



ESSAY
SPECIAL ISSUE

The Detroit-Windsor Border and COVID-19

Michael Darroch i
Robert L. Nelson ii
Lee Rodney iii

This brief essay chronicles the closure of the Detroit-Windsor tunnel during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the Canadian government's containment measures in the spring/summer of 2020 from the authors' perspectives as both residents and researchers living in the border city of Windsor, Ontario (Canada). Drawing upon crossings in March and June 2020 as well as reflections on the urban cross-border context that Windsor and Detroit facilitate, the article details the changes in border operations and the resulting difficulties faced by local communities. In conclusion we point to the current, local quagmire that Windsor-Essex finds itself in, having some of the highest case COVID-19 counts in Canada as of July 2020. Caught between a laissez-faire approach to managing the migrant worker outbreaks in Essex County, and slow-moving county/provincial and federal responses to the pandemic, local attitudes toward reopening the border here seem more divided than in other parts of Canada.

The Windsor-Detroit Border pre-COVID-19

The border crossings between Windsor, Ontario (Canada) and Detroit, Michigan (U.S.) are noted for the high volume of trade that passes at the narrows of the Detroit River which has facilitated the transnational development of the auto industry for over a century. Truck traffic on the Ambassador Bridge became

notorious after 9/11 as the crossing became a choke point when security concerns increased, while the Gordie Howe Bridge, the 21st century security enhanced "smart border", is still under construction. Windsor and Detroit are also one of the most populated cross-border urban border regions in North America. The two cities are separated by the Detroit River (between Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair) and joined by the Ambassador Bridge and the Detroit-Windsor tunnel. This interconnected urban fabric had developed over two centuries and has only recently been divided by the "thickening" of the border in the last two decades (Rodney 2014). As of this writing, the Canada-U.S. border has now been closed to travelers for four months, since March 21st, 2020. Crossing is now limited to essential workers, crossing from Windsor to work at one of Detroit's many hospitals. With the exception of brief periods of closure after September 11, 2001, this situation is unprecedented.



- i **Michael Darroch**, PhD, Department of Cinema & Media Arts, York University, Canada. Contact: mdarroch@yorku.ca
ii **Robert L. Nelson**, PhD, Department of History, University of Windsor, Canada. Contact: rnelson@uwindsor.ca
iii **Lee Rodney**, PhD, School of Creative Arts, University of Windsor, Canada. Contact: lrodney@uwindsor.ca



The Detroit sector was established in 1926 along with the El Paso sector as the two first stations for U.S. border patrol agents. For much of the 20th century, traffic between the two cities was heavy. The Detroit-Windsor tunnel and the Ambassador bridge were Progressive Era projects that accommodated the expansion of the auto industry and encouraged the adaptation of the automobile as a cultural symbol of efficiency and a way of life. Prior to 1945, however, most traffic still moved by ferries which crossed the river multiple times a day, shuttling commuters and cross-border shoppers as well as immigrants between the two inner-city centres (Bavery 2016; Klug 2008). By the late 1950s, Detroit and Windsor were beginning to envision the region as a modern, cross-border “international metropolis”. As Detroit prepared for a bid for the 1964 Olympics, the “Americanada Teleferry” project was floated in the spirit of the times as a cross-border gondola that was proposed to link Detroit’s Cobo Hall (now TCF Center) from Windsor’s waterfront in the early 1960s.

For residents of Windsor and Detroit, the ‘experience’ of the border over these postwar, pre-9/11 decades was merely a slight inconvenience. Passports were not required and a non-verbal ‘wave through’ was not out of the ordinary when crossing. For the most part, the only stress was whether or not the Canadian border guards would notice the ‘layering’ of newly bought clothes the returning Windsorites were wearing/smuggling after a day of shopping in Detroit (older Windsorites today state that ‘shopping downtown’ in the 1950s and 1960s meant downtown Detroit). Arab-Canadians testify to the same nonchalance from border guards, even in the 1990s, when entering the USA at this border (Nelson 2019). All this would change quite suddenly on 9/11, when the border became a hard and fast division, cutting through the heart of an old and deeply-established, cross-river community. Unlike the COVID-19 crisis however, the border did shortly reopen to most traffic. Yes, in the early months many encountered three-hour delays, and the likelihood of being pulled into ‘secondary’ by the Department of Homeland Security increased for all, but especially Windsor’s significant Arab-Canadian population. Yet, for the vast majority of Windsorites who had always had access to the shopping and entertainment of Detroit, already by late September 2001, American shopping malls could be patronized, and on the 10th of October, Canadians could witness the Calgary Flames defeat the Detroit Red Wings at the Joe Louis Arena at the Detroit River’s

edge. The world had changed, but one could continue to live the cross-border life of Windsor-Detroit.

