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Violence and Migration on the Arizona-Sonora Border

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Author Statement and Acknowledgments

Jeremy Slack is a Ph.D. student in the School of Geography and Development at the University of Arizona. Scott Whiteford is a Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona. Jeremy Slack collected most interview data presented here between April 2009 and September 2010. We would like to thank the generous support of the Ford Foundation for making this research possible and for funding the binational research project, Migration and Violence A New Research and Policy Challenge on the Mexico/United States Border. We also need to recognize the important contribution of Daniel E. Martinez and Prescott Vandervoet, whose collaboration, discussions, and projects were critical in developing an understanding of contemporary migration on the Arizona-Sonora border. We would also like to thank Paola Molina, Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Ana Ochoa-O’Leary, Colin Deeds, Raul Saba and Silvia Tesh for their helpful comments, insights and questions. We are indebted to the anonymous reviewers that pushed our ideas and challenged our concepts in a productive and professional manner. Our heartfelt appreciation goes out to the owners and employees of the shelter for migrants where we worked in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. Your friendship and openness not only helped us shape our questions, but also made us comfortable and welcome in a complex environment. However, the most valuable contribution came from the hundreds of people that were willing to share their powerful stories with us. Thank you and good luck on your journey, wherever it may take you.
Abstract

2010 was a significant year for immigration issues along the United States-Mexico border. In April, Arizona signed into law the most extreme law against undocumented immigrants. In August, 72 hopeful migrants were massacred in Tamaulipas by alleged drug traffickers, and the Arizona desert claimed a record 252 lives in fiscal year 2010. These events were part of the trend that began with border militarization in the mid-1990s and escalated in the wake of 9/11, resulting in the extremely violent character of the undocumented border crossing experience. This is manifest, not only in the frequent reports of abuses by various actors along the border, but also in the consolidation of undocumented migration with the trafficking of narcotics. The authors have documented many cases of robbery, kidnapping, physical abuse, rape, and manipulation by drug traffickers. In this article, we discuss these different manifestations of violence by understanding both the structural constraints that create and characterize violence, as well as the individual reactions to the factors. The authors propose the conceptualization of “post structural violence” as a manner of enhancing the discussion of agency within and as a reaction to the structural conditions generated by border security and immigration policy.

Introduction

Alejandro’s eyes were vacant, blood red, and darting randomly about the room. He was scratching vigorously at his arms and shifting constantly in his seat. It was obvious that he was high, but he informed me, “No soy migrante. Soy burrero.” [I am not a migrant. I am a drug mule] (personal communication, April 22, 2009). I was taken aback by his honesty. I had spoken to other burreros (drug mules) before, but never while they were attempting to blend into the general population of economic migrants. At the shelter where we have been working for the past two years, it is understood that in order to stay here, one must pretend to be a migrant. Because of this, it is rare that people admit to being professionally involved with drug trafficking, human smuggling, or robbing migrants in the desert. However, the connections between migrants and so-called, “border professionals” who engage in the clandestine border economy as a vocation, represent a complicated web of structural factors and individual agency that result from the desperation and violence that envelop undocumented migration.  

2010 has been a particularly shocking year with regard to immigration and the border. We have seen a rise in scapegoating of so called “illegals” culminating in the Arizona law SB 1070 to criminally
prosecute undocumented migrants and require police to check immigration status. The 72 hopeful migrants that were shot dead in a ranch along the Texas border in Tamaulipas by supposed “Zetas,” a criminal syndicate in Mexico, represent a startling example of the escalation of criminality and violence along the border. And yet, another deadly year in the Arizona desert ended with a record-breaking 252 bodies recovered at the end of fiscal year 2010 (McCombs 2010b). These tragic events shape the context of the research and writing of this article.

The forces generating these types of events for Central American and Mexican migrants has been described as structural violence by many scholars (Nevins 2005, 2008; Spener 2009). The concept of structural violence, first developed by Johan Galtung (1969), explicitly focuses the analysis on inequality and social, political, and economic mechanisms used to create or enforce inequality and continued marginalization. “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (Galtung 1969:168). The forces that limit people’s ability to realize their full life potential also compel people to migrate or, in many cases, lose their lives. As Paul Farmer (2004:307) wrote, “The concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression. Oppression is a result of many conditions, not the least of which resides in consciousness.” In this article, we will discuss violence as it relates to the undocumented border crossing experience and question the explanatory power of structural violence when it fails to take into account the heterogeneity of actions and reactions of each individual.

This article is based on research conducted in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, the center for deportations in the most active Border Patrol Sector. We randomly sampled participants at a shelter for people that have been deported or repatriated from the United States to Mexico. Of the 71 in-depth interviews focused on the violence of migration, 28 relayed experiences of being incarcerated in the United States, 16 had encounters with border bandits and were robbed, 9 reported contact with the drug trade during their migratory experience, 7 were kidnapped, and 4 reported witnessing rapes of female migrants.

