Peril on the migrant trail - Immigrants face death, danger to reach U.S.
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One afternoon last October I was driving home from Laredo on I-35 when I saw three bedraggled men climb over a ranch fence and stagger onto the access road. They looked like they were in bad shape, so I pulled over and asked them in Spanish if they needed help. In unison, they gasped, "-Si!"

All three were from poor villages in southern Mexico. They had met at a migrant shelter in Nuevo Laredo. Each was making his first trip to come to find work north of the border. They had no money, no guide, no food, no water and no papers. They had spent the last six days and nights lost in the brush with nothing to eat, drinking from cattle troughs, sleeping under the stars. Although they knew beforehand it would be perilous, lack of work back home left them little choice but to attempt the crossing. They had families to feed. Fortunately, the weather was cool. A month earlier, the three might not have made it out to the highway. Every summer, migrants die crossing the ranches of South Texas on foot. I gave them a ride to a store in Encinal and handed them $20 to buy something to eat and drink. I don't know what happened to them after that.

This story illustrates why most Mexican migrants today hire paid guides, known as coyotes, pateros or polleros to smuggle them into the United States. Before the intensification of immigration enforcement efforts in the mid-'90s, migrants could swim across the Rio Grande and quickly blend into the Mexican-majority crowd in one of the Texas border towns. Now migrants must travel far around the heavily patrolled urban stretches of the border and walk for days through the brush to get around the last immigration checkpoints on the highways leading to the interior. Few can make it on their own, but smugglers are available for hire to lead them across the river, guide them through the brush, and load them into vehicles to be driven to Austin, Dallas, Houston or San Antonio. When they arrive with migrants at a "safe house" in their destination city, smugglers call the relatives that agreed to pay the fee for the migrant's trip, which can range anywhere from $1,000 to $2,000. Once the smugglers are paid, the migrant is free to go. Migrants rely on recommendations from friends and relatives to locate reliable smugglers at the border, but such recommendations are no guarantee of good treatment or safe passage. Smugglers in this part of the country have abused their clients in a variety of ways, ranging from sexual assault to abandonment on the trail to extortion of more money once the "safe house" is reached.

Migrant smuggling is a mass phenomenon. During the 1990s, the number of Mexicans residing in the United States roughly doubled to more than 8 million. Much of that growth is attributable to migrants being smuggled into the country. Clearly there is a huge market for smuggling services. Moreover, it appears that most smuggled migrants, in spite of the abuses inflicted on them by their smugglers and the other injuries and indignities they suffer along the way, manage to get where they're headed in the United States. They find work on farms, in restaurants, on construction sites, in garment factories, slaughterhouses, and in private homes as gardeners, housekeepers and nannies. They repay their smuggling debts and send money home to their families in Mexico. Their labor underwrites key sectors of the U.S. economy.

Mexico is the United States' No. 1 supplier of migrant labor (95 percent of those apprehended by the Border Patrol are Mexican, most of the rest are Central American). Mexico is also the United States' second largest trade partner. The number of trucks carrying goods back and forth across the border has grown exponentially since the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect in 1994. Millions of them pass through Texas. Given the volume of traffic, agents at the security checkpoints on the highways leading away from the border only open a trailer compartment when they have some reason to be suspicious about its contents. Most trailers are not opened.

Smugglers have figured this out and have begun to use tractor-trailers to transport large numbers of migrants north from the border. It is one of the more expensive ways for migrants to get into the United States, but instead of trudging through the brush for several days, migrants ride in the back of a truck for a few hours.
Certainly for children, the elderly and others not hardy enough to hike through the desert, the 18-wheeler looks like a better option. Thousands of migrants have gotten to their U.S. destinations in this way. Smugglers can earn tens of thousands of dollars per load, enabling them to offer truckers the chance to make a fast buck in return for committing a victimless crime with a low probability of getting caught. Not surprisingly, they find takers.

