long and medium term. The U.S.-Mexican border region is so dynamic that it is not easy to predict how far the process of integration will advance. Nevertheless, Mexican and American border communities have made much progress towards conceptualizing and managing their regions in a transborder mode.

NAFTA has been a catalyst because it made border issues a high priority on the bilateral agenda and brought increased federal involvement and funding to border issues, particularly by the U.S. federal government. At the same time, the longstanding inclination of the U.S. government and the decentralization process in Mexican public administration have combined to facilitate greater transborder cooperation at the local level in the border region. The U.S. and Mexican consuls general in the San Diego-Tijuana region have undertaken an initiative that will have long term significance for the future course of the border. They have developed the Border Liaison Mechanism, an arrangement to convene local actors from all government levels from both sides of the border to work on issues under the aegis of the consuls general as representatives of their respective foreign relations departments. This mechanism potentially provides a way for the dissimilar government structures to interact across the border to deal effectively with local transborder issues.

Increasing transborder linkages in most areas and increasing interdependence economically, socially, and culturally are clear indicators of the direction of change in the U.S.-Mexican border region. This zone that is the interface between two asymmetrical partners is moving towards regional integration.

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