



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
RICE UNIVERSITY

BINATIONAL RESEARCH PAPER

DEVELOPING THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER REGION  
FOR A PROSPEROUS AND SECURE RELATIONSHIP:  
THE IMPACT OF MEXICAN MIGRATION AND  
BORDER PROXIMITY ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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MARCH 27, 2009

## **The Impact of Mexican Migration and Border Proximity on Local Communities**

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# **The Impact of Mexican Migration and Border Proximity on Local Communities**

## **Abstract**

U.S. communities along the Mexican border form a region that is mainly poor, yet are growing faster than the national average. Mexican migration has shaped the region and contributed to its growth and poverty, due to the generally lower income and educational levels of the migrants, their children, and Mexico. Growth and cross-border traffic with Mexico are among the few sources of dynamism in the region's economy, even as they contribute to fiscal strains on local government. These communities have therefore responded with some ambivalence to Mexican migration and federal border control policies. Expansion and forward deployment of the U.S. Border Patrol—the strategy of “prevention (of migration) through deterrence”—originated locally and proved to be highly popular. The more recent strategy of building additional border fencing, however, was not a local demand and has met with some resistance. In the broadest sense, policy options for the region require fundamental choices regarding growth and integration with Mexico. As long as a substantial development gap remains between the two nations, it is not clear that any level of growth among U.S. border communities east of San Diego can close the gap with the rest of the United States, or if current growth levels are sustainable or desirable in such an arid region. Nevertheless, policy choices can be made that favor (a) continued growth through deepening bilateral integration; (b) greater integration of the region with the national economy; (c) efforts aimed at greater immigrant and Hispanic integration in U.S. society; (d) bilateral efforts to narrow the development gap between Mexico and the United States, or some combination of the above.

## **Introduction**

High levels of immigration in recent decades have given rise to policy challenges and debates that have spread from traditional gateway communities to the entire country as significant migratory flows disperse to nearly every state.<sup>1</sup> This background paper, however, focuses on issues and concerns regarding cross-border migration specifically to and through U.S. communities along the Mexican border. The issues are considered from local border community

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<sup>1</sup> See Douglas S. Massey, ed., *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).

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and national perspectives, based on a review of published reports and other publicly-available materials.

A range of U.S. jurisdictions are aligned along the 1,954 mile border with Mexico, including most notably four states, 24 counties, and a wide variety of cities, towns, and school districts.<sup>2</sup> This jurisdictional variety suggests the different ways that “border communities” and the border region can be defined; it also reflects the various ways border communities are affected by migration from Mexico, how they define their interests regarding migration, and how they have responded to these flows and their effects. For the purposes of this background paper, the core definition of “border communities” will be limited to the 24 members of the Border Counties Coalition, although data from other sets of border-proximate jurisdictions will be considered for comparison.<sup>3</sup>

### **Primary Impacts and Concerns in a Regional Context: Migration and Growth in a Poor Region**

In general terms, some of the more salient impacts of a lengthy and heavily-trafficked border on the region’s communities derive from some of the principal ways that Mexico differs from the United States overall (and forms a sharp contrast with the northern border): culture and language,

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<sup>2</sup> There are references to both 22 and 24 U.S. counties on the Mexican border. Three Texas counties (Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, and Presidio) converge at a point on the border in West Texas, south of Van Horn. As a result, the middle county (Jeff Davis) only touches the border at this point. A fourth county (Culberson) forms another point within four miles of this same border point. Thus, the borders of Jeff Davis and Culberson counties lack a contiguous border with Mexico, but lie entirely within the immediate border region and are members of the Border Counties Coalition. See [www.bordercounties.org](http://www.bordercounties.org).

<sup>3</sup> The rationale for defining the primary region of border communities in this fashion is due to the comprehensive coverage of the border itself by counties (unlike cities), the formal organization of these jurisdictions as border entities (in the Border Counties Coalition), and the clear differentiation of these jurisdictions from the next tier of like jurisdictions, which are the “counties which touch the counties which touch the border.” On the first point, the phenomenon of the border colonias, which is discussed in a later section of this paper, is largely found in unincorporated areas of the border counties. On the point of differentiation, the state of Texas has profiled three categories of border-proximate counties. The first category, comprised of the 14 counties that touch the border (one less than the Texas members of the Border Counties Coalition, as explained in fn. 2), is called the “Actual Border Region.” The second category, called the “32-county Sub-border Region,” includes both the border-touching counties as well as the next overwhelmingly rural 18 counties to the north that touch the border counties. The “Actual Border Region” contains just over 90 percent of the population of the larger “Sub-border Region,” establishing the differentiation between the two sets of counties. See Susan Combs, *The Border: On the Brink*, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, Window on State Government, March 2001, [www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/brink/](http://www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/brink/).

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level of development, and rate of population growth. These factors account for a region that is, for the most part, one of the poorest in the United States but is nonetheless growing at above the national rate, and that is also closely tied socially, culturally, and linguistically to Mexico. Thus the region as a whole—most of which lacks economic options—can be seen to express a certain ambivalence regarding Mexican migration in its various forms (commuter, short term, and permanent), its larger relationship with Mexico, and constant pressures that would move border and migration policy in different directions.

The collection of policy dilemmas may come down to this: most of the region is poor and has few options, but is growing; Mexican migration (past and present) contributes to both the region's growth (directly and through a higher natural rate of increase among Mexican Americans) as well as its poverty; growth and cross-border traffic with Mexico are among the few sources of dynamism in the region's economy, yet they also contribute to severe fiscal strains on local government.

So is migration basically a problem, or an inherent part of most of the region's main source of economic stimulus? If the region's integration with Mexico produces such mixed results, is an alternative path of greater integration with the higher-wage U.S. national economy to the north conceivable? On the other hand, if migration in its various forms and an ever-deepening relationship with Mexico are essentially the region's fate, are far more vigorous policies promoting immigrant and Mexican American integration into the U.S. middle class called for?

