

ESSAY
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The Central U.S.–Mexico Borderlands during the 2020 Pandemic

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This essay begins by setting the scene of the 2020 novel coronavirus virus (COVID-19) pandemic in the central U.S.–Mexico borderlands. The essay then outlines the pre-pandemic situation, from 2016-2019, one characterized by larger numbers of migrant arrivals from Central America, harsh U.S. anti-refugee and anti-Mexican practices, and hardened border controls. The article then discusses pandemic-linked deaths and closures of the border to all but U.S. citizens and Legal Permanent Residents and to slightly diminished cargo traffic, rising again by July and numbers of COVID-19 deaths declining thereafter. Official U.S. border rhetoric has broadened to strengthen nationalist security rationales around health, while activists push back against harsh policy practices, creating an ongoing, dynamic tension in the borderlands.

Introduction: Flawed Governance

The rising COVID-19 infection and death rates in the cross-border El Paso–Ciudad Juárez metropolitan region of more than two million people peaked in July and August, then by mid-September, decreased to total 464 deaths in (American) El Paso and 813 in (Mexican) Juárez, a city double the size.¹ Governors of both Texas and Chihuahua preside over economies that remained

open for “essential” business, gradually opening for others, with the formal border crossing closure initially to end June 22 but delayed every month by month, perhaps to be extended through the end of 2020. One mayor (*presidente municipal*) caught the virus, wears a facemask, and recovered; the other mayor advocated face masks but openly flaunted his disregard for them, pictured at an El Paso country club with un-masked friends sitting close to one another, but served by a face-masked waiter.



State governors in federalism, each elected under populist presidents—one of them right-wing and the other left-wing—took capital-city cues to minimize the urgency of the pandemic in early days and delay policies that could have saved lives. In both countries, it quickly became clear that unprepared quasi-private-public health care systems fell short in the early weeks of the pandemic, depending on the states in which people lived. Medical personnel had few tests at the outset, and it took up to a week to get results. In Texas 97% of tests were administered in the private market

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health sector, thus costly to all but the privately insured, or aged or impoverished under Medicare and Medicaid. Only in mid-May did free public testing become available in El Paso. In late May, just 3.5% of El Pasoans had been tested, a slightly higher figure than Texas, at 3.4%, but far lower than neighboring state New Mexico at 9.8% (Moore 2020). In Juárez, only hospitals test extremely ill patients, with estimates at .05% of the population. Uneven coordination between health authorities on both sides pose challenges to identify contacts of the infected (Kocherga 2020).

While borders hardened sharply during the pandemic, they had been hardening after the election of President Trump. In justifying extended border closures for the pandemic, Acting U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said “border security is homeland security” (quoted in Taylor 2020).² One might wonder if the U.S. respects national security in other countries, for the U.S.—currently leading in worldwide deaths—deports refugees, including those with infections, by plane to the Global South or to neighboring city Juárez where an estimated 10,000-15,000 languish awaiting hearing dates that have been cancelled.³ President Trump and U.S. corporate CEOs wrote Mexico’s President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) encouraging him to consider production “essential” so that manufacturing supply chains would not be broken in the interdependent economies of North America (Angulo 2020).

Pre-Pandemic Tensions

Prior to the 2020 pandemic, the interdependent economies of the Paso del Norte region showed congested and bustling pedestrian, car, and cargo-truck high-volume traffic in its five regional ports of entry. Business voices bristled at traffic delays, given U.S. strict border controls to ward off terrorism, illegal drugs, and unauthorized immigration. Depending on the time or season, waits at the border could take as long as two-to-three hours. Family members, shoppers, and workers crossed the border with documents as citizens, Legal Permanent Residents, and B1/B2 (so-called “laser”) visas for short-visit crossing.

Two turning points occurred in 2016-2017: the election of President Donald Trump, who campaigned on anti-Mexican, anti-immigrant messaging; and the movement of large-scale immigrant caravans from Central America. Trump, perhaps as part of his usual negotiation strategy, threatened to end NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, although a U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA, which some called NAFTA 2.0, T-MEC in Spanish) was negotiated to achieve three-country ratification by 2020. The images of migrant caravans fed Trump’s fear-mongering language of invasion. As a transit country, Mexico and AMLO (elected in late 2018) coped with U.S. pressure to secure their borders at the south.

Through 2017 and 2018, U.S. border agents processed asylum seekers who presented themselves at the border according to U.S. law and international protocols, even as ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) federal agents pushed into homes and workplaces for large-scale deportation in these less visible yet real internal borderlines. El Paso’s faith-based community, especially Ruben García at Annunciation House, co-ordinated shelter space at no cost to the federal government while volunteers processed documented asylum seekers for one-to-three days before their journeys, some with ankle bracelets, to relatives elsewhere in the U.S. to await hearings. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents coordinated with García for buses to drop off as many as 1,000 refugees per day at sites, but as Christmas approached in 2018, CBP dumped large numbers of refugees at the downtown Greyhound Bus Station with no food, fresh clothing, place to sleep, money, or linguistic skills to communicate for their bus tickets. The nonprofit community again rose to the challenge to accommodate, feed, and shelter refugees until U.S. policy practice took even harsher turns in 2018: children separated from parents, people caged and sleeping on rough ground under the downtown freeway while border agents processed them for removal, detention centers, and unsanitary conditions inside government processing centers until a congressional delegation visited and exposed the inhumane conditions. All of these stories and images fueled new narratives, both by Trump and human rights organizations.

