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Reopening the U.S.–Mexico Border: A Framework for Action

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 brought with it a global pandemic. This forced governments around the world to implement measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, which is now responsible for several million deaths.¹ To contain the virus, one of the major points of actionable policy implemented by many countries was to close their borders. The U.S.–Mexico border² was one of them. However, the U.S.–Mexico border remained partially open, although by March 2020 restrictions on cross-border travel were imposed on all land crossings. Almost a year-and-a-half after the restrictions were implemented, and with increasing vaccination rates that provide near herd immunity in the border region, there is now talk of lifting them. This brief describes the border restrictions put in place by the U.S. and Mexico, questions their overall utility, recommends reopening the border fully, and offers policy recommendations on how to do it.

RESTRICTIONS ON CROSS-BORDER TRAVEL

On March 21, 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Mexico's Foreign Ministry shut down the border to all "non-essential" traffic to contain the spread of the coronavirus. By partially closing the border, Washington and Mexico City sought

to reduce human mobility and thereby create social distancing, a key measure in fighting the pandemic.³

The definition of what constitutes non-essential cross-border traffic was never fully defined for all borderlanders, however.⁴ The closure of the border turned out to be an asymmetric measure that largely applied to Mexico but not the U.S. Notably, U.S. citizens and permanent residents continued near-unrestricted back and forth travel, while Mexican citizens and residents were impeded from crossing all land ports of entry (primarily on the U.S.–Mexico border) unless they demonstrated a verifiable emergency. Moreover, unlike at the U.S.–Canadian border, where the Canadian government required all travelers to quarantine, neither the U.S. nor the Mexican governments required any border crossers to quarantine. And hardly anyone allowed to cross was penalized by either country for traveling for non-essential purposes, such as visiting family or for entertainment. This was problematic because many continued to spread the virus across the border almost freely, defeating the purpose of the restrictions on non-essential travel.⁵ Cities on both sides of the border, in fact, experienced their peak rates of infection months after border controls were implemented, demonstrating that such restrictions were largely ineffectual. El Paso, Texas, for example, was at its worst levels of infection and deaths months after the restrictions



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were put in place.⁶ Finally, air, rail, and sea travel continued, with Mexican citizens and residents able to travel by those means into the United States and with American citizens and residents crowding Mexican beaches with few or no restrictions.⁷

At the same time, while Mexicans were prevented from crossing at land ports of entry, both countries considered trade essential and all commercial traffic continued unabated. Since both governments considered commercial cargo an essential part of their economies, trucks and trains, loaded with all kinds of products, were allowed to cross, regardless of the nationality of the drivers. But no negative tests were required for cargo movers and only masks were always required. However, as vaccines became more available, the city of El Paso, for example, offered free COVID-19 vaccinations to cross-border truckers to prevent the cross-border spread of the virus.⁸

MONTHLY REVIEW OF BORDER RESTRICTIONS

Every month, since March 2020, both governments have met to review the evolution of the pandemic and decide whether to lift restrictions on cross-border traffic at land ports of entry. Until the summer of 2021, all restrictions on Mexican citizens remained in place, even as U.S. citizens and residents travelled with no limitations.

Evidently, both governments sought to balance commercial and economic concerns with public health anxieties, but the system was never rebalanced to prevent all non-essential travel rather than simply restricting Mexican citizens and residents from using land ports of entry. Restrictions were imposed only on Mexican citizens and residents and have continued as established in March 2020, even though conditions on the U.S. side of the border have markedly improved after vaccines were deployed in the country and is possible to allow those on the Mexican side of the border (who have been vaccinated or can show proof of a recent negative test) to visit the U.S. for non-essential purposes.

IMPACT OF (PARTIALLY) CLOSING DOWN THE BORDER

The consequences of shutting down the border to a large segment of the border population with demonstrably little benefit toward controlling the pandemic have been damaging to life in the region. Partially closing the border has not only separated families and friends but it has also depressed economic activity on both sides.⁹ By now, it is evident that prohibiting travel for Mexican citizens and residents but allowing U.S. citizens and residents to travel freely back and forth did not stop the spread of the virus.