### *Population Effects*

Migration from Mexico—temporary and permanent, legal and unauthorized alike—has long provided border communities with a number of benefits, long-term costs, and much of its socio-demographic profile. As a result of generations of migration, the Hispanic population of the four border states is proportionally much larger than that of the United States; in addition, the Hispanic population of the four border states is proportionally more of Mexican origin than the

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rest of the nation. In turn, 23 of the 24 border counties are proportionally more Hispanic than the states of which they are part.<sup>4</sup>

We can begin to construct a more nuanced profile of these communities from the point of view of the largest category of the jurisdictions in the region: the 283 public school districts located within 100 miles of the border. A 2003 study found that 75 percent of the districts situated 41 to 100 miles from the border reported English to be the primary language spoken in the local community, while the rate fell to 66 percent for communities in districts 11 to 40 miles from the border. Only 20 percent of school districts located within 10 miles of the border reported that English was the primary language in the communities they serve.<sup>5</sup>

Due to a combination of natural increase and immigration, border communities are growing at a relatively rapid pace. During the 1990s, the 24 border counties grew more than twice as fast (22 percent in that decade) as the nation as a whole (10 percent). The school district study also found that in 2003, more districts within 10 miles of the border (65 percent) reported a growing population than districts 41 to 100 miles from the border (35 percent).

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<sup>4</sup> The Census estimated that the national population was 13.7 percent Hispanic in 2003, while Arizona was 27.8 percent, California 34.3 percent, New Mexico 43.2 percent, and Texas 34.2 percent. At 28.7 percent Hispanic, San Diego was the only border county that was not demographically more Hispanic than its state. The other 23 counties ranged from a low of 31.9 percent Hispanic in Pima County, Arizona (home to Tucson) to 96.1 percent in Webb County, Texas (home to Laredo). The aggregate population of the 24 counties (6.6 million) was 50.7 percent Hispanic in 2003. Dennis L. Soden, *At the Cross Roads: US / Mexico Border Counties in Transition*, Border Counties Coalition, 2006. See [www.bordercounties.org/index.asp?Type=B\\_BASIC&SEC={62E35327-57C7-4978-A39A-36A8E00387B6}](http://www.bordercounties.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={62E35327-57C7-4978-A39A-36A8E00387B6}); and [http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=iped\\_techrep](http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=iped_techrep). The Mexican-born share of the aggregate population of eight border cities (San Diego; Yuma and Tucson, AZ; Las Cruces, NM; El Paso, Laredo, McAllen, and Brownsville, TX) rose by 50 percent in the 1990s, from about 10 percent of the total to over 15 percent. Pia Orrenius and Madeline Zavodny, "Mexican Migrants Stay in Border Comfort Zone," *Southwest Economy*, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, May-June 2008, [www.dallasfed.org/research/swe/2008/swe0803c.cfm](http://www.dallasfed.org/research/swe/2008/swe0803c.cfm).

<sup>5</sup> The school board associations of the four border states sponsored a comprehensive study of these districts that resulted in a number of publications between 2003-2004. See principally Tenley S. Harrison, June Lee-Bayha, and Ed Sloat, "La Frontera: Study of School Districts Along the United States/Mexico Border," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Ill., April 2003). The information cited is based upon the reporting of the 206 school districts that participated in the study. Within 10 miles of the border, the remaining districts divided evenly between reporting that (a) Spanish was the primary language in the local community or that (b) English and Spanish were spoken equally, each at 40 percent.

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### *Economic Effects*

The geographic and demographic proximity of border communities to Mexico has a range of implications. For example, 46 percent of the school districts located 100 miles or less from the border reported that agriculture remained the dominant sector of the economy in their community. This is indicative of several factors, including the relatively long growing seasons in the border region, and the ready availability of Mexican labor in the area.

Nonetheless, the role of migrant Mexican labor has undergone a dramatic restructuring in the border region over time, according to a Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas analysis of Mexican household survey data. This study found that while 60 percent of Mexican migrants surveyed in border communities worked in agriculture in 1980, the rate fell to less than 10 percent in 2004. By the latter date, the share of migrants who reported working in sales had nearly tripled to 33 percent, while those who reported working in service jobs more than doubled to over 40 percent by the mid-1990s.<sup>6</sup>

The use of migrant Mexican labor in agriculture is indicative of a single-factor dependence on cross-border flows that ensures the viability of a sector that supplies the U.S. national market. The transition of migrant labor to the growing service and retail sectors, however, is indicative of an ever-greater economic integration of urban border communities with Mexico. A Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas study found the transportation services (trucking and warehousing) sector and the retail sector to be the principal private sector areas of overrepresented concentration in Texas border cities, and linked both cases to how “border geography shapes these local economies”:

The high concentration of trucking and transportation services is due to international bridges and checkpoints that cause delays and require special handling of goods moving across the border. Laredo has by far the largest concentration of transportation activity, a product of its strategic location on the shortest truck route from the United States to Monterrey, Mexico's major industrial center.

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<sup>6</sup> Orrenius and Zavodny, *Mexican Migrants*. This data is based on surveys conducted in migrant-sending communities in Mexico.

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The strength of border retail sales results from the throngs of Mexican shoppers who flock to the U.S. side. Brownsville and El Paso have large neighboring cities in Mexico. Laredo draws shoppers from nearby Nuevo Laredo but is best known as a destination for shoppers from the Mexican interior, particularly Monterrey.<sup>7</sup>

This study also found a third overrepresented sector of concentration, as measured by official data on personal income: government, due both to public sector employment (including employment related to border control) and to transfer payments due to poverty, which the study characterized as “the essential economic problem on the border”:

Various sources contribute to the high government employment. Major military installations in El Paso and Del Rio provide both civilian government and military jobs. The border itself generates public sector jobs in immigration, naturalization, customs and border security. Finally, state and local governments provide unusually high levels of public assistance for income maintenance, medical care, education and training, and housing ... Transfer payments not only shape local employment patterns but also have played a large role in regional income growth since 1969.<sup>8</sup>

The poverty question, which concerns the U.S. resident population, is expanded upon in the next section. But first, several more points are worth noting regarding commuter and short-term border crossers, the role of women migrants, and the nature and volume of Mexican border crossing. Given that a consistently higher proportion of Mexican migrant workers in border communities are women—as compared to Mexican migrants who reported working in the

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<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Gilmer, Matthew Gurch, and Thomas Wang, “Texas Border Cities: An Income Growth Perspective,” *The Border Economy*, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (June 2001), [www.dallasfed.org/research/border/tbe\\_gilmer.html](http://www.dallasfed.org/research/border/tbe_gilmer.html).