These numbers are indicative of the dangers that make up the invisible landscapes of history, politics, and domination present on the border (Whiteford and Whiteford 2005). Moreover, contemporary border enforcement practices such as apprehensions, complicated processing practices by United States
authorities, and criminal proceedings separate families and groups, breaking down the social networks used by individuals to lessen the dangers of crossing. How individuals and families react and manage the vulnerability caused by structural forces represents a significant driver of violence along the border.

**Structural Violence and Beyond**

Violence is often far more insidious than anticipated and, indeed, often invisible upon first inspection (Bourgois 2009; Fassin 2009). It is necessary to understand how people attempting to cross the border act and react in attempts to subvert border enforcement and how these actions influence the procedures and issues that arise for the security regime. Through our first hand experiences we have seen that this can include, but is not limited to: (1) different crossing patterns and strategies, (2) engaging in the drug trade, (3) human smuggling, (4) robbery, or (5) participation in the sex industry. These strategies (unless directly coerced) are attempts to defray the costs of undocumented crossing and recuperate losses that need to be repaid to moneylenders at home. It is clear that while structural factors greatly limit people’s actions and motivations, individual agency is involved with the different choices people make to defray the vulnerability imposed by situations out of their control.

The concept of structural violence explicitly focuses the analysis on inequality and the social, political, and economic mechanisms used to either create or enforce the inequality and continued marginalization of a group of people. “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (Galtung 1969:168). This expanded definition is useful in that it exposes the forms of violence that are not immediately visible but lie underneath the surface, causing incredible amounts of pain and death without firing a single bullet or landing a single blow (Farmer 2003).

In the case of migration, the various United States organizations that are in charge of immigration and the border (Customs and Border Protection (CBP), United States Border Patrol (USBP), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), etc.) control and/or punish undocumented migrants, while providing little formal support for migrants’ basic legal and human rights (Nevins 2005, 2008; Spener 2009). In Mexico and Central America, economic policies have led to the end of rural subsistence farming, encouraging people to migrate to urban centers or to the United States to find work (Schneider and Wolfson 2005). This leads to a system where migrants provide
cheap labor and support consumption in the United States while simultaneously enduring extreme risks to their physical and emotional well-being, threatening their survival and decreasing their life expectancy. There are, however, other economic activities that can be far deadlier than migration even though they tend to follow a similar logic of desperation and necessity.

The more than 30,000 deaths associated with the drug war in Mexico between 2006 and 2010 are tied to structural violence, direct violence, and state sanctioned violence. The lack of economic opportunity, the unquenchable appetite for drugs in the United States, and the (temporary) power associated with being a narco (drug kingpin,) are all part of a larger structure that leads to these countless deaths.

The concept of structural violence, however, can be all encompassing when it comes to defining social ills. We seek to add specificity in the case of migration by highlighting how people act and react within these structures, especially at times and places of upheaval, change, and unfamiliarity for those involved. Structural violence frameworks can have the unfortunate tendency to neglect the way people react to marginalization and repression, in turn, influencing the structures of power that ultimately create violence.

In Paul Farmer’s (1996) seminal article “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below,” he lays out how endemic poverty and oppressive regimes lead to a form of violence. He focuses on a man named Chouchou and the story of his fatal beating for supposed political insurgency that amounted to little more than an offhand comment overheard by plain-clothes military officers. While Farmer proceeds to analyze the position of Chouchou and others with respect to their societies, noting that their mortality rates are much higher as a result of the inequality and lack of access to goods and services, he does not discuss motivation. For our intentions, we would like to put the murderous soldiers alongside Chouchou in order to compare how and why each came to experience the structures of violence in a different manner.

In order to do this, we need to question the convoluted pathways that lead to these manifestations of violence. Chouchou and his murderers likely had much in common: ethnicity, education, poverty, etc. However, there was some point when the murders decided to join with a more powerful force to limit his or her own vulnerability vis-à-vis society as a whole. Obviously, the same
options are not available to everyone, but by questioning the decision to stay a nail or become a hammer, we blur the lines of victim-hood and expand the continuum of violence (Bourgois 2009). However, as is the case with joining a drug cartel in Mexico, this decision can ultimately have the reverse effect, as there is far greater mortality for someone that joins the bloody conflict to control the sale of drugs to the United States than a migrant worker. That is why we see this decision making process as a form of violence in and of itself.

We suggest the term “post-structural violence” to describe the way people react within the confines of a situation precipitated by structural violence. While it is slightly problematic to use the word “post-structural,” as it could be interpreted that the conditions of structural violence has ended, we intend post-structural to imply the actions undertaken to mitigate the effects of a particular individual’s precarious situation. We also do not see post-structural violence as separate from structural violence, rather an overlapping situation that can be used to expand and specify the multiple layers that make up the continuum of violence. This continuum may need to be revisited in that it denotes a linear relationship which is likely not the case, as multiple forms can exist simultaneously, and it is this overlap that creates the landscape of violence.