In the past decade, Detroit has witnessed revitalization and gentrification in its downtown districts, just as Windsor also began promoting a new downtown Cultural District and university arts campus. Prior to COVID-19, these changes brought a wave of new businesses and cultural events to each city’s centre. In October 2018, Detroit-based entrepreneur Dan Gilbert announced that his Quicken Loans online mortgage company was expanding to a previously empty building in downtown Windsor. Gilbert had recently failed to land the new Amazon Headquarters as a cross-border Detroit-Windsor venture. Since 2010, Gilbert’s companies had already redeveloped as many as 100 downtown Detroit buildings, bringing a pool of tech-savvy workers to the heart of Detroit. In 2018, as the future of North American trade agreements looked grim, Gilbert could see the advantage of tapping into the talent pool of southwestern Ontario’s rich university and technology sectors, without the necessity for all workers to cross the border physically. “One campus, two countries” was the slogan used for the Amazon pitch.

The Windsor-Detroit Border since COVID-19

The invisible barrier that divides Windsor from Detroit under COVID-19 is, amazingly, vastly thicker and (for the time being) more life-changing than 9/11. Windsor is a house in lockdown where only those who have jobs in Detroit may cross the border, and almost no one else. The statistics for June are as follows: “There

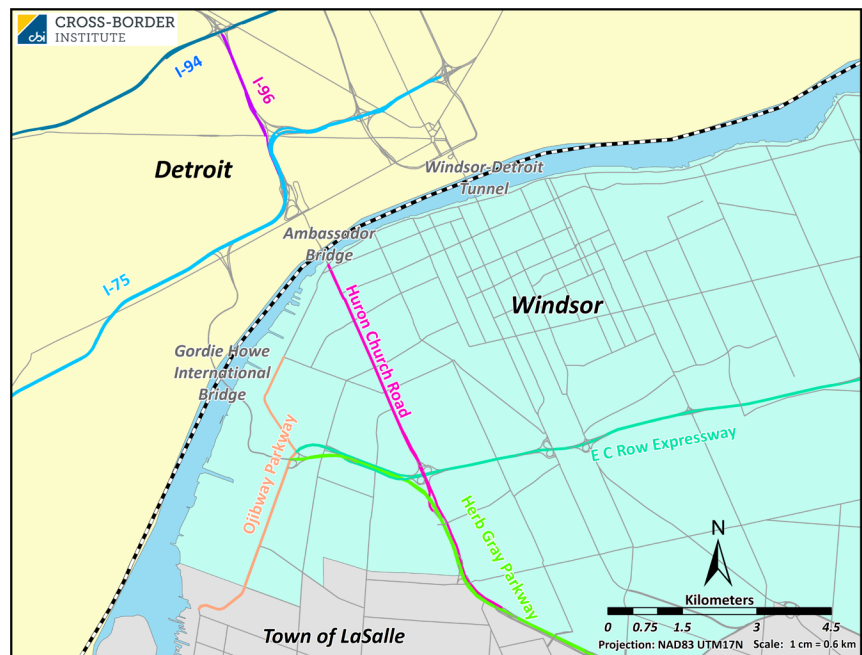


Figure 1: Detail of Detroit-Windsor border crossings.

were 112,150 car crossings at the bridge, which is 70 per cent lower than a year ago. The tunnel saw 53,232 cars, a decline of 85 per cent." At the same time, as an indicator that international trade continues to flow right past Windsor and Detroit, truck crossings on the bridge were down a mere 9 percent for June (Waddell 2020).

The massive cross-border flow to take advantage of sports teams, restaurant and bar culture, and of course 'cross-border shopping' has come to a standstill. On the one hand, those living in Scarborough have not been able to travel into Toronto to watch sports or live music either, and shopping and restaurants have been similarly severely curtailed. Yet, a total ban on travel to your neighboring major city is however quite different as Windsor in many ways relies on Detroit's amenities. And this difference will only become more acute if, as is currently expected, Ontario will slowly be opening up shopping and entertainment while the border is expected to remain iron tight into 2021. An important caveat here, however, is the significant daily workforce that travels from Windsor to work in Greater Detroit, some 6000 Windsorites, mainly working in the Healthcare sector. These people maintain the connection to Detroit, and surely conduct some shopping for family and friends after their shift is over. Finally, it must be noted that although some normalcy returned shortly after 9/11, the border was permanently securitized and changed. There is every reason to expect that while, in the short term, the current disruption is in many ways greater, the 'normalcy' that returns after a vaccine will presumably be much more 'normal' than the world of late 2001.

Many families in this area live on both sides of the border. Lee Rodney reflects on the impact it has had on her situation:

My family is split between Ann Arbor, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario. Upon hearing of the border closure in mid-March my partner and I crossed into Canada with our marriage certificate in hand for a three month stay. After watching the news coverage of crowded airports and temperature checks, we were anticipating a similar kind of pandemonium when crossing back through the Detroit-Windsor tunnel. The border agent at the NEXUS lane waived us through and welcomed us back. Normally this would be comforting, but we were anticipating additional health screening that was not yet in place. Three months later in mid-June, my partner had to return to the US for medical appointments. I drove him across the border and dropped him two metres past the customs booth on U.S. territory and was directed to do a U-turn in the customs plaza as I am not allowed into the U.S. as a Canadian citizen. We were the only people crossing at that time. It was eerily quiet. Driving back through the empty tunnel several questions were racing through my mind: Will I see him again? Will I get a record for "attempted entry" when the

border is officially closed? Will I have to quarantine for 14 days after being in the U.S. for 5 minutes in my car? Thankfully, no, though my American partner has since quarantined in my attic once already and is scheduled to do so again. This will make one month of attic dwelling for him this summer. We understand why quarantine is essential and feel happy to be under the same roof.