The tragic deaths of 19 undocumented migrants who suffocated in a refrigerated trailer in Victoria last month remind us that this type of smuggling also claims its victims. Tractor-trailer compartments are not meant to haul human cargo. It's not yet clear why the trailer's refrigeration was cut off or whether so many of the more than 70 migrants inside would have smothered even if it had been running. Surely, the smugglers didn't mean to kill their customers, from whom they expected to collect another $900 apiece upon arriving in Houston. Yet through some combination of negligence, recklessness and incompetence, they did exactly that.

In the days following this disaster, which was widely publicized on both sides of the border, authorities discovered several other 18-wheelers hauling migrants through the region. Evidently, the Brownsville-based ring that caused the deaths in Victoria was not the only one trucking migrants into Texas. Nor had migrants been deterred by the deaths of their compatriots. At least no one died or was seriously injured in these cases. To put a stop to the 18-wheeler smuggling, U.S. customs and immigration officials have announced that they will install mobile X-ray equipment at their interior checkpoints to scan tractor-trailers for human cargo. In response, smugglers will likely go back to marching their charges through the brush and hiding them in car trunks. Or they may take some of their cash and bribe the border guards to waive them through the checkpoints.

As was the case following the deaths of 14 migrants in the desert near Yuma, Ariz., two years ago, the Victoria tragedy has led the U.S. and Mexican governments to redouble their efforts to break up smuggling rings and to warn aspiring migrants of the dangers of crossing the border illegally. The prospects of success do not look good. U.S. immigration authorities arrested an average of 14,500 individual smugglers annually along the border during the last six years. Public service announcements about the dangers of crossing have already been running on radio and television for a couple of years. Meanwhile, smuggling rings have continued to proliferate and annual apprehensions of migrants coming across the border have hovered around 1 million. Although several hundred migrants perish crossing the border every year, thousands of others reach their destinations. We don't know how much worse the odds of safe passage will have to get before the flow of migrants across the border abates significantly.

We do know that south of the border, well-paying jobs are scarce. North of the border, manual workers willing to do the heavy lifting required in key industries are in short supply. As long as this situation persists, Mexican workers will continue to come north, often actively recruited by employers here. Unless U.S. authorities legalize this labor flow, it is likely that thousands of migrants will continue to seek the services of smugglers, whose ranks will swell further. There are few significant barriers to getting into the smuggling business, the risks to any individual of getting caught are small, and there is a tremendous amount of money to be made.

At the time of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States and Mexico were beginning to discuss an agreement that would legalize a significant portion of the cross-border flow of workers. After Sept. 11, 2001, U.S. national security concerns took priority and the migration talks stalled. It is a sad irony that Mexican migrant workers, a number of whom died in the twin towers, have become an unintended casualty of the war against terrorism. In the absence of legal migration options, migrants continue to be exposed to terrible risks coming across the border and frequent exploitation by unscrupulous employers once they're here.

The U.S. government is now legitimately concerned that liberalizing the movement of people across its borders could make it easier for terrorists to enter the country. But legalizing Mexican migrant workers might actually have the opposite effect. If migrant workers and their families registered with the U.S. government to live and work here legally, then only real criminals would need to seek the services of smugglers to sneak into the country.

The U.S. government could then redirect some of the considerable resources it now dedicates to arresting thousands of otherwise law-abiding workers at the border to tracking down a far smaller number of violent criminals.
Legalization would also finally recognize the rights and dignity of the millions of Mexican undocumented workers upon whose labor we have depended for decades. Such recognition is long overdue. Without it, the U.S.-Mexico border will likely remain what it has become for too many people: a death trap.

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Caption: PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS NICOLE FRUGE/STAFF SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS
These X-ray photos taken in 1999 by Mexican authorities show a wide shot (top) and a close-up version of human forms and cargo in a truck on Mexico's border with Guatemala. In two months of using this new mobile truck scanning system, officials report finding more than 110 undocumented immigrants. A Texas Ranger investigates the scene outside Victoria where an 18-wheeler was found with bodies inside.