Moreover, even Galtung’s (1969) original discussion of structural violence questions the distinction between structural and what he calls, “personal violence” – one individual acting against another. “It may be argued that the distinction is not clear at all: it disregards slight of the structural element in personal violence and the personal element in structural violence” (Galtung 1969:177). Galtung continues by discussing the socialization process that limits personal freedoms and leads people to react violently. For instance, “a bully would be seen as the inevitable product of socialization into a violent structure: he is the rebel, systematically untrained in other ways of coping with his conflicts and frustrations because the structure leaves him with no alternatives” (Galtung 1969:178).

As individuals arrive at the border region, they inevitably get involved with actors such as their guides, bandits, or drug traffickers that have very different agendas from the would-be crossers. This exposes people to conditions of extreme vulnerability, without social or economic safeguards from either their own country or the country of destination. Not only are people newly exposed to the border, and for a brief period of time at that, but also the very area constantly undergoes changes. The ways people access
the United States, both legally and illegally, constantly shift: new visa categories, different threats, new crossing areas, different modes of crossing – bikes, horses, vehicles, or walking. How people react within these structures of violence is an important and complex reality of border crossing. This is the crux of our supposition that there is a post-structural element that occurs for individuals within these contexts. It requires people to navigate a series of difficult decisions and, by attempting to move beyond the structures of violence (i.e., their vulnerability), they are taking roles that increase their chances of death, while decreasing their vulnerability to structural violence.

Primo Levi’s (1988) use of the “gray zone” describes the multitude of ways people react to marginalization and violence. Levi, a holocaust survivor, writes about the difficulty in distinguishing who is the victim and who is the victimizer as people within the labor camps vie for any sort of advantage that will increase the likelihood of their survival. As Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg (2009: 20) write:

Levi (1988) and other survivors assert that we do not have the right to judge the actions of inmates in the concentration camps because the gray zone was omnipotent (Steinberg 2000). He implicitly contradicts himself, however, by devoting much of his writing to eloquently dissecting the moral dilemmas of human agency at Auschwitz through detailed descriptions of individual behaviors, decisions, and interpersonal betrayals.

This is an important contribution not only to the complexity of the grey zone but also of how structural violence is malleable in the hands of the individual. Bourgois (2009) notes that there is complexity to violence that is not often acknowledged. The post-structural arena highlights the complexity of human agency while avoiding the mechanistic and paternalistic explanations and blanket victimization that may be assumed from structural violence. The following vignette is a counterpoint to the opening anecdote from Alejandro⁴, in that we see a similar set of opportunities and the difficulty involved in resisting entering into the drug trade.

Luis⁵ had recently been deported from the United States back to Nogales, Mexico. He had been working as a nurse in California for six years before being deported to Nogales. It was 3:00 A.M. when he arrived, so he decided to go to the bus station. While he was waiting there for the sun to rise, he was approached by four men who told him they were from a shelter and could offer him a place to sleep and eat. He started to go with the men, but began to feel uneasy and tried to leave,
at which point they drew guns and instructed him to get into the van. The men were armed with *cuernos de chivo,* or AK-47s, and gathered a group of repatriated migrants to cross the border. Luis said that he was told to cross as a distraction, so that the drug runners could see border patrol approaching and evade capture. While he was not forced to carry drugs, it is entirely plausible that he or others have been made to traffic drugs. He was told that they would kill him if he failed.

Upon arrival in Phoenix, he was held in a “safe house” and instructed to pay $3,000 or else they would not let him go. His other option was to go and kill someone to prove his loyalty. He was able to get a family member to wire transfer $2,700 but was later apprehended by ICE agents and deported to Mexico (February 18, 2009).

While it is difficult to ascertain how frequent instances like this occur, the fact that we have seen several similar instances firsthand speaks to a general worsening of the situation here in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands. What is particularly interesting is the difference between the opening story about being a drug trafficker, versus Luis’ resistance to this lifestyle. Why such variation? Moreover, Luis’ decision seems far more levelheaded when compared to Alejandro’s. Alejandro is far more likely to die as a result of his vocation than he would otherwise. And yet, people continue to engage with drug trafficking. If Luis did not have the money to pay the ransom, perhaps he would have been more likely to take the other option, but who knows. In light of the massacre of 72 would-be migrants on August 25th, 2010 calls this into question yet again.

Everyone interacting with the clandestine border is attempting to navigate its perils for monetary gain, whether it is as an economic migrant looking for work in the United States or as a *coyote* (a human smuggler), *burrero,* or *bajador* (a thief/bandit known to rob people crossing through the desert) more actively engaging with how to circumvent United States prohibitions of labor and commodities. The following outlines in general terms the process of crossing the border into the Arizona Desert.

