

Still, They Persist: The Failures of Operation Gatekeeper

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Along the Southwestern border of the United States, there runs a wall, ten feet high and thirty miles long, separating the privileged from the needy, the wealthy from the poor, the United States from Mexico. This wall is symbolic of the United States' immigration policy in that it is rigid, unrealistic, and ineffective. Despite its clear inefficiencies, the building of walls and the use of barriers has continued to be the United States' main line of defense against illegal immigration.

Operation Gatekeeper, first enacted in 1994, was designed to militarize the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Since Gatekeeper, the border has seen the introduction of “high-intensity, stadium-type lighting, large numbers of motion detectors, remote video surveillance and a 33 percent increase in the number of total border patrol agents monitoring the border” (Cornelius 663). The idea behind Gatekeeper was to deter illegal immigration by making it more difficult for immigrants to enter the country. The U.S. government expected that militarizing the border would prevent immigrants from crossing it, or at least reduce the number of illegal immigrants entering the country. This “prevention-through-deterrence policy,” however, was flawed from the start because it underestimated Latin American immigrants' determination to better their economic situation (Cornelius 668). Instead of discouraging immigration into the United States, Gatekeeper and similar operations have only encouraged illegal immigrants to take increasingly dangerous measures in order to enter the country.

Not only have the United States' wall-building tactics failed in reducing the number of immigrants entering the country, illegal immigration has actually increased since the implementation of Gatekeeper in 1994 (Eschbach 435). Despite the United States' intentions,

work-deprived Latin American immigrants have continued to enter the U.S. illegally in greater numbers with each passing year. The only difference since the implementation of Gatekeeper is the difficulty of the journey.

It is true, however, that certain areas have seen a decrease in illegal immigration. California's San Diego area, for example, accounted for nearly 40 percent of illegal immigrant apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border before the implementation of Gatekeeper; six years after Gatekeeper, in 2000, that number dropped to below 10 percent (Cornelius 667). On the surface, this decline in apprehensions may seem like a victory for the United States in border security, but upon closer review, the numbers prove to be deceiving. Gatekeeper's success has been defined by the drop in illegal alien apprehensions in San Diego County alone, not by an overall decline in illegal immigration into the United States. This means that San Diego's decrease in apprehensions comes as a direct result of increased apprehensions in neighboring counties. After reviewing these trends, the U.S. General Accounting Office came to the conclusion that "Although illegal alien apprehension has shifted, there is no clear indication that overall illegal entry into the United States along the Southwest border has declined" (Cornelius 667). In effect, Operation Gatekeeper and similar programs have done more to shift immigration patterns eastward than to actually lower immigration rates.

Perhaps the only statistic more stunning than the number of immigrants who have succeeded in entering the United States since the implementation of Gatekeeper, however, is the number of immigrants who have not completed the journey. Since the implementation of Gatekeeper, the number of immigration-related deaths near the U.S.-Mexico border has increased by almost 600 percent in California alone (Eschbach 438). Not surprisingly, the numbers become even more staggering the further east one goes: between 1994 and 2000, both

Arizona and Texas saw over a 1,000 percent increase in immigration-related deaths (Cornelius 667). Though the United States deliberately planned to make the path into the U.S. more difficult as part of their “prevention-through-deterrence policy,” they also planned for immigrants to recognize the dangers and eventually give up on their attempts to enter the country; this, however, has never been the case. In fact, since the implementation of Gatekeeper more than twelve years ago, the number of illegal immigrants entering the United States has continued to increase concurrently with immigration-related deaths on or near the U.S.-Mexico border.

Along with increasing the number of immigration-related deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border, Gatekeeper has had other important, but unexpected, results. Due to the sharp increase in risk associated with crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, it is true that immigrants are finding it more difficult to cross, not just into the United States, but out of the country as well. In fact, more and more immigrants are forced to stay in the United States today than in the past. This is not by choice. In the past, immigration patterns suggested that many illegal immigrants entering the U.S. had no intention of relocating permanently (Cornelius 669). These immigrants aspired to work in the United States for long enough to earn sufficient funds to bring back to Latin America. When these funds ran low, the process would repeat itself. With the militarization of the border and the subsequent increase in risk associated with crossing the border, however, fewer and fewer immigrants decide to make the trip back home. These workers end up working long enough to bring their families to the U.S. via a smuggler instead of working long enough to return to their homes (670).

Yet the question remains: With so many challenges in their way, with their lives on the line, why do illegal immigrants continue to risk it all in order to enter the United States? The answer is not surprising: they risk their lives because it's all they have to lose. Most illegal

immigrants, especially those from Latin America, are products of dire economic situations. As of May 2006, for example, the average wage in Mexico was 198.76 pesos per day, which translates to 18.3 American dollars per day (Gutierrez 1). This number, however, only takes into account the wages of employed Mexicans; it does not include the millions of unemployed workers in the country. Faced with the possibility of not being able to provide for their families, many immigrants find the decision to head north in search of work an easy one to make instead of making \$18.3 a day, they will make almost three times that amount for the same time spent working in the United States (based on minimum wage at \$5.15 per hour).

Not only are the wages higher in the United States, but jobs are more plentiful as well. Immigrants know that once they enter the country, they are practically guaranteed jobs, if not as full-time employees, at least as day-laborers. According to Thomas Fischer, former head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Georgia, “Immigrants are being hired everywhere. I’m talking about everything from your Fortune 500 companies down to your mom-and-pop businesses” (Masci 7). Presented with such a step up in their economic situations, is it really any wonder why immigrants take the risk?

Operation Gatekeeper has been deemed a success by the U.S. government. It has succeeded in its mission of deterring illegal immigration in high-population areas of the Southwest. This skewed view of success, however, fails to take into account the negative side effects of the policy: people are dying at an alarming rate because of the operation and immigrants are staying in the United States longer. Worst of all, Gatekeeper and similar programs focus their attention on building physical boundaries between “us” and “them,” on walls and deterrence, rather than on the real problem, which is an economic system that provides enough incentive for immigrants to risk their lives in pursuit of an improved economic situation.

Despite its clear failures and malicious implications, this “prevention-thought-deterrence policy” continues to be used today.

If we can learn anything from Gatekeeper, it is that walls are not a solution. As long as there is a remote chance that immigrants will succeed in their trek to the States, they will continue to try because it is clear that once here, their lives will improve. We may build walls, but as long as there are companies in the United States ready to employ undocumented workers, we will never stop illegal immigrants from entering the country. The United States needs to stop throwing money at the problem and realize that it is not because of economic refugees that our immigration policy has failed, it is because of our own economic policies and practices. If, however, the United States continues to deliberately place immigrants in harm's way, but is reluctant to hold corporations accountable for hiring illegal workers, then not just the efficacy, but the morality of the United States' immigration policy must be called into question.

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