By early 2019, the U.S. established the perhaps-misnamed Migrant Protection Protocol, also called Remain in Mexico, pushing an estimated 10,000 migrants into Juárez, now approximately 15,000. Asylum seekers could not approach the borderline to make their claim, but rather were “metered” (sometimes on their arms) to await entry while sleeping on the bridge or streets in Juárez. The burdens on Juárez, a city in which nearly half of the population lives below Mexico’s poverty line, can scarcely be overstated. Moreover, vulnerable refugees from all over the world—Central and South America, Cuba, and Africa—became targets for organized crime, such as theft, kidnapping for ransom, and rape. Juárez shelters can house approximately 2,000 people, but the rest fend for themselves. Cross-border nonprofit organizations, such as Abara Frontiers, work with the State of Chihuahua government to place people in certified shelters (see text and pictures: <https://www.abarafrontiers.org/>). Once both governments put the pandemic policies into place, the crowded facilities in both Juárez and the U.S. public and private, for-profit detention facilities raised alarms among many, even as residents and CBP agents became infected with the virus.

The Pandemic Arrives

Both presidents took a casual approach to the pandemic, avoiding social distancing and delaying U.S.-Mexico

border closure until March 20 to all but “essential” crossers, namely citizens and Legal Permanent Residents, not laser-visa holders, thus decimating retail stores in south El Paso dependent on Mexican shoppers. Mexico declared March 30 and thereafter as a national emergency, issuing an unenforced order to close non-essential businesses. With 500 maquiladora plants in the State of Chihuahua, three-fifths of them in Juárez with over 300,000 workers, only 28 temporarily closed, according to Border Industrial Association president Jerry Pacheco; some workers faced furloughs at 50-65% pay (US\$20-30 per week), and others worked in plants that ostensibly took preventive measures. Activist lawyer Susana Prieto Terrazas encouraged workers to take photos inside the plants, then posted many on Facebook that showed, for example, crowded work spaces separated with flimsy plastic and people lined up close together to have temperatures taken (Villagran 2020a).⁴ On April 27, then with a third of the plants in operation, workers protested with videos that went viral, “better fired than dead;” Prieto claimed that workers’ deaths represented almost half the city’s death count of 33 at the time (Villagran and Martínez 2020).

Meanwhile, refugees remain stuck in Juárez, an unsafe city, without adequate shelter. While the faith-based shelters accommodate approximately 2,000, as noted, others sleep in parks, on the streets, or stay in cheap hotels if they have money. El Paso’s Anti-Deportation Squad documents flight patterns and plane departures with shackled refugees to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, reportedly with 50% or more of arrivals infected and facing hostility from nationals in their own countries (Johnston 2020).⁵ Brownsville is also home to a “witness” group that protests airport deportations. Activists in King County, WA, have been successful in stopping such flights, though the local government responsible for airport policy faces lawsuits for their response to civic action.

In early-pandemic El Paso *Times* reports on infection numbers and deaths, once reporting daily figures on deaths in both cities, Juárez showed three-to-four times the number of El Paso, despite the city being twice the size of El Paso. Given the low rate of testing, the

number of infections is hardly a credible figure to report. Now in mid-September, the El Paso deaths are a little more than half those in its neighbor city.

U.S.-Mexico trade and traffic figures decreased in March and April, with most warehoused inventory already moved northward. Economist Tom Fullerton reported data on northbound crossings to El Paso showing February’s 67,300 cargo trucks down to 43,700 in March; car traffic down much more from 891,300 to 340,300, and pedestrian traffic down the most, from 499,300 to 103,900, thus impacting revenue to the city of El Paso from bridge tolls.⁶ Lauren Villagran reported figures slightly differently: Northbound traffic to El Paso on one of the heavily trafficked (free) Bridge of the Americas, down to 229,000 vehicles versus 305,000 in March 2019, and pedestrian traffic at the downtown Paso del Norte Bridge down 79% compared to the previous year (Villagran 2020b). Perhaps as a quid pro quo for El Paso’s forced fumigation and delousing of Mexican