**Overview of Undocumented Crossing – The Tucson Sector**

The decision to migrate is largely driven by structural forces, such as international intervention, global trade, and institutions forcing millions of vulnerable people with no option other than to leave their community in search for a new livelihood (Nevins 2005; Spener 2009).
The militarization of the United States-Mexico border that began in the mid-1990s with Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Hold-the-Line has increased the difficulty of undocumented crossing by fortifying urban areas with additional agents and technology (Andreas 2001; Cornelius 2001; Dunn 2009; Nevins 2008). Most notably, it resulted in a shift in the crossing patterns away from the cities and into inhospitable areas such as the Sonoran Desert (Cornelius 2001; Martinez n.d.; Rubio-Goldsmith et. al 2006). Arizona, and particularly the Tucson Sector, has now become the most active and dangerous crossing point with 45 percent of all apprehensions, 50 percent of reported deaths, and 47 percent of marijuana seizures in 2009 (see figure 1.1). From 1990 to 2008, the ratio of apprehensions in the Tucson Sector has risen from 1 in 20.58, to 1 in 2.28 (DHS 2010).

The growing militarization of the border, including the border fence, presents new risks, including the border patrol, vigilante groups, a brutal desert to cross, and ultimately unscrupulous employers. Women, children, and monolingual indigenous migrants are particularly vulnerable. Once they cross into the United States, many are apprehended in the desert, picked up at a work raid, arrested for a minor legal infraction, or have their Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) status removed due to prosecution for crimes. Most are repatriated to Mexican border towns with no money for food, shelter, or transportation home.

The trip to the border for many people, especially Central Americans desperate to find work, is an expensive obstacle course which often includes dealing with abusive Mexican authorities, encountering drug gangs, the danger of being robbed or injured while riding the trains to the border, or being arrested and deported from Mexico. Mexico’s Human Rights commission reported 9,758\(^7\) kidnappings of immigrants from September of 2008 to February of 2009 in Mexico. Nine out of 10 reported that their lives were threatened (CNDH 2009; for a detailed description of Central American crossing experiences see Hagan 2008).

There are many distinct regions of the United States-Mexico border. The research upon which this article is based was done in the Tucson Sector,\(^8\) centered by the border cities of Ambos Nogales. This region now experiences the highest number of undocumented border crossings. This phenomenon has been referred to as the funnel effect, because all of the would-be migrants crossing to and from a wide variety of destinations are funneled here into the most treacherous terrain along the United States-Mexico border.
border by increased enforcement in urban areas (Rubio-Goldsmith et al. 2006). It is estimated that more than 3,000 people cross the border every day in this region, while Nogales, Mexico, receives a huge portion of the nearly 500,000 deportees per year returned to Mexico (INM 2005). The repatriation of about 100,000 individuals to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico (SRE 2006), with an official population of less than 200,000 people (INEGI 2005), has a profound impact on the city and region.

As the most active sector for USBP apprehensions, the Tucson Sector has developed a sophisticated business of human smuggling and trafficking. The criminalization of unauthorized migrants and militarization of the border has led to an overlap of drug cartels that are using this area to smuggle marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and amphetamines and coyotes smuggling people through the desert. Migrants can be used as decoys as the case of Luis demonstrates, allowing others to escape apprehension and successfully transport drugs into the United States, but also as a way to recuperate the costs of failed crossing attempts or to recruit for new labor.

The ultimate form of violence on migrants passing through the borderlands is death. The National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) (2007) of Mexico estimates that one migrant dies every day since Operation Gatekeeper, which started in San Diego in 1994 as an expansion of Operation Blockade/Hold the Line, initiated in 1993 in El Paso, Texas (Dunn 2009; Nevins 2008). The goal of these operations was to fortify urban zones and displace people from traditional routes into more dangerous zones with the hopes that it might deter would-be crossers (Andreas 2001; Dunn 2009). “Nearly 2,000 men, women, and children have died...not counting the bodies still out there waiting to be discovered” (McCombs 2010a:1). The deadliest year thus far has been fiscal 2005, with estimates for the number of deaths in Arizona to be around 238 and 516 border-wide. The number of reported deaths in 1995 and 1996 was 61 and 59 respectively (Cornelius 2005; Nevins 2008). From 2000 to 2004, the average rose to 410 reported deaths per year (Cornelius 2005). While the border patrol frequently discusses the vulnerability of migrants to smugglers, the United States government has not addressed the deaths in the desert and how it is related to border policy.