In sum, the United States and Mexico, despite a mutually agreed framework for containing the virus, engaged in asymmetrical restriction measures that were largely ineffective against the pandemic and were detrimental to economic and social life in border communities.¹⁰

A FRAMEWORK FOR REOPENING THE BORDER

The U.S.–Mexico border depends on the efficient management of cross-border flows—with few or no disruptions and an expeditious process of legal and legitimate travel. A closed or partially closed border is generally detrimental to the local economy and cross-border social life, as already mentioned. Moreover, an efficient and secure management of the border is essential for both sides to prosper. So, it is time to reopen the border. The following section outlines some specific proposals to do so to the benefit of both communities. This is particularly true as U.S. vaccination rates reach nearly 70% and Mexican vaccination rates also increase, albeit more slowly.¹¹

Health Clearance

Two instruments allow for a system of screening: A negative test and proof of vaccination. To ensure that only healthy individuals are crossing the border, regardless of their nationality, in addition to a passport/visa, border agents could also require a negative COVID-19 test or proof of vaccination. Integrating such proof into the process would allow for a gradual and controlled restoration of cross-border travel in a way that more closely guards against the virus. As vaccine rates increase, more people could resume their normal use of the border for legal and legitimate purposes. The information gathered at the border could also be stored in computer systems in order to understand how the rates of virus-free and vaccinated travelers evolve over time until life is restored to as close to “normal” as possible. A similar system is already in place for air travel, as anyone boarding a plane from Mexico to the U.S. must show a negative COVID-19 test. There is no reason not to implement it at land ports of entry. This is a quick and cost-free measure that would help restore cross-border traffic in the near term.

Vaccinate All Borderlanders

As the vaccine rollout continues, even if faster on the U.S. side and slower on the Mexican side of the border, there is less of a reason to continue with blanket restrictions on half of all borderlanders—the 7.5 million Mexican citizens and residents out of a border population of 15 million in all U.S. border counties and Mexican border municipalities. And as vaccines become more readily available in the United States, Mexicans should be allowed to obtain the vaccine on the U.S. side and carry proof of vaccination as they cross the border. An as-yet unknown number of Mexican citizens have already traveled by air to the U.S. to get vaccinated.¹² It is time to allow health services in U.S. border cities and towns to also care for all borderlanders, regardless of nationality. At the same time, vaccines should be made readily available to health services on the Mexican side of the border, targeting those who

do not have a passport or visa and cannot enter the United States. Protecting this population, even if they cannot cross the border, will reduce transmission of the virus in the entire border area, benefitting all border residents on both sides and reactivating both the economy and social life along the 2,000-mile border.

Contactless Screening

Thinking somewhat forward, new systems of contactless screening could also be put in place over time, allowing technology to capture information on each border crosser, with agents verifying the information on their screens. Platforms with touch-free mechanisms are already in place; for instance, Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology has been deployed at many ports of entry.¹³ Additional information could also help contain the virus with the right technology deployment. Only in times of doubt would an individual go on to a secondary inspection. This process is already in place with the Global Entry, Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI) (U.S.–Mexico), and NEXUS (U.S.–Canada) platforms.¹⁴ More travelers should be allowed to register on such platforms. This, in turn, would help to make cross-border traffic seamless, in addition to reducing contact.

Taking advantage of the lessons from the pandemic regarding the importance of contactless screening, technology has emerged as a viable approach on a broader basis. This would permit a greater use of artificial intelligence to seamlessly screen cross-border travelers, reducing not only contact but also wait times and making the border crossing system generally more efficient.

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CONCLUSION

As the United States begins to reach herd immunity, thanks to its broad-based vaccination efforts, it is less justifiable to continue with current border restrictions on the region's residents. Instead, as the next few months are key to understanding the evolution of the pandemic, given new dangerous coronavirus strains such as the Delta variant, both governments should work jointly to prepare the border for a new normal, restoring travel to those who can show proof of vaccination or a recent negative COVID-19 test; expanding vaccination rates throughout the border in the short term; and expanding contactless border technology in the longer term. These measures can only make the border more efficient, prosperous, and secure— and especially healthier.

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