

Evaluating U.S. Immigration Control Strategy, 1993-2003

Dr. Wayne Cornelius, TBI Lecture Series



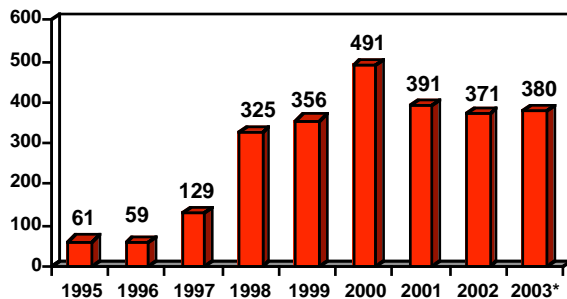
Dr. Wayne A. Cornelius, Director of the UCSD Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, gave the opening lecture for the Trans-Border Institute's 2003-2004 Speaker Series. Dr. Cornelius' lecture at USD's Salomon Hall provided a critical overview of the "unintended consequences" of U.S. immigration policy, particularly the deaths of more than 2,700 unauthorized border-crossers in the last decade. Since 1993, Dr. Cornelius explained, the "overwhelming emphasis" of U.S. immigration control policy has been on heightened enforcement at the U.S.-Mexican border. Spending on border enforcement more than tripled during this period, at the same time that interior enforcement activities "withered away." Indeed, the shift away from interior enforcement has been dramatic;

from 1990 to 2000, the number of employers fined for hiring undocumented workers dropped from 14,311 to 178. Meanwhile, most resources for border enforcement have been concentrated in four sequentially developed segments of the border: El Paso, Texas (Operation Hold-the-Line), San Diego, California (Operation Gatekeeper), central Arizona (Operation Safeguard), south Texas (Operation Rio Grande).

These concentrated enforcement programs involved the construction of single, double, and even triple fencing –from corrugated steel landing strips to closely spaced concrete poles– to deter undocumented crossers. In addition to the deployment of thousands of additional border patrol agents in these areas, new border enforcement technologies have been introduced to detect migrants: high-intensity stadium lighting, remote-controlled 24 hour video surveillance, seismic and magnetic sensors, helicopters, infrared night scopes, and computerized photo and biometric databases. Still, according to Dr. Cornelius, "less than 70 miles – 3.5% of the U.S.-Mexico border – have been fortified in this way. The rest of the border still presents very few man-made obstacles to would-be illegal entrants – at most, a few strands of wire, strung on 3-foot-high metal poles."



Annual migrant deaths in U.S. Southwest, 1995-2003



What are the implications? Migrants are driven to remote areas, mostly in Eastern mountainous and desert regions, where the risks and costs for undocumented crossers are much greater. "Since 1998, deaths resulting from unauthorized border crossings have totaled between 300-400 a year. So far this year, some 360 deaths have been recorded by Mexican Consulates along the border." In fact, these statistics understate the number of fatalities, since they include only migrants whose bodies have been recovered by the Border Patrol and the Mexican police.

Most of these deaths have resulted from exposure to extreme cold or heat, with migrants suffering deaths by dehydration, hypothermia, and other conditions produced by "environmental causes." In addition to these natural dangers, organized vigilante activity on the U.S. side of the border has increased recently, particularly in the Tucson sector. Also, more migrants have hired professional people-smugglers or "coyotes." These smugglers fees have tripled since 1993, thanks to the increased risks and the willingness of U.S.-based relatives to finance the safe passage of would-be migrants. In many cases, however, this exposes migrants to further dangers, since many smugglers engage in predatory behaviors, or are willing to expose migrants to greater risks (e.g., high-speed chases) to make a profit.



Meanwhile, following trends in economic cycles and job availability, migrant apprehensions by the U.S. Border Patrol rose along the southwest border during the economic expansion from 1994-2001, and have declined with the recent economic recession. Even when apprehensions increased, there was no evidence that flow of migrants had been deterred. Indeed, the population of undocumented migrants living in the United States has *grown* to 6-7 million, and accounts for nearly 60% of the total U.S. farm labor force. In other words, despite the rise in apprehensions over the 1990s, large numbers of undocumented Mexican and other Latino migrants continued to successfully enter the United States. Dr. Cornelius noted that

the increased costs and risks may have paradoxically led many migrants to stay (rather than migrate seasonally).

What are the solutions? Dismantling the current concentrated border enforcement operations, or “going back to Square One,” is a non-starter due to the political opposition that would result. Also, the option of extending concentrated border enforcement operations *all along* the Southwest border would not only require tens of billions of dollars in new spending, but would “make economically desperate migrants even more desperate, and people-smugglers would take even greater risks with their lives, undoubtedly raising the death toll.” Furthermore, “Congress has shown no appetite for a new national system for verifying employment eligibility [e.g., national identification cards], without which effective worksite enforcement is quite impossible” (Dr. Cornelius also noted that the stringent enforcement of immigration laws in the workplace that would necessarily accompany such a system would cause major protests from employers due to the “economic disruptions” that would result).

Thus, Dr. Cornelius argued for a longer-term strategy “to create economically attractive alternatives to emigration, by getting serious about sending-area development... What is needed is substantial resource commitments by both the U.S. and Mexican governments; an innovative program design; and the political courage to sustain the effort over a 15-20-year period... Meanwhile, border enforcement remains “the symbolic, low-cost, ‘feel-good’ approach to immigration control... All other approaches would be more costly, politically and economically. Moreover, there are severe political constraints on *eliminating or relaxing* the current border enforcement strategy, especially in the post-9/11 era. But the fact that the alternatives are politically constrained doesn’t make the status quo *right*, in moral and ethical terms.”

Dr. Cornelius made note of the special obligation facing individuals at the University of San Diego (USD), the only U.S.-based Catholic university on the U.S.-Mexican border. “At a value-based institution like USD, I also believe it is imperative to discuss the moral implications of maintaining the status quo in U.S. immigration control policy: a policy that deliberately places human beings in harm’s way, in a clearly failed attempt to modify their behavior, even while the U.S. employers who drive unauthorized immigration take no risk and pay no penalty whatsoever... One would hope that, in the first decade of the 21st Century, we could devise a more humane and morally defensible response to unauthorized immigration.”

Speaker Biography

Dr. Wayne A. Cornelius is Gildred Professor of Political Science at the University of California-San Diego (UCSD), as well as founder and Director of the UCSD Center for Comparative Immigration Studies (CCIS). CCIS conducts comparative, cross-national research on international migration, especially in the North American, Western European, and the Asia-Pacific regions. Previously, Dr. Cornelius also founded and directed the UCSD Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, the nation’s largest research and training institution devoted to interdisciplinary studies of Mexico and U.S.-Mexican relations. Among many distinguished accomplishments, Dr. Cornelius has testified on the issue of migrant deaths before the United States Commission on Human Rights (USCHR), and served as President of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA). He has authored of more than 200 publications dealing with the political economy of immigration, Mexican politics, and U.S.-Mexican relations. Recent publications include *The International Migration of the Highly Skilled* (co-editor/co-author, 2001); "Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of U.S. Immigration Control Policy," *Population and Development Review* (December 2001); *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective* (co-editor/co-author, 2nd edition, forthcoming 2003); and *Reforming the Administration of Justice in Mexico* (co-editor/co-author, forthcoming 2004).