Professionals on the Border: Coyotes, Bajadores, and Burerros

Undocumented crossing is a dynamic and rapidly changing system that reacts to United States enforcement and to the whims of powerful transnational drug cartels. In this section, we will describe just
how the different actors interact, creating a system that increases the vulnerability of migrants and shows some unintended consequences of United States security policies. Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002) have documented a massive increase in the percentage of undocumented migrants employing coyotes to assist them in crossing as well as a huge increase in the cost of these services. The average price to cross is over $1,600 today (CNDH 2007), and it is clear that there have been drastic changes in the level of profitability and organization of clandestine border crossings.

David Spener (2009) meticulously outlines the different crossing styles or “coyotaje” in South Texas. We agree with Spener that the dominant discourse on coyotes lacks complexity and nuance, usually depicting coyotes as ruthless criminals. By blaming the guides for all of the violence along the border, the authorities seek to avoid blame for the hundreds of deaths that occur every year on the border (see also Nevins 2008). However, the way that Spener constructs coyotaje as the process of providing access to the United States for undocumented migrants, he negates that there are many instances when the goals of people trying to cross and those assisting them are not the same. For Spener, instances of robbery, drug trafficking, and sexual slavery are aberrant forms of coyotaje and, therefore, are, in part, excluded from his analysis.

By defining the question in these terms, he automatically constructs a positive vision of coyotes. In our experience, Spener’s (2009) “false coyotaje,” “narco-coyotaje” (people engaged in both human smuggling and drug trafficking) and “human trafficking” are common phenomena and play an extremely important part in the border crossing dynamic. Spener does acknowledge that in 2007, at the end of his fieldwork, there were reports that the Gulf Cartel was becoming involved with clandestine immigration in South Texas, but Spener asserts that this was most likely a form of extortion of coyotes by the more powerful drug cartels. Our contrasting data most likely stems from the difference in his geographical focus and the dramatic shifts as a result of the drug war in recent years. This topic appears more frequently in our interviews during the end of 2009 and 2010. More research is needed in multiple areas along the border to determine both the difference in the experience of being smuggled into the United States as well as how the processes of clandestine migration function border-wide.

Municipal police officers interviewed in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico agreed that there had been a consolidation of migration and drug networks. Many migrants also reflected a great deal of concern about
this issue. We were told of one woman’s experience crossing where she suspected that the guides were really only concerned with trafficking drugs. They were a group of 44 in all. Suddenly, the guides shouted that the perrera, (a border patrol truck that resembles a dog catcher, hence the name) was coming. Everyone bolted, and the guides disappeared. “Why would they just leave us there if they didn’t have something else more valuable?” she asked (personal communication, March 2, 2010). The process of locating a guide here in Arizona also seems to be quite different from previous research that suggests that people more frequently rely on guides from their hometowns (Cornelius and Lewis 2007; Lopez Castro 1998). As one migrant succinctly stated, “Están por todos lados. Encuentras uno que parece más o menos de confianza y te vas con él” (They are everywhere. You find one (guide/coyote) that seems more or less trustworthy, and off you go with him) (personal communication, June 12, 2010). Moreover, some coyotes do collaborate with the bandits, known locally as bajadores, which rob migrants. One in five migrants we surveyed reported being robbed during their previous crossing attempt (n=71 semi-structured interviews). A 25-year-old man from Zacatecas recounted that his group was once confronted by a group of armed men with bandanas covering their faces that ordered them to hand over everything. “If you hide money, we are going to shoot you in the foot and leave you here to die” (personal communication, April 8, 2010). Of the 16 migrants that were robbed by bajadores, six explicitly accused the coyote of being involved, either because the migrants were robbed and the guide was not or because other people that had used the same guide were robbed in the same fashion before. Spener also discounts robbery as a frequent aspect of coyotaje. He classifies it as false coyotaje, an aberrant form.

Complicated links between the different clandestine groups that operate in the limited space of the border crossing cooridors represent a little understood phenomenon. The three major illicit activities in this region, run by bajadores, coyotes, and narcos through the use of drug mules known as burreros, make up the clandestine geography of illicit border activity. Each group maintains autonomy in some sense, but collaboration and consolidation is increasingly common. When migrants are kidnapped or held at “safe-houses,” usually in Phoenix, Arizona, we can clearly see how human smuggling and drug trafficking has merged.

Coyotes frequently take advantage of the well-known, likelihood of robbery and convince their clients to entrust all of their money to the guide in case they encounter bajadores. A 19-year-old from
Oaxaca that had attempted to cross through Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico had entrusted 5,000 pesos ($400) to his guide, which he lost when the coyote abandoned them in the desert. His uncle and his pregnant wife also gave their cash to the coyote for safekeeping.