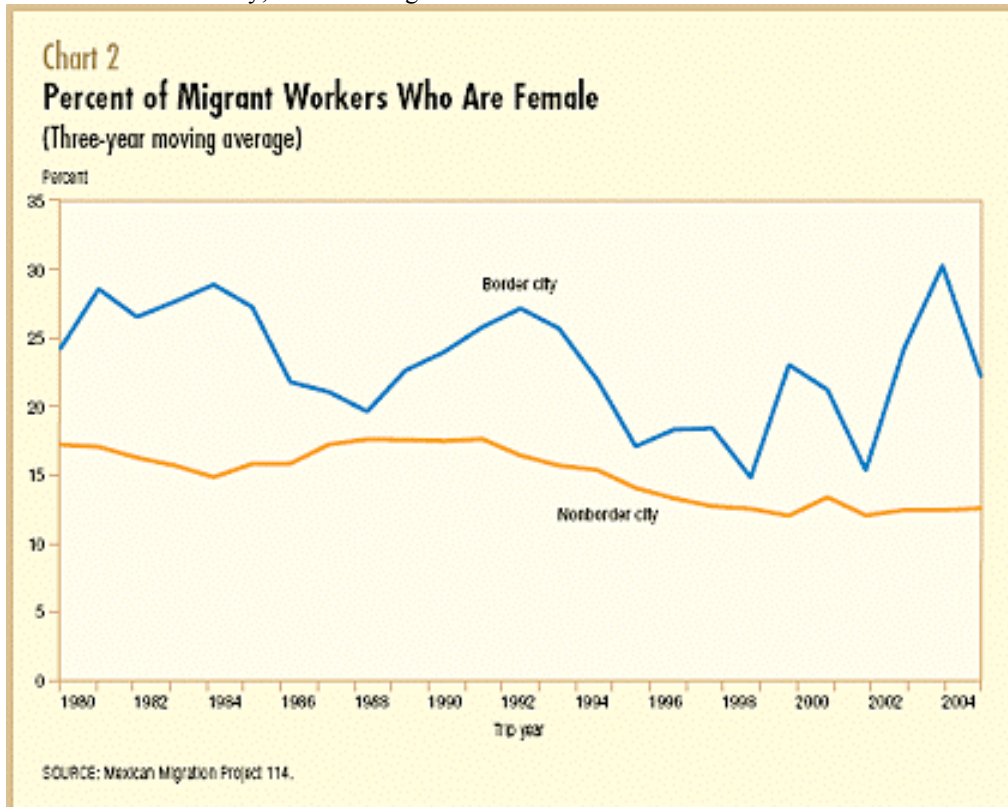
<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* The authors offer a table with a detailed breakdown of the percentage role of government payments in personal income in Texas and the six counties that the Texas border cities are located in, based on 1997 data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis of the Department of Commerce. As they summarize: “The most striking feature of Table 3 is the high percentage of personal income made up by government payments in all these cities. In Texas, 14.3 percent of personal income comes from government payments to individuals, while the shares for the six cities range from 22.2 percent in El Paso to 39.2 percent in Eagle Pass.”

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interior of the United States<sup>9</sup>—it appears that in the border region, migrant women have also massively shifted from agricultural to service jobs, including domestic employment in U.S. households.

The great majority of migrant workers who reside directly across the border in Mexico but who work in U.S. border communities for one to five days per week appear to cross legally. Such migrants were found to constitute nearly 8 percent of the workforce in the cities of Tijuana and Mexicali in 2002. An earlier study found that only 10 percent of these day-to-day cross-border workers were entering the U.S. illegally, but over 40 percent were entering with non-employment visas.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Orrenius and Zavodny, Mexican Migrants:



<sup>10</sup> These percentages are based on data from the Mexican Survey of Urban Employment cited in Joan B. Anderson and James Gerber, *Fifty Years of Change on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Growth, Development, and Quality of Life* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 7. According to this 1998 study, 43 percent of the border crossers entered with a non-work border crossing card, tourist or other visa, 33 percent held a immigrant visa (valid for work purposes), and 14 percent were U.S. citizens.

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The population residing on the Mexican side of the border obviously constitutes an important labor, consumer, and business market for U.S. border communities. In 2003, some 6.8 million Mexicans (a number greater than the U.S. resident population in all of the 24 border counties combined that year) used a U.S. border crossing card to make over 100 million trips to the U.S. side.<sup>11</sup>

### *Poverty and Growth*

This very preliminary and partial sketch of the migration-related demographics of border communities already suggests a number of policy concerns that bear on the region's migratory relationship and socioeconomic integration with Mexico. The still-prominent role of agriculture in the region's economy alone is suggestive of a low-wage, seasonal labor force that is comprised of cross-border migrants and U.S. residents.

However, the great restructuring of migrant labor into the service and sales sectors has not closed the "border wage penalty." The 2008 Federal Reserve study found that border migrants earn 16 percent less than migrants in the interior of the United States. In the words of the authors, "the border wage penalty appears to be largely related to the nature of border labor supply"—apparently in a manner that cuts across economic sectors.<sup>12</sup>

It is not only the border crossers who pay the "border wage penalty."<sup>13</sup> U.S. communities along the Mexican border are among the poorest in the country. Indeed, if we exclude San Diego, the per capita income of the other 23 counties in 2003 was below that of all 50 states.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. Embassy, "U.S. Department of Homeland Security expands use of the Laser Visa/Border Crossing Card," news release, August 10, 2004, <http://mexico.usembassy.gov/eng/releases/ep040810borderstay.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Orrenius and Zavodny, Mexican Migrants.

<sup>13</sup> For regular cross-border workers, the more relevant comparison is to wages on the Mexican side, of course. The earlier study referred to above found that Tijuana and Mexicali workers who crossed the border earned an average of over \$1000 monthly in 1998, which was nearly three times the average for workers who did not cross. And while the average cross-border worker of Matamoros (across from Brownsville) was found to average only \$663, this still was more than twice the average monthly salary of those who did not cross. Anderson and Gerber, *Fifty Years*.

