

Testimony of

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My name is Douglas S. Massey and I am Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University. Since 1982 I have co-directed a large project studying Mexican Migration to the United States with my colleague Jorge Durand of the University of Guadalajara. The Mexican Migration Project, which is funded by NICHD and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, offers the most comprehensive and reliable source of data available on documented and undocumented migration from Mexico. The project won a MERIT Award from the National Institutes of Health and based partly on its stature in the field, Jorge and I have been elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

Two decades of intensive research using these data reveal a fundamental contradiction at the heart of U.S. relations with Mexico. On the one hand, we have joined with that country to create an integrated North American market characterized by the relatively free cross-border movement of capital, goods, services, and information. Since 1986 total trade with Mexico has increased by a factor of eight. On the other hand, we have also sought to block the cross-border movement of workers. The United States criminalized undocumented hiring in 1986 and over the next 15 years tripled the size of the Border Patrol while increasing its budget tenfold.

This escalation of border enforcement was not connected to any change in the rate of undocumented migration from Mexico. Rather U.S. policy makers somehow hoped to finesse a contradiction, integrating all markets in North America except one--that for labor. This contradictory stance has led to continued migration under terms that are harmful to the United States, disadvantageous for Mexico, injurious to American workers, and inhumane to the migrants themselves.

Rather than increasing the likelihood of apprehension, the militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border has reduced it to a forty-year low, channeling migrants to remote sectors where the chance of getting caught is actually quite small. In these relatively unguarded sectors, however, the risk of death is greater and mortality among migrants has tripled, bringing about the needless death of 300-400 persons per year. Although U.S. efforts to increase the costs and risks of border crossing did not discourage undocumented migrants from coming, they did deter them from going home. Once in the United States, migrants are reluctant to face again the gauntlet at the border so they stay put and send for family members. The end result has been an unprecedented increase in the size of the undocumented population. The hardening of the border in San Diego and El Paso also pushed migrants away from traditional destinations towards new receiving areas.

In the end, during the 1990s what had been a circular flow of able-bodied workers into three states became a settled population of families scattered across 50 states, significantly increasing the social costs of migration to U.S. taxpayers. The economic costs were likewise exacerbated by the criminalization of undocumented hiring in 1986, in an effort to eliminate the "magnet" of U.S. jobs. This action only encouraged U.S. employers to shift from direct hiring to labor subcontracting. Rather than dealing directly with migrants, employers began to work through intermediaries to escapes the burdens of paperwork and the risks of prosecution. In return, subcontractors pocketed a portion of the wage bill that formerly went to migrants, thereby lowering their wages. Unfortunately, the ultimate effect was not to eliminate undocumented hiring, but to undermine wages and working conditions in the United States, not so much for undocumented migrants who had always earned meager wages but for authorized workers who had formerly been able to improve their earnings over time. In the new regime, everyone had to work through a subcontractor regardless of legal status and the advantaged bargaining position once enjoyed by U.S. citizens and legal resident aliens was nullified.

At this point, all we have to show for two decades of contradictory policies towards Mexico is a negligible deterrent effect, a growing pile of corpses, record low probabilities of apprehension at the border, falling rates of return migration, accelerating undocumented population growth, downward pressure on U.S. wages and working conditions, and billions of dollars in wasted money. These outcomes are not simply my opinion, but are scientific facts that can be reproduced by anyone else using data publicly available from the Mexican Migration Project website.

The situation is thus ripe for reform. Rather than undertaking repressive actions to block migratory flows that are a natural consequence of Mexico's economic transformation and its ongoing integration with the United States, a more salutary approach would be to bring labor flows above board and manage them in ways that are beneficial to both nations.

The steps that I believe are needed to accomplish this reform include but are not limited to: (1) the creation of a temporary visa program that gives migrants rights in the United States and allows them to exercise their natural inclination to return home; (2) expanding the quota for legal immigration from Mexico, a country with a one trillion dollar economy and 105 million people to whom we are bound by history, geography, and a well-functioning free trade agreement; (3) offering amnesty to children of undocumented migrants who the United States entered as minors and who have stayed out of trouble; and (4) establishing an earned legalization program for those who entered the United States in authorized status as adults.

These actions, along with others I can enumerate, would go along way toward resolving the current mess. They would enable the United States to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of a migration that will likely occur in any event. The approach of management rather than repression will better protect American workers and allow Mexico to develop more quickly to the point where the forces now promoting large-scale migration ultimately disappear. The legislation submitted to Congress by Senators Kennedy and McCain moves the agenda of immigration reform substantially in this direction, and for this reason I support it.