On the other hand, two people reported being caught by bajadores, but the coyote was able to reason with them and prevent the bandits from robbing the group. Another stark contrast is in the treatment of women. Four people reported seeing women being raped by bajadores, four others witnessed less extreme forms of sexual abuse such as forcing women to disrobe. One woman reported that bajadores raped a different woman in her group. Two men had tried to intervene, and they were shot and killed (personal communication, May 13, 2010). An older woman named Priscila said that bajadores raped a muchacha in her group. The men held a pistol to her boyfriend’s head and told him that if he moves, he is going to die right now. After they had gone, the young girl that had been raped said that she wished they had killed her (personal communication, May 13, 2010).

However, two other migrants reported that the women in their group were separated and left alone, while only the men were robbed. If anything is clear from these scenarios, it is the complicated set of rules and standards that govern the relationships between the different border actors.

Since profit seeking does not end with robbery or payment for crossing, people are also frequently held in so-called “safe houses,” to be ransomed for several thousand dollars. In the seven interviews with migrants who were kidnapped, in order to be let free from the safe houses they have been told to pay between $1,800 and $3,500 in addition to the arranged price for crossing. More work needs to be done to fully understand kidnappings, especially since the information in this paper is based on the stories of people who were apprehended by ICE or USBP during or shortly after the kidnapping, which most likely represents only a fraction of total kidnappings.

One indicator of manipulation by drug cartels is noticeable when large groups of migrants are organized and sent across the line in a staggered formation. Our respondents have informed us that this is to evade detection of drug shipments by border patrol. The most common manifestation of this is coordinating groups of border crossers, by dividing them in groups of 15-20 and sending them in staggered formation, one leaving 30 minutes to an hour before the next. This is usually done without the knowledge of the would-be migrants, and only when people break from the formation do they see the
other aspects of the crossing. After five or six of these groups have been sent out, a group of 10 individuals carrying backpacks filled with marijuana are sent behind them. Those with more valuable drug cargo are now able to keep tabs on the movement of the border patrol in response to the undocumented migrants and, therefore, increase their rate of success. A man named Marcos from Michoacan explained his experience with this dynamic. He and his friends had been separated from their group and decided to turn back. They ran into a group of burreros carrying AR-15s. The drug runners told them that they had to keep going to provide them with cover. Marcos was informed, “If you turn back, I will kill you.” They were forced to walk another two days without food or water (personal communication, February 4, 2010).

The drug war has had an impact on the profitability of drug trafficking and has caused the cartels to diversify their income generating activities with robberies and kidnappings (Stratfor 2008). These events have also had an impact on our research. We have seen a large decline in robberies since several bajadores were murdered by narcos in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico.16

Because of the vulnerability created during the migration process, individuals become more likely to accept $1,800 to cross through the desert with a backpack full of marijuana,17 rather than attempt to find a way to come up with $1,600 to pay for a guide. This choice is the aftermath of structural violence, representing something new, whereupon the individual’s limited choices within a structurally controlled atmosphere lead he or she to engage with a violent system. People are dealing with the results of structural forces and deciding how best to mitigate their vulnerability and marginalization, a key example of “post structural violence.” This is obviously a difficult choice, but the drug cartels have dedicated resources to attracting as many people as possible to work in their profitable and dangerous business.

While Tony Payan (2006) has deemed non-“point of entry” (POE) drug smuggling, meaning traffic through the deserts on foot, to be an insignificant and rare phenomenon, our research carried out in another border region suggests another pattern. It is definitely the case that the majority of drugs are smuggled in large trucks, and valuable drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, are probably never taken in backpacks through the desert but smuggled in dummy compartments in cars or in truck cargo. However, migrants have reported seeing over 30 burreros during a single attempt to cross. As Alejandro’s story has
shown, there is still a convoluted and hidden relationship between drugs and migration. The following story shows both how coordinated professional drug mules have become as well as how easy it is to get stuck in the drug trade:

José’s Story (excerpt adapted from Jeremy Slack’s fieldnotes, September 4, 2009)

Jose, a short man with baggy clothes and a shaved head, was originally from Veracruz but had been living in Ciudad Juárez, the epicenter of the drug violence in recent years. Despite having originally crossed as a migrant to work in Los Angeles 10 years ago, he had crossed the border several times with backpacks filled with marijuana. His first trip was through Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico, a town about 40 miles south of the border.

Burdened by the weight of 50 pounds of marijuana and the supplies for the journey, they could only walk for short stretches. José explained that there were 10 people carrying the drugs, as well as a guide and the encargado (boss); both were armed.

José informed me that the encargado knows top cartel members personally. Only his word will save you if you lose a shipment of drugs. The encargado has to tell them that it was the migra (border patrol) or soldiers or bajadores that took the drugs. This is to insure that no one runs off with the drugs.

They walked for three days and nights, hiding and sleeping in the day, walking at night. They diverged from the traditional migrant paths after the first day and went really high up in the “sierra,” where the migra rarely goes. Soon they arrived at a series of ranches that helped them transport the drugs, by signalling when the coast was clear and providing shelter.