<sup>14</sup> Soden, *Cross Roads*, (Table 4.1) put the aggregate 23 border counties (without San Diego) per capita income in 2003 at \$20,039—well below 50th ranked Mississippi's \$23,466 that year. Six of the Texas counties had per capita incomes under 50 percent of that of the United States as whole. For 2007, Orrenius and Zavodny put the 23-county per capita income at \$22,302—61 percent of the national average.

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To quote the school districts' study, "Residents of La Frontera tend to be young, immigrant and poorly educated."<sup>15</sup> As the 2001 Federal Reserve study of Texas border cities put it, "High population growth is the source of the seeming paradox between a booming job market and continued stagnation of income ... Legal and illegal immigration and a high birth rate make it difficult to raise incomes in these six cities, despite what—at least from a labor market perspective—looks like solid economic progress."<sup>16</sup>

### *Border Colonias*

One feature of the border that dramatically captures the reality of poverty in the area is the phenomenon of colonias. These have a range of definitions that vary by government agency, but most converge on some characteristics: they are unplanned communities with substandard (or even nonexistent) basic services or infrastructure in areas such as water systems, sewage and storm drainage, paved roads, electricity, etc.<sup>17</sup> A number of official definitions explicitly limit colonias to areas along the border and, as the name suggests, these communities are understood to be overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, Hispanic.<sup>18</sup>

The Border Counties Coalition estimated that over 1.5 million residents in 23 of the 24 border counties (excluding San Diego) were living in 1,869 designated colonias in 2004.<sup>19</sup> If correct, this figure would represent around 40 percent of the population in these counties and,

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<sup>15</sup> Harrison, et al., *La Frontera*, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Gilmer, et al., *Texas Border Cities*.

<sup>17</sup> For a listing of various government code, program, and agency definitions, see [www.sos.state.tx.us/border/colonias/what\\_colonias.html](http://www.sos.state.tx.us/border/colonias/what_colonias.html). See also the Texas Attorney General's page on "What is a Colonia?" at <http://maps.oag.state.tx.us/colgeog/colonias.htm>. The Department of Housing and Urban Development maintains an extensive state-by-state directory of designated colonias, identified by jurisdiction in the case of incorporated areas, and by name (and county) for unincorporated areas at [www.hud.gov/local/index.cfm](http://www.hud.gov/local/index.cfm). For a detailed qualitative review of outsider access to the colonias, see Manuel de la Puente and David Stemper, *The Enumeration of Colonias in Census 2000: Perspectives of Ethnographers and Census Enumerators*, Census 2000 Evaluation, September 22, 2003, <http://www.census.gov/pred/www/rpts/J.4.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> According to the Housing Assistance Council publication *Taking Stock: Rural People, Poverty, and Housing at the Turn of the 21st Century* (December, 2002: [www.ruralhome.org/pubs/hsganalysis/ts2000/1TSfrontice.pdf](http://www.ruralhome.org/pubs/hsganalysis/ts2000/1TSfrontice.pdf)), 97 percent of the border region colonia population is Hispanic. See the "Border Colonias" section, p. 43: <http://www.ruralhome.org/pubs/hsganalysis/ts2000/ColoniasOverview.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Soden, *Cross Roads*, pp. 8-13, [http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=iped\\_techrep](http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=iped_techrep).

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astonishingly, an outright majority of its Hispanic population, as given in this same study.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the human and social costs and degradation that these communities represent, the Border Counties Coalition study concluded that, “In many ways colonias may become the number one environmental issue facing the border region, primarily due to a lack of funding for basic services.”<sup>21</sup>

### 2004 - Number of Colonias and People Residing in Colonias by State

| State/County      | # of Colonias | Population     | State/County      | # of Colonias | Population       |
|-------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|------------------|
| <b>Arizona</b>    | 86            | <b>190,697</b> | <b>Texas</b>      | 1624          | <b>1,041,428</b> |
| <i>Cochise</i>    | 18            | 33,105         | <i>Brewster</i>   | 3             | 720              |
| <i>Pima</i>       | 12            | 31,824         | <i>Cameron</i>    | 156           | 41,992           |
| <i>Santa Cruz</i> | 7             | 22,328         | <i>Culberson</i>  | NA            |                  |
| <i>Yuma</i>       | 16            | 103,440        | <i>El Paso</i>    | 286           | 66,604           |
| <b>California</b> |               | <b>244,491</b> | <i>Hidalgo</i>    | 716           | 117,172          |
| <i>Imperial</i>   | 16            | 244,491        | <i>Hudspeth</i>   | 5             | 1,231            |
| <i>San Diego</i>  | NA            |                | <i>Jeff Davis</i> | 1             | 200              |
| <b>New Mexico</b> | 143           | <b>42, 984</b> | <i>Kinney</i>     | 1             | 66               |
| <i>Dona Ana</i>   | 40            | 37,697         | <i>Maverick</i>   | 64            | 219,301          |
| <i>Hidalgo</i>    | 7             | 3,522          | <i>Presidio</i>   | 7             | 825              |
| <i>Luna</i>       | 5             | 1,765          | <i>Starr</i>      | 285           | 23,953           |
|                   |               |                | <i>Terrell</i>    | 1             | 1,128            |
|                   |               |                | <i>Val Verde</i>  | 15            | 109,510          |
|                   |               |                | <i>Webb</i>       | 55            | 453,740          |
|                   |               |                | <i>Zapata</i>     | 29            | 4,986            |

SOURCE: Dennis L. Soden, *At the Cross Roads: U.S.-Mexico Border Counties in Transition*, Border Counties Coalition, 2006, based on U.S. Census Data.

<sup>20</sup> The Border Counties Coalition study, authored by Dennis L. Soden of the Institute for Policy and Economic Development of the University of Texas at El Paso, gives U.S. Census population estimates for the counties and for the colonias in separate tables. The former (Table 2.2) is on pp. 2-9 and the latter (Table 8.5) is on pp. 8-14. The county population estimates are clearly identified as 2003, while the colonias population table is titled as 2004, as reproduced below. Thus the proportions of the 23 border county residents given here as living in colonias are unofficial and approximate.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-13.

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### *Fiscal Impacts*

The question of the economic and fiscal impact of migration is notoriously controversial and disputed. The widely varying estimates that receive the most attention are aggregates at the national and state levels. Border communities certainly do not attempt to make such general economic assessments. Nevertheless, some observations regarding the challenges posed to local governments by certain forms of migration have been offered in government-sponsored studies of border communities.