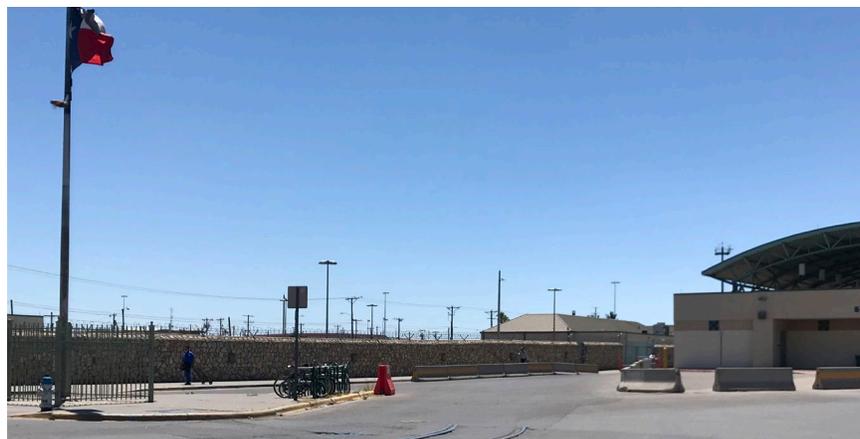


Figure 1. Top left: southbound pedestrian crossing, May 2020 (photo credit: Staudt) Top right: sanitary tunnel, May 2020 (photo credit: Nancy S. Reynolds). Bottom: northbound pedestrian crossing, May 2020 (photo credit: Staudt).

workers from 1917 to decades thereafter, including the millions of *braceros* (temporary Mexican migrant workers) from 1942-1964 sprayed with DDT (Romo 2005),⁷ pedestrian crossers into Juárez pass through a short makeshift disinfection tunnel, a practice cited in other southbound crossing communities such as Nogales. The usual truck congestion at ports of entry gave way to desolation. A large Facebook Reporte de Puentes group posted "Zaragoza, 2 ready lanes and 2 regular, 3 minutes to cross. Juárez can't live without El Paso, nor can El Paso without Juárez because we are one heart!" (quoted in Villagran 2020c).

From the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics for northbound truck crossings all along the U.S.-Mexico border, we can see a gradual rise from May (417,586) to June (531,579), and July (557,267)—the latest figures available as of mid-September (BTS, 2020). Although the pandemic continues to be with us, export-assembly production and northbound supply-chain transportation appear to be getting back to normal. The State of Chihuahua, no longer categorized "orange" by the federal government, now is "yellow," that is, medium risk. Lawyer Susana Prieto was jailed in the State of Matamoros in June during the pandemic on trumped-up charges for her activism to help workers gain higher wages and establish an independent service and industrial union. She was released after three weeks, banished to the State of Chihuahua, and forbidden to leave the state, despite being a dual citizen with a home and family in El Paso. As USMCA went into effect July 1, it became clear that the promise of strengthened labor rights will likely be ignored. No longer will border agents accept claims for asylum, and a few migrants trickle across facing extremely risky journeys. Former Border Patrol chief for the El Paso Sector Víctor Manjárez, Jr. said that the logistics of a sophisticated multi-piece trafficking system "mimic those of a legal global supply chain" (Villagran 2020d).

Looking back over the last six months, it is impossible to know whether the pandemic was contained by selective border closures (recall the slippery treatment of "essential" workers) for either or both sides of the borderline. Given the uncertainty in the beginning months of the pandemic, perhaps closure was warranted. However, the flaws in governance in both countries plus the shoddy roll-out of health recommendations and testing make it impossible to determine which factors have now led to a decline in COVID-19-related deaths. That large-scale maquiladora production and trucking more-or-less continued during the whole pandemic exposes, I believe, the priority of economic health over people's health. Now, in September, the continued closure seems only to confirm the U.S. President's hostile obsessions with both Mexicans and the transnational interaction of people who remain relatives, friends, co-workers, and shoppers. That political reality could change in early 2021 if a different president is elected.

In closing, we see an interdependent Central U.S.-Mexico borderlands binational community hurting from pandemic-related stricter border controls, work stoppages, unemployment, sickness, and death—a hurt that spreads to other parts of the U.S. and Mexico. At the same time, the essential nature of the interdependent regional economies may be more firmly wedded together on the ground and in people's hearts and minds, though we are nowhere near a North American Union, at least in my lifetime.⁸

Notes

- 1 The methods for this brief essay rely on sources (media and official), on 45 years of living, teaching, and researching in these borderlands (including seven books and edited volumes), and participant observation in nonprofit organizations that serve migrants.
- 2 A 1944 law which "grants the president broad power to block foreigners from entering the country to prevent the 'serious' threat of a dangerous disease" has been evoked to expel children after reaching the border (Dickerson 2020).
- 3 The 10,000, later 15,000 figure is widely shared among the faith community activists in El Paso, with whom I am affiliated.
- 4 I am a member of the Facebook group, ObrerxPower PoderObrerx
- 5 I participated in the Anti-Deportation Squad, begun in fall, 2019.
- 6 From an online panel discussion, "COVID 19: El Paso's response to COVID-19 and its economic impacts" by Virtual Research Forum, May 27, 2020. Panelists at a Rice University Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies webinar on May 13, 2020, "The Effect of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the North American Supply Chains," also reported decreased truck traffic.
- 7 Romo also presented on racialized health practices of the so-called Spanish Flu of 1918 (that originated in the U.S.) at the forum.
- 8 In our conclusion to *Fronteras no Más: Toward Social Justice at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2002), Irasema Coronado and I wrote about the limited prospects for a North American Union (NAU) roughly modeled on the European Union.

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