Upon arrival in Tucson, Arizona, they were driven to the Tufesa bus station and sent back to Mexico. He said that they were supposed to pay him $1,300 there, but they didn’t. Jose said he was going to go back to see them in Mexico and collect his money. He shrugged and said, “No me pagaron, Esta vez, no me pagaron.” (They didn’t pay me. This time they didn’t pay me.)

José probably be will be tasked with another journey through the desert in order to collect his pay. This starts a cycle that frequently ends in death or jail. People have been exposed to a form of violence
and a criminal lifestyle as a direct result of the vulnerability and marginalization created by securitization of the border, United States immigration policies, the demand for drugs, and the lack of work opportunities at home. Because there is individual agency involved in the decision to participate in the drug industry, it is important to acknowledge that this violence has a social and economic utility. In David Riches’ (1986) discussion of violence, he discusses the need for perpetrators to legitimize violence: the most acceptable way to do this is to establish it as a form of tactical “preemption.” In the case of drug trafficking or engaging in human smuggling, migrants are preempting their vulnerable state after failing to enter the United States. Rather than meet with the possible fate of being unable to enter the United States and return home with greater debt than before, they are acting in a way that will limit the possibilities of monetary failure by gambling their lives.

Post-Structural Violence-Criminalization and Symbolic Dimensions

In an attempt to continue the policies of deterrence as a strategy to control undocumented migration, Operation Streamline was started in the Tucson Sector during fiscal 2008. United States officials are selecting migrants to be prosecuted criminally for entering the United States unlawfully. Operation Streamline usually involved about 70 people being tried and almost invariably convicted en masse five days a week for entering the United States without authorization (see Green 2008). People with a criminal record in the United States or who were formally deported are sentenced anywhere from 30 days to 24 months in jail. First-time deportees are given a formal deportation as long as they plead guilty to the charges. This deportation means that the migrants now have a criminal record in the United States and would be sentenced to jail time if they return to the United States. The migrants are shackled at their feet, hands, and waist during the trial, and then sent immediately to the processing center where they will be formally deported. “Te mata psicologicamente!” (They kill you psychologically!) said a young man sick with worry after being unable to find his wife who was not sent to the same streamline trial (personal communication, September 4, 2010).

The threat of a long period of incarceration is intended to deter individuals from attempting to cross again, but it also increases their vulnerability. People detained in prisons for long periods of time will be in greater need of immediate income, and the drug business can offer a tempting solution. The
current tendency to prosecute immigration violations criminally, frequently detaining migrants alongside the mainstream prison population, has serious consequences not only for the safety and well-being of people attempting to look for work in the United States or reunite with loved ones, but it is yet another example of how policies generate a more criminal and dangerous situation for migrants and the border in general. A 34-year-old woman from Durango explained that the prison was a very violent place, where drug use is common. She witnessed a stabbing right before she left. “I am not a bad person! I am not a bad mother! I only need to get back to my children” (personal communication, September 4, 2009).

There are always forces at work, creating vulnerability and marginalization, but as the dominant structures are controlled, in this case by the United States efforts to criminalize a process that was once overlooked, individual reactions to repression create a different type of violence. Whether people actively decide to participate in criminal enterprises such as the drug trade or are coerced into compliance, the root causes of this action can be traced directly to the marginalization caused by structural violence. However, the agency of individuals must not be ignored. Since violence can be used as an attempt to take back power, it is important to note that people may also be engaging in illegal activities as a response to their lack of power (Arendt 1970; Riches 1986). In the case of post-structural violence, it is not simply the act of engaging in violent and dangerous activities as a result of marginalization but being directly or indirectly subversive to state supported structures such as United States security operations on the border.

Conclusions

Moving across Mexico and then the United States-Mexico border is a daunting task. For those who have already made the journey once or twice before, the surprise of an increasingly militarized border comes as a shock. The increase of the number of Border Patrol agents on the United States side and a growing number of the Mexican military on the Mexican side have added to dangers for migrants crossing the border by an overall escalation of violence.

More research is needed to fully understand these processes. The border crossing is a highly dynamic situation, changing quickly in reaction to border securitization. It is a dynamic relationship between smugglers and enforcers, constantly shifting as one adapts to the other’s actions and reactions. This makes an already difficult research topic even more elusive because, not only are the people
constantly on the move, but also the experience can differ drastically from one month to the next, resulting in a lack of standardization or consistency in data.

The concept of post structural violence highlights the role of both the United States and Mexico in exposing people to multiple forms of danger and creating a dynamic whereupon individuals are put in direct conflict with the state. When Galtung (1969) first introduced the idea of structural violence, he left the discussion open as to how personal violence and structural violence relate to one another. The articulation of physical violence between individuals is increased where structural violence impacts people more once separated from their communities and social networks (Bourdieu 2000; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourgois 2001; Scheper-Huges 1992, Wolseth 2008). The conditions of post-structural violence that arise on the United States-Mexico border intensify the risk and vulnerability created by multiple actors and forces with varied motives and goals. With little understanding or support of border legal systems or the rules of cartels and gangs, migrants run the risk of losing everything.