Yet we have been extremely fortunate thus far. Stories of couples separated by the Canada-U.S. border make headlines frequently, as living "common law" is not often possible for those in the region who hold jobs in different countries. Writing in the Detroit Free Press, Jamie LaReau reports that a cross-border petition by a group called "Advocacy for Family Reunification at the Canadian Border" has been signed by nearly 3500 people. The petition, representing couples across the U.S and Canada was presented to the Canadian Government on July 10 (LaReau 2020; Wilhem 2020). Another petition still circulating at Change.org currently has 22,248 signatures as of this writing. It highlights the restricted and outdated definition of family that excludes many LGBTQ couples, "committed partners, adult children, siblings, etc.," and calls for an expansion of the current policy to allow for "greater exemptions for compassionate reasons, such as a serious illness" (Change.org 2020).

The traffic at the Detroit-Windsor tunnel is exceptionally quiet with the official border closure. Essential workers and family members who use this crossing are screened by Customs and Border Patrol agents upon entry to Canada. Visiting family members from the U.S. are required to quarantine for two weeks, reporting on a mobile app and monitored by a quarantine officer for two weeks after crossing.

Conclusion

Finally, in conclusion, it should be noted that as of late July 2020, Windsor has the highest per-capita rates of COVID-19 infection in Canada. As the border has been closed since March 21, the infection rates are not rising significantly due to cross-border travel in recent months. The situation locally was hastened by outbreaks among migrant workers in Windsor and Essex County living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. The Windsor-Essex region has the highest concentration of agricultural production in Canada with over 8000 migrant workers who travel annually to work in the county's many greenhouse operations (Basok and George 2020). These workers all tested negative upon arrival in Canada in March and rates of infection only started to rise in June (Windsor-Essex Health Unit 2020). In contrast, infection rates among Windsorites crossing to work in Detroit have been relatively quiet, a point that raises serious questions of equity and invites further study. There have been many calls to address the situation which is currently caught between county,

provincial and federal jurisdiction. Over the summer, the balance of new cases has been through community spread, suggesting that we may be facing an emergency situation in the near future if the transmission rates continue to rise. Ultimately, it is arguable that closing the border has been an effective means of containment in the Detroit-Windsor borderlands. A longer-range study of border closings as a policy to limit the pandemic is necessary to understand its influence across different geographies and populations.

Works Cited

- Basok, Tanya, and Glynnis George. 2020. "Migrant workers face further social isolation and mental health challenges during coronavirus pandemic", *The Conversation* (April 26). Available: <https://theconversation.com/migrant-workers-face-further-social-isolation-and-mental-health-challenges-during-coronavirus-pandemic-134324>
- Bavery, Ashley. 2016. "Crashing America's Back Gate: Illegal Europeans, Policing, and Welfare in Detroit, 1921-1939", *Journal of Urban History* 44(2): 239-261. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0096144216655791>
- Change.org. 2020. "Canada: Allow family reunification during COVID-19". Available: <https://www.change.org/p/government-of-canada-canada-allow-family-reunification-during-covid-19?signed=true>
- Klug, T. A. 2008. "Residents by day, visitors by night: the origins of the alien commuter on the US-Canadian border during the 1920s", *Michigan Historical Review* 34(2): 75-98. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20174286>
- Nelson, Robert L. 2019. "Pitas and Passports: Arab Foodways in the Windsor-Detroit Borderlands", *Mashriq & Mahjar* 6(2): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.24847/66i2019.235>
- LaReau, Jamie L. 2020. "These couples want the same right as married couples when crossing the border", *Detroit Free Press* (July 2). Available: <https://www.freep.com/story/news/2020/07/02/covid-19-keeps-lovers-crossing-border-between-u-s-and-canada/3280136001/>
- Rodney, L. 2014. "Art and the Post Urban Condition" in M.Darroch and Janine Marchessault (eds) *Cartographies of Place: Navigating the Urban*. McGill-Queen's University Press. 267-279.
- Waddell, Dave. 2020. "Preparations required now for Canada-U.S. border reopening that's likely months away", *Windsor Star* (July 25). Available: <https://windsorstar.com/news/preparations-required-now-for-canada-u-s-border-reopening-thats-likely-months-away>
- Wilhelm, Trevor. 2020. "Unmarried couples lobby to cross border to reunite", *Windsor Star* (June 26). Available: <https://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/unmarried-couples-lobby-to-cross-border-to-reunite>
- Windsor-Essex Health Unit. Available: <https://www.wechu.org>