As the study sponsored by the Border Counties Coalition cited above notes, discussions of the fiscal impacts of migration in the region tend to be dominated by three main policy issues: the costs imposed to health services, education, and law enforcement. Notably, these observations refer only to actual ongoing expenditures, and ignore the unestimated infrastructure and service needs of the border region's many colonias.<sup>22</sup>

An earlier 2002 study sponsored by the counties estimated that in 2000, uncompensated emergency medical services for undocumented immigrants cost the 24 counties nearly \$190 million.<sup>23</sup> This study did not, however, make any attempt to estimate either the overall economic contributions of undocumented immigrants in these counties, or the taxes that they paid. A more recent study sponsored by the Border Counties Coalition estimated that law enforcement costs due to undocumented immigrants in fiscal year 2006 were a nearly identical \$192 million.<sup>24</sup> This study also does not examine the economic and fiscal contributions of undocumented immigrants to the counties.

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<sup>22</sup> There appears to be a great need for a comprehensive assessment of the unmet infrastructural and service needs of the border colonias. So far, only inventories qualitatively describing needs have been made available. A strong recommendation could be made for a joint federal-border states study that should be organized immediately in conjunction with the Census Bureau in 2009 to take advantage of the entry into these communities. See reference to de la Puente and Stemper regarding the 2000 Census experience in 17n.

<sup>23</sup> The precise estimate was \$189,565,000. Border Counties Coalition, MEDICAL EMERGENCY: Costs of Uncompensated Care in Southwest Border Counties, p. 30, September 2002, [www.bordercounties.org](http://www.bordercounties.org).

<sup>24</sup> The precise figure in this case is \$191,948,007, supported by extensively detailed tables for each county. Border Counties Coalition, Undocumented Immigrants in U.S.-Mexico Border Counties: The Costs of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Services, p. 132, September 2007, [www.bordercounties.org](http://www.bordercounties.org).

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Neither the border counties nor the region's school districts have attempted to calculate the costs to public schools due to immigration, whether legal or undocumented. This is in part due to the explicit legal prohibition against inquiries about the immigration status of students in the public schools.<sup>25</sup> Some states and private groups have attempted such estimates at the state and national levels, but no estimates are available specifically for border communities.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, the study sponsored by the school district associations of the border states referred to earlier does venture some observations specifically concerning border-crossing students. About 12 percent of districts within 100 miles of the border that participated in the study reported having students that cross the border daily.<sup>27</sup> One superintendent estimated that as many as 40 percent of the elementary school students in his border district may be border crossers.

The school districts study also notes that the great majority of participating districts (73 percent) reported offering English language courses to students. Furthermore, 63 percent of districts reported offering translation services, and 58 percent offered classes to immigrant parents to inform them "about the nature of schooling in the United States."<sup>28</sup> These and other factors, such as the cost of subsidized school lunches, would appear to account for the significantly higher rate

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<sup>25</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* (457 U.S. 202, 1982) that a Texas statute denying public education to undocumented children was unconstitutional. See <http://supreme.justia.com/us/457/202/case.html>.

<sup>26</sup> The Texas state comptroller estimated the cost to the state's public schools of undocumented students in the 2004-2005 school year to be \$957 million. Susan Combs, *Undocumented Immigrants in Texas: A Financial Analysis of the Impact to the State Budget and Economy*, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, Window on State Government, December 2006, [www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/undocumented/](http://www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/undocumented/). The first page of this online report notes, however, that the estimated contribution of undocumented immigrants to the gross state product in fiscal 2005 was \$17.7 billion, including \$1.58 billion in state revenues.

<sup>27</sup> Harrison, et al., *La Frontera*, p. 16. This study does not indicate how such students cross the border, but it notes that enforcement of residency requirements is costly, and the loss of students also means a loss of funding provided to the school. In Texas, per capita spending on public education is in fact significantly higher in the border counties than the state as a whole, according to another study by the State Comptroller. See Susan Combs, *The Border: On the Brink*, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, March 2001, [www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/brink/](http://www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/brink/). This reflects at least in part both the younger average age of the more heavily Hispanic border region, as well as some specially funded programs for low-income students.

<sup>28</sup> Harrison, et al., *La Frontera*, p. 21.

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of per capita spending on public education in Texas border counties (\$1,269) as compared to the state as a whole (\$986).<sup>29</sup>

### **Local Responses to Migration**

The foregoing provides context and background for an examination of some of the more salient responses of border communities and jurisdictions to ongoing undocumented migration flows and the presence of undocumented migrant residents. The central issue for the region (and the nation, with regard to the region) over the last two decades has been to establish greater control over the border itself. It is instructive to acknowledge that the basic border control strategy of “prevention through deterrence” was a locally devised innovation, albeit implemented by a federal agency: the U.S. Border Patrol.<sup>30</sup>

“Prevention through deterrence” has been the dominant approach to controlling the Mexican border since the 1990s. The integration of local branches of the U.S. Border Patrol into border communities can be seen as this approach unfolded and expanded. The strategy favors forward deployment of patrol officers and vehicles along the border as a deterrent to crossers, instead of the previous focus on the pursuit and apprehension of unauthorized crossers on the U.S. side. The first trial operation of this model, dubbed “Hold the Line,” was instituted for six weeks by then-McAllen sector chief Sylvestre Reyes in 1988, apparently with neither authorization nor funding by his superiors.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Combs, *On the Brink*. This analysis does not include data on age structure, which may account for the better part of higher per capita spending on public education among the younger and heavily Hispanic border communities. It does, however note another driver of spending on school children: in the border counties over 40 percent of school children were reported living in poverty, relative to a statewide rate of 22.1 percent. This would logically translate into at minimum higher spending on subsidized school lunches.

<sup>30</sup> Among the numerous published assessments and critiques of this strategy, see Belinda I. Reyes, Hans P. Johnson, and Richard Van Swearingen, *Holding the Line? The Effect of the Recent Border Build-Up on Unauthorized Immigration*, Public Policy Institute of California, 2002; Wayne A. Cornelius, et al., *Controlling Unauthorized Immigration from Mexico: The Failure of ‘Prevention through Deterrence’ and the Need for Comprehensive Reform*, Immigration Policy Center, June 10, 2008, [www.immigrationpolicy.org/images/File/misc/CCISbriefing061008.pdf](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/images/File/misc/CCISbriefing061008.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Joel Brinkley, “A Rare Success at the Border Brought Scant Official Praise,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1994, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9800E2D7153BF937A2575AC0A962958260>.