Exploring the depths of insecurity, crime, violence, and migration is fundamental in the struggle to influence immigration reform. As academic researchers, it is necessary to produce work that is highly relevant and does justice to the stories and people willing to share their lives with us. Moreover, it is important to reevaluate crime as the near exclusive realm of the criminologist and bring a new perspective that focuses on the inherent violence hidden behind the choices of those involved. In the case of today’s dangerous and violent border crossing dynamics, it is imperative to deepen understandings of violence and the unintended consequences of immigration policy.
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Notes

1 This and all subsequent names are pseudonyms.
2 Sixty-five of these interviewees are male. The shelter where we work is starkly divided by gender, and while the larger team has been working on collecting survey data from female migrants, we have not yet fully incorporated the qualitative approach into a larger research team.
3 On August 5th, Mexican President Felipe Calderon announced that a report estimated the death toll at 28,000 from 2006 to completion in 2010. The associate press reported these numbers, but the actual report has not been made public.
4 It is important to note that we do not know exactly how or why Alejandro got involved with drug trafficking. All we know is that he had at one point entered the U.S. for work, but returned to Northern Mexico. This is undoubtedly a complicated initiation process that is not well understood.
5 This vignette appears courtesy of our colleague Paola Molina.
6 Literally, goats horns, based on the shape of the guns.
7 The National Commission for Human Rights collected accounts from people that had been kidnapped and approached authorities. Four hundred ninety-one* people were interviewed about their experiences in this time period. From these interviews, they estimated the number of people being held simultaneously, and then arrived at the overall figure.
8 There are nine sectors along the United States-Mexico border – (East to West) McAllen Sector, Laredo Sector, Del Rio Sector, Marfa Sector, El Paso Sector, Tucson Sector, Yuma Sector, El Centro Sector, San Diego Sector.
9 The 2006 USBP statistics represent a high of 600,000 in 2000 and 450,000 in the most recent figure available at this time. However, these statistics represent events not people. So each individual may have two or three apprehensions. Other USBP statistics report about 100,000 individuals being repatriated to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico in the previous year (2007).
10 Operation Gatekeeper was started in 1994. The basic strategy was to fortify urban areas so that people would be less successful in their attempts to cross there, forcing them to attempt to cross in more dangerous rural areas on the hopes that this would deter people from crossing.
11 No More Deaths cites 238, while the Secretaria de Relaciones al Exterior (Mexican State Department) reports 516.
We have found that while these terms are often interchangeable, if there are multiple people involved in the smuggling experience, the guide is the one that physically accompanies migrants through the desert, and the coyote is the one that makes the arrangements like a manager.

For another discussion of the dangers of bajadores, see Ochoa O’Leary 2009.

However, he also makes an inaccurate historical reference to bajadores, as similar to “man snatchers” from the bracero program that steal workers from different recruiters, which has evolved into kidnapping (Spener 2009:306n9). This would be closer to enganchadores (people that look for potential migrants, sometimes trying to coax them away from other coyotes) in our experience. The cooperation between guides and bandits may take the form of a security tax to allow the coyotes to keep operating the area, or it may be an arrangement where the guide takes a percentage of the stolen goods. However, more research is needed to fully explore these relationships.

Due to the sensitivity of this line of questioning, for the purposes of our structured interviews, we only asked about witnessing sexual violence against women. In one-on-one interviews, when appropriate, we did ask about personal experiences.

While we have been attempting to investigate more of the linkages between the bajadores and the other actors in border crime, it has become difficult since reports of robberies dropped sharply in the spring of 2009. On April 24 and May 13, 2009, bodies were found on the outskirts of Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. The two men had each been killed by strangulation and wrapped in plastic or entamalado (made into a tamal, a steamed corn based food typical in Mexico) in the local slang, with a note attached from the cartels threatening to kill more bandits for their behavior. The first note read “esto les va a pasar a todos los que anden de bajadores, de ratas y los que apoyen con ranchos a estas personas ya los tenemos ubicados se los va cargar la madre” (This will happen to all bajadores, or ratas as well as the people that help them by letting them use their ranches, we know where and who they are, you are screwed) (El Diario de Sonora, April 24, 2009).

There have been many similar murders since this event, but only one included a narco-mensaje (note).

There is a legal distinction between voluntary repatriation and deportation. Voluntary repatriations are not a criminal offense, whereas deportations are a misdemeanor. Recent legislation to consider all acts of undocumented entrance to the United States a crime was defeated in July 2009.

Figure based on three interviews with self-described burreros.