

Border Enforcement as a Deterrent of Illegal Immigration: Evidence from Return Mexican Migrants

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Over the past several decades a variety of policies have been implemented with the intent to reduce the level of unauthorized immigration, particularly from Mexico, into the United States. For instance, through the increased border enforcement, the imposition of sanctions on employers who knowingly hire unauthorized workers and two amnesty programs, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 aimed to diminish the demand for these workers and, thereby, stem undocumented immigration. More recently during the 1990s, Operation Gatekeeper in California (1994), Operation Hold-the-Line in Texas (1993), and Operation Safeguard in Arizona (1999) have intensified border patrol policies in an effort to deter Mexicans from illegally crossing the border. Yet, the literature has been unable to identify a significantly large impact in reducing unauthorized immigration (Bean, Edmonston, and Passel 1990). Instead, the aforementioned border enforcement policies seem to have had significant unintended consequences, as is the case with a re-channeling of the flows of illegal immigrants and increased deaths associated with illegal entries (Cornelius 2001).

In this study, we work with a sample of undocumented Mexican migrants interviewed over the 1993-2003 decade upon their return to Mexico (voluntarily or following deportation) to assess how border enforcement – as measured by having been apprehended in their last trip – deters them from trying to cross again to the U.S. The focus on apprehension is important given the belief by some that apprehension and deportation work as a “positive deterrent to illegal reentry and related violations.” (INS 1978, p.17). Yet, research suggests that deported migrants continue to attempt to cross the border into the United States until they succeed and, once in the United States, they stay longer, possibly to offset their increased cost of migration (Kossoudji 1992). While this research documents the persistence of undocumented immigrants in trying to cross the border, it is restricted to the pre-IRCA time period and focuses on trip data for a relatively small sample of 631 male migrants.

Our study contributes to the literature on the effects of border enforcement by using a representative, rich and timely dataset. Specifically, we focus on the migration behavior of approximately 12,000 Mexican immigrants returning to Mexico between 1993 and 2003 –a period of time during which a variety of border enforcement operations along the U.S.-Mexico border have been implemented. Additionally, due to the richness of the data, we are also able to control for and evaluate the impact of a crucial set of determinants of immigrants’ repetitive willingness to cross not typically available at the individual or even aggregate level. In this manner, we can address potential omitted variable biases in previous studies. Some of the aforementioned determinants of immigrant border-crossing persistence include:

- Border crossing costs – as reflected by smuggling costs as well as by the time spent working in a border city before crossing.
- Wage gains – as captured by the difference between the wages earned in the last U.S. job held minus the wages they last earned in Mexico before crossing.
- Savings accumulated – as captured by remittances home, which can be an important determinant of migration among “target savers”.
- Networks – The presence of networks of family and friends in the U.S.
- Regional characteristics of the U.S. and Mexican communities where they last lived, such as their unemployment rates,
- Macroeconomic factors as captured by a set of year dummies.

We rely on the information collected by the *Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México* (EMIF). This survey is administered by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF)¹ in eight different cities along the United States-Mexico border: Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros. These cities account for more than 90 percent of the migration flux from Mexico to the United States and vice versa (Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, 1998). Additionally, the survey methodology is designed to constantly update the data flow to obtain a sample that properly represents where and when migrants cross the border into Mexico. Individuals are surveyed who cross on foot, by train, car, bus and plane. During each survey shift, an interviewer applies a screening form that permits differentiating migrants from tourists and individuals born in the United States. Once a person is considered eligible (i.e. a migrant), the EMIF questionnaire is administered anonymously by a trained interviewer.

We use data from eight consecutive waves of the EMIF: 1993-1994, 1994-1995, 1996-1997, 1998-1999, 1999-2000, 2000-2001, 2001-2002, and 2002-2003. Each wave includes four quarterly surveys administered separately to four groups of migrants in the border regions: 1) migrants coming from South of the Northern Mexican border region, 2) migrants in Northern border cities originating from another Northern border community, 3) migrants returning from the United States to/through the Mexican Northern border region, and 4) Mexican migrants deported from the United States. Due to our interest in the effectiveness of border enforcement on deterring illegal immigration, our sample will consist of undocumented Mexican migrants in the third and fourth groups. This group includes individuals who are 12 years old or older, not born in the United States, and who migrated to the U.S. with the purpose to visit family or friends, to complete some business, or to work for more than one month. While some of the migrants returning voluntarily to Mexico are doing so permanently, most of them appear to have returned temporarily to visit with family and friends.² Because a fraction of Mexican migrants may never go back to Mexico, our sample may not be representative of the entire universe of Mexican migrants in the U.S. but, rather, of the universe of Mexican migrants in the U.S. going

¹ COLEF carried out the survey for the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social and the Consejo Nacional de Población.

² When asked about the reason for returning to Mexico, fourteen percent of migrants declared they were returning because they couldn't find work in the United States, their job in the U.S. had finished, or because they were going to take a job in Mexico. One may presume that these respondents may be planning to remain in Mexico, if not permanently, for an extended period of time. The remaining migrants claimed to be returning for vacation or for personal reasons.

back to Mexico sometime in their lives, either temporarily (e.g. to visit family, for vacation, etc.) or permanently. As such, our study focuses on undocumented Mexican returnees for whom we have a representative sample to explore whether apprehension by the border patrol effectively deters them from trying to cross again to the United States.

Our analysis of the effects of border enforcement relies on limited dependent variable regression methods. We first explore the extent to which border enforcement discourages future border crossing attempts by undocumented migrants interviewed upon their return to Mexico. We focus on first-time crossers, for whom we have complete information on their past migration experiences, and specifically ask how apprehension deters them from trying to cross again. Additionally, we assess the effect of changes in border enforcement intensity –captured by increased border patrol hours and dummy variables indicative of structural breaks in border enforcement activities in specific border regions– on the likelihood of future crossing attempts. Subsequently, we expand our sample to include multiple-times crossers (e.g. migrants returning from their second or higher order trip) and examine how the previously noted border enforcement measures, along with the wage gains and migration costs experienced by migrants during their last crossing, influence the number of crossing attempts using sample selection and count models.

Overall, the analysis sheds light on the effectiveness of increasing border enforcement in deterring undocumented migrants from future border crossing attempts. In particular, the study evaluates the extent to which border enforcement policies may have had the unintended consequence of increasing the persistence and number of crossing attempts of those determined to cross in the recent past.

References

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