

Immigrants? It's the economy

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The border is out of control, some people claim, and the Border Patrol wants to militarize the boundary between the United States and Mexico.

This request is despite recent increases in Border Patrol agents and millions of dollars for technology. The Border Patrol claims it needs the reinforcements because the flow of undocumented immigrants — and, recently, drugs — continues unabated.

This claim presumes that the border at some time was controlled — or that there has ever been an honest attempt to control it.

According to the popular view of many South Texans, the Border Patrol responds to agribusiness, food processors, restaurateurs, contractors and other labor-intensive enterprises, allowing the in-flow of workers when they are needed, then apprehending them once the work is done.

It might not work exactly like that, but the thrust of the explanation is that the real determinant of immigration from Mexico is economics rather than governmental policy.

Businesses profit from the availability of a low-wage labor force — and so do the consumers, who receive services less expensively.

In fact, economic forces have always controlled the border.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Americans on the westward movement benefited from cattle and horses stolen from Spanish Texas by American cattle rustlers. Later, in the 19th century, the cattle rustling came from the other direction.

Without concern for border restrictions, U.S. merchants in the early 1800s carted goods into Santa Fe and south to Chihuahua while Yankee clipper ships anchored at the mouth of the Rio Grande, unloading American merchandise that would be hauled to Monterrey and Saltillo.

The commercial empire that existed southward — and still continues today — has had a return flow of laborers. After 1848, following the U.S. War Against Mexico, the pull of Mexican workers into the United States was evident in the growth of cities along the border.

Later, in the early 1900s, Mexican workers migrated to the new border-area agricultural lands but also to other parts of the state and beyond to the Midwest.

The demand for laborers was such that contractors for agribusiness and construction projects collared workers as they crossed the international bridges, urging them to sign labor contracts with them.

There were no passport requirements to enter into the United States.

But even when requirements were imposed in 1924, once immigrants were on U.S. soil, the Border Patrol did not enforce them.

It wasn't until the Great Depression in the 1930s that the Border Patrol began to deport undocumented immigrants. But once the economic crisis subsided, workers from Mexico returned illegally or under the auspices of the Bracero Program.

Two other "crises" called for special measures to control the flow of undocumented workers. One was the recession of the mid-1950s, which spawned "Operation Wetback," a massive drive to apprehend and deport illegal immigrants.

The other came during the recession of the early 1980s. Legislation was passed requiring pre-employment checks on the legal residency of workers and imposed heavier fines on employers who do not comply with the law.

Somehow, those who hire undocumented laborers know how to get around the new legislation, so now the emphasis is again on apprehending the illegal workers.

But will a road equipped partly with a real fence and throughout with an electronic fence and an army of agents stop the flow of these immigrants?

Probably not, but it will make it harder. Periodic increases in Border Patrol agents and equipment does help control the border. That alone, however, will not fix the problem since, ultimately, economic forces control immigration.

Still, the flow of immigrants puts great pressures on education and health services here. One way to lessen this impact is to work with the Mexican government to improve conditions; this is probably the best deterrent.

But this indirect policy is the hardest to sell to American voters.