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### U.S.-Mexico Border Sectors by State

| California             | Arizona        | New Mexico | Texas  |
|------------------------|----------------|------------|--|
| San Diego<br>El Centro | Yuma<br>Tucson | El Paso    | El Paso<br>Marfa<br>Del Rio<br>Laredo<br>McAllen |

Reyes, a native of El Paso County, had joined the Border Patrol in 1969 and became its first Hispanic sector chief in 1984 when he was assigned to McAllen. Reyes suspended his first forward deployment operation after six weeks in 1988 due to lack of funding to cover the overtime pay involved. In 1993, he was named sector chief in his native El Paso, which was experiencing a surge of illegal border crossing into the city and its neighborhoods.

The surge at the then-principal crossing points in El Paso and San Diego came after a drop-off following the legalization programs of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Activists in California responded to the notable increase in illegal border crossings by organizing the historic ballot initiative known as Proposition 187.<sup>32</sup> This proposition later passed by a landslide in the November 1994 election.

But in El Paso, Reyes in September 1993 again resorted to a forward deployment strategy along 20 urban miles of border. This time, however, the success of “prevention through deterrence” was such that it won support in Washington, D.C., and was extended beyond the first 30-day trial and included an additional 10 miles west into New Mexico. A change in traditional operational and monitoring frameworks, however, was required by the federal agency, the Clinton administration, and Congressional overseers in order for the deterrence model to be judged as successful. The previous pursuit and apprehension model by definition produced far more arrests and repatriations—traditionally the main basis for justifying U.S. Border Patrol budget

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<sup>32</sup> California Proposition 187, passed in November 1994, proposed to deny undocumented immigrants all public services with the exception of emergency medical care. A U.S. District Court invalidated the law based on the Supreme Court’s ruling protecting access to public education by undocumented immigrant children in *Plyler v. Doe* (1984). California’s appeal of this ruling was dropped by newly elected Governor Gray Davis in 1998.

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requests—than did deterrence.<sup>33</sup> Appreciating the latter required appreciating, if not adopting, the local point of view.<sup>34</sup>

The growing clamor over undocumented migration, emanating especially from California at this time, encouraged the Clinton administration to go further and attempt to reproduce the forward deployment model elsewhere along the border. “Operation Gatekeeper” was launched in San Diego in October 1994, “Operation Rio Grande” was launched in Brownsville in August 1997, and “Operation Safeguard” was launched in Nogales, Arizona (Tucson Sector) in February 1999.

From the point of view of border communities, the success of the forward deployment model is manifold. The fact that it redirects illegal migration flows away from urban areas and into remote locations may not appear to be an unqualified achievement from a national policy perspective, but it does appear to be seen locally as a benefit to the community. Presumably, the redirection results in lower local law enforcement and emergency medical service costs than would otherwise be the case.

Furthermore, the previous model that concentrated on pursuit and capture on U.S. soil created problems specific to the heavily Hispanic demographics of border communities. As *The New York Times* reported on the situation Reyes encountered in El Paso in 1993:

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<sup>33</sup> Brinkley, Rare Success. See also Joanna Griffin, “Operation Hold-the-Line” in Mexico and the United States, ed. Lee Stacy (Marshall Cavendish, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> The tension between local support for forward deployment and opposition to it at higher levels owed to several basic factors: (1) costs – the new strategy required increased overtime pay in the short term and additional personnel in the long term, (2) decreased apprehensions, (3) international criticism – Mexican media and political actors sharply criticized the strategy, leading to an official Mexican diplomatic protest, which brought the State Department into the discussion in Washington, and (4) regional complaints – success in the El Paso sector diverted migration elsewhere, leading to complaints and demands for additional resources in other states and sectors. According to an account in the *New York Times*, Reyes was able to get part of the initial funding he needed by going around the opposition of the then-acting chief of the Border Patrol, communicating instead directly with the higher-level financial office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). While the Border Patrol was running a deficit, the INS financial office had \$300,000 in “end-of-the-budget-year money that had to be spent.” Following the implementation of “Operation Blockade,” the tension it created appears to have been resolved when a combination of media attention and a favorable House report on the strategy’s success created the political support needed for Congressional funding to extend the strategy to other areas. Reyes’s one apparent concession to criticism was to change the name of the operation to “Hold the Line,” which does not translate as provocatively into Spanish. See Brinkley, Rare Success.

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Thousands of illegal aliens were streaming across the Rio Grande without constraint. Border Patrol officers were chasing them through the streets, backyards and parking lots. Often the officers grabbed El Paso residents by mistake and demanded proof that they were citizens.

There had been brawls and shootings, accusations of abuse, and loud public protests. The city had risen up in outrage, and a federal judge had ordered the patrol to stop questioning people based solely on their appearance.<sup>35</sup>

Although we lack survey data to precisely establish the public's response along the border to the forward deployment strategy, we have a number of indicators in this regard, including the extension of the strategy to other communities since the 1990s. Sylvestre Reyes became so popular that in 1996 he was elected the first Hispanic to Congress from El Paso. After a term in Washington, D.C., he was unanimously selected by his colleagues to chair the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, has been reelected by his constituents five times, and has been honored and recognized by a large number of Hispanic organizations.<sup>36</sup>

By primarily redirecting undocumented migration to remote border areas, however, the forward deployment strategy has generated other problems and elicited different responses by other communities and levels of government. The major consequences have had distinct but related aspects. First, increased flows through remote desert corridors have significantly increased deaths among border crossers.<sup>37</sup> This result has introduced a new and continuing source of

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<sup>35</sup> Brinkley, Rare Success.

<sup>36</sup> Among the Hispanic and border community institutions and organizations that have honored Reyes (some repeatedly) since 1996 are the Pan American Health Organization, the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (regional and national), the Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of Commerce, the League of United Latin American Citizens, the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, the Mexican American Bar Association, the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the El Paso Inc. newspaper's "El Pasoan of the Year Award," the U.S.-Mexico Chamber of Commerce, the American G.I. Forum, and the Rio Grande Council of Governments.

<sup>37</sup> See Wayne A. Cornelius, "Death at the Border: The Efficacy and 'Unintended' Consequences of U.S. Immigration Control Policy 1993-2000" (working paper 27, The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, December 2001), [www.ccis-ucsd.org/PUBLICATIONS/wrkg27.PDF](http://www.ccis-ucsd.org/PUBLICATIONS/wrkg27.PDF).

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tension in U.S.-Mexico relations, and led to the implementation of a seasonal program known as “Operation Desert Safeguard” that is intended to address the problem.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, the spread of the enhanced border control strategy has notably redirected migratory flows toward Arizona in particular, and apparently contributed to a growing and expanding undocumented population throughout the country.<sup>39</sup> At a time when comprehensive immigration policy reform has become politically deadlocked, the growing undocumented population in Arizona and its dispersal elsewhere has spurred the creation of a large number of state and local policies aimed at countering and driving out the migratory flow.<sup>40</sup> At the national level, the principal legislation that moved forward was the Secure Fence Act of 2006, which aimed to go beyond the forward deployment strategy with some 700 miles of double fencing, as well as other forms of border control.

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<sup>38</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “CBP Launches Operation Desert Safeguard Aimed at Preventing Migrant Deaths: Effort Focuses on Dangerous Sonoran Desert Area,” news release, June 3, 2003, [www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/newsroom/news\\_releases/archives/cbp\\_press\\_releases/062003/06032003.xml](http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/newsroom/news_releases/archives/cbp_press_releases/062003/06032003.xml). See also [www.cbp.gov/xp/CustomsToday/2003/august/op\\_desert\\_safeguard.xml](http://www.cbp.gov/xp/CustomsToday/2003/august/op_desert_safeguard.xml).

<sup>39</sup> See Douglas S. Massey, ed., *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2008); Jorge G. Castaneda, *Ex Mex: From Migrants to Immigrants* (New Press, 2007); Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, eds., *Crossing the Border* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2004); Jorge Durand, Nolan J. Malone, and Douglas S. Massey, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> The Mexican foreign ministry’s Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME) maintains inventories of local laws and proposals concerning migrants at [www.ime.gob.mx/smilcm.htm](http://www.ime.gob.mx/smilcm.htm). Exit polls with relatively large sample sizes indicate a positive correlation between the presence of Hispanic voters and support for legalization of undocumented migrants. Arizona, however, was the notable exception to this tendency among the states for which exit polls were available in the 2006 Congressional elections (a year in which the immigration issue was particularly salient and voters were polled on this issue both nationally and in a number of states). Likely factors in the “Arizona exception” (relative especially to the other three border states) are the older age of its population and the higher proportion of retirees who have migrated there from outside the region; the fact that the Hispanic population and voters in Arizona constitute the lowest proportion of the four border states (perhaps short of a “critical mass” at 11 percent of the electorate in 2006); the more recent growth of the Hispanic population there compared to the other border states; and the recent upsurge in unauthorized flows. If these contrasts indeed account for the support in Arizona for punitive measures such as that state’s Proposition 200, they would logically also apply to communities and states elsewhere in the country which have even smaller proportions of Hispanic voters, and which have reacted to recent unauthorized migratory inflows with their own punitive and exclusionary measures. See David R. Ayón, “Immigration and the 2006 Election,” *U.S.-Mexico Policy Bulletin* (December 2006), Mexico Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: [www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/mex\\_bulletin\\_8.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/mex_bulletin_8.pdf); and National Immigration Forum, *Arizona’s Proposition 200, 2004 Election Analysis*, [www.immigrationforum.org/documents/TheDebate/Restrictionists/AZProp200Analysis.pdf](http://www.immigrationforum.org/documents/TheDebate/Restrictionists/AZProp200Analysis.pdf).

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It appears that the success of the forward deployment strategy contributes to a lack of significant local support, especially in Texas, for the construction of new border fencing. Indeed, elected officials in Texas border communities have been among the more notable critics of the new fence or “border wall.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Alternative Policy Directions**

The national debate on immigration policy reforms appears to be deadlocked over how to balance the objectives of ending unauthorized flows; resolving the status of undocumented residents; enhancing immigrant integration; providing for labor needs; and setting desirable levels of legal immigration and the criteria for admission. At the national level, the question of the desirable extent of U.S. socioeconomic integration with Mexico is profoundly implicated in this discussion, but receives virtually no attention.

In border communities, however, the already high level of integration with Mexico cannot be overlooked; nor can the complicated ways in which this reality is linked to the relatively impoverished status of these communities go unnoticed. What are the fundamental alternative directions that policy can take? Each alternative direction below involves a different sort of “integration,” some in combination with another:

#### *I. Further Regional Integration with Mexico.*

More than 40 years after the advent of the Border Industrialization Program (which was offered as a substitute for the bracero guest worker program) and nearly 15 years after NAFTA went into effect, the notion that an ever-deeper integration with Mexico can in and of itself stimulate an acceptable pace and level of development for U.S. border communities lacks credibility.<sup>42</sup> This

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<sup>41</sup> In an interview broadcast on National Public Radio on June 8, 2007, Laredo Mayor Raul Salinas declared that mayors of cities along the border were united against the construction of the border fence ([www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10856978](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10856978)). Significantly, both U.S. senators from Texas, responding to the local outcry, sponsored an amendment in 2007 that allowed the secretary of Homeland Security to use discretion in determining the appropriateness of fence construction along the border. Rep. Raul Grijalva of Arizona has also sponsored legislation weakening the provisions of the 2006 Border Fence Act.

<sup>42</sup> In other words, a pace of development that would show significant progress in closing the income disparity between border communities and the rest of the country during successive five-year intervals.

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may be inherently the case due to the wide disparities between the two countries in income and education levels.<sup>43</sup> Bilateral integration has nonetheless been the major thrust of national policy, following the undirected movement of the two countries' economies and societies. As such, it may in fact be the region's only realistic option, and it remains the most likely direction for the future.<sup>44</sup>

There is perhaps the not-insignificant consideration that both legally and logistically, a freer labor movement across the border could help limit the colonias phenomenon on the U.S. side. This would call for infrastructure investments and personnel adequate to significantly and reliably reduce border wait times, as well as a new or expanded guest worker program that would include border-crossing commuters.

One long-pending bilateral integrationist measure on a national scale, however, would logically tend to diminish the role of border communities in U.S.-Mexico trade: the opening of the border to long-haul Mexican trucks. Laredo in particular has experienced a great boom in trucking and warehousing services, due to restrictions that limit cross-border trucking to a 20 to 25 mile commercial zone along the border.

### *II. Enhanced Immigrant and Hispanic Integration Nationally.*

Proposals for comprehensive immigration reform have come to place a high priority on the socioeconomic and civic integration of immigrants who already reside in the United States. The proposals typically include legalization of undocumented residents through a series of steps that include English-language and civics instruction. These proposals could be augmented with new programs aimed at the fuller integration of legal as well as undocumented immigrants, and could

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<sup>43</sup> It can certainly be argued that persistent poverty in border communities is due to a failure to accompany deepening integration with Mexico with efforts to narrow the development gap between the two countries, as is the practice when countries are incorporated into the European Union. This is famously the only border in the world between a developed and a developing country. The relative poverty of the U.S. side of the border (in a U.S. context) is in effect the mirror image of the relatively higher level of development of the Mexican side of the border, relative to Mexico as a whole.

<sup>44</sup> Of the options suggested here, deepening integration with Mexico is the most pronounced trend in terms of policy, the spontaneous direction of the two economies, and as a result of continuing migration. The other options would entail policy departures to varying degrees—and no alternative policy direction has gained support or even been proposed since the advent of the maquiladora program.

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be further adapted with the particular challenges of border communities in mind.<sup>45</sup> The primary thrust of this approach would be national, even if it included special provisions for the border region. It should be noted, however, that a wide range of state and local policies aimed at encouraging immigrant integration have already been adopted in a number of states, which could serve as models for the border region.<sup>46</sup>

### *III. Greater Regional Integration Northward.*

A 2001 study of Texas border cities published by Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (referred to in the “Economic Effect” section of this paper) states bluntly that “the most direct path to significant gains for these cities still lies in broad and full participation in the economy to the north.” Following the release of a 1998 report by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, the authors of a Federal Reserve report suggested that a range of programs aimed at raising the region’s standards “in labor quality, infrastructure, housing, environmental conditions, public health and other key areas,” and integration of “the cities’ economies more fully into the high-wage U.S. labor market” represented a path for the region’s development that would be superior to further integration with Mexico.<sup>47</sup> This policy direction would require major investments by both the border states and the federal government and would be, above all, a Texas-centered

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<sup>45</sup> A prominent example of immigrant integrationist policy is access to higher education at in-state tuition rates by undocumented immigrant graduates of those states’ high schools, popularly known as versions of the “Dream Act,” which has also been introduced (but not voted on) at the federal level. Another step in this area would be to augment the resources available to “Hispanic Serving Institutions” under Title V of the Higher Education Act of 1965, in particular for those institutions in the border region. Significant support for immigrant integration can also be found in the corporate sector. As a recent report from the Americas Society and Council of the Americas has detailed, a large number of major U.S. corporations either sponsor or directly offer programs in support of immigrant integration. These include “training for skills development, financial literacy programs, English language courses, scholarships for higher education, information about access to health care, and campaigns for civic participation.” Federal incentives could be provided to extend these programs into border communities. See U.S. Business and Hispanic Integration: Expanding the Economic Contributions of Immigrants, A Product of the Americas Society and Council of the Americas, July 23 2008, <http://as.americas-society.org/article.php?id=1145>.

<sup>46</sup> See Progressive States Network, The Anti-Immigrant Movement that Failed: Positive Integration Policies by State Governments Still Far Outweigh Punitive Policies Aimed at New Immigrants, September 2008, [www.progressivestates.org/content/902](http://www.progressivestates.org/content/902).

<sup>47</sup> Gilmer, et al., Texas Border Cities. The 1998 report that they refer to is John Sharp, Bordering the Future, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 1998.

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approach.<sup>48</sup> This is highly compatible with the notion of an expanded and deepened approach to immigrant and Hispanic integration suggested in Direction II (Enhanced Integration Nationally), above, and can be considered the border-specific dimension that most proposals for comprehensive immigration reform lack.

Bringing most of the border region up to U.S. national income standards, however, may require a transformation on a level that might be likened to emulating a sort of “San Diego model” away from the Pacific coast. Such a transformation would require growth and diversification of border community populations on a scale that is economically and environmentally unfeasible.

### *IV. Simultaneous Integration, North and South.*

Directions I and III conceivably could be combined within an ambitious framework of enhanced overall U.S.-Mexico or North American integration. A bilateral or continental approach to regional development problems would most logically include the border region, if it is not to be limited to Mexico’s south. Robert Pastor has extensively elaborated on this policy direction.<sup>49</sup> A variation on this approach would be to develop a new bilateral strategy for the border that would be limited to this region. The steps that could be taken in this regard include enhanced capitalization and role for the North American Development Bank, authorization by both governments for a major entry into the Mexican border communities by the U.S. Agency for International Development, and inclusion of border development on the agenda of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America. Pastor’s various publications strongly suggest, however, that the deep-seated problems of the border cannot be resolved in isolation of Mexico’s broader development issues.

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<sup>48</sup> There appear to be no ready estimates of the infrastructure, housing, educational, and public health needs, etc., of the large number of border colonias. A key recommendation would be to mandate a comprehensive official study to establish the dimensions of the unmet needs of these border communities. Policies and programs intended to address these needs would be de facto Texas-centered due to the number of colonias, colonia residents, and high proportion of the region’s total population (San Diego County excepted) found in a handful of Texas border counties. Another necessary measure would be for the states to grant counties ordinance-making authority, which would allow them to establish and enforce building codes and zoning restrictions. A major assault by the counties on existing colonias would entail major investments in infrastructure, however, and would probably require budgeting a combination of housing subsidies and funds to construct public housing, as well as investments in schools and health clinics, in addition to infrastructure such as roads, water and sewage systems, etc.

<sup>49</sup> Robert A. Pastor, *Toward a North American Community: Lessons from the Old World for the New* (Peterson Institute, 2001).