



PACIFIC COUNCIL ON
INTERNATIONAL POLICY

MEXICO INITIATIVE

NATIONAL DELEGATION:

U.S.-Mexico Border
at San Diego &
Tijuana

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NORTH BOUNDARY FORUM

In January 2023, the Pacific Council sent a group of 18 high-level delegates and staff to the San Diego-Tijuana border region for a firsthand look at the dynamics at the U.S.-Mexico border. Delegates met with border authorities from the U.S. and Mexico, toured the busiest land border crossing in the world at San Ysidro/El Chaparral, engaged with diplomats and experts on the U.S.-Mexico relationship, visited migrant shelters providing essential services in Tijuana, and explored current and future opportunities for binational economic growth and development.

The delegation spotlighted two cities seeking to grow together even as border policies continue to cleave what could be a more unified region into two distinct parts. We delved into coexisting contradictions at and on both sides of the border: policies to facilitate the flow of goods while confining the current of people; illegal goods and substances that mostly pass through legal ports of entry, from guns gushing south to fentanyl flowing north; a high-tech North American manufacturing hub beset by inadequate infrastructure; a burgeoning population of politically and economically disempowered refugees looking northward side-by-side with firms that moved south seeking economic advantage; among many others.

Beyond the contradictions, we also heard consensus: specialists spoke about investment opportunities, we witnessed unprecedented cooperation to shelter and protect migrants, and experts echoed each other describing joint solutions to shared challenges. All were convinced that the most favorable future for San Diego and Tijuana, while not united, is in unison. As the 'three amigos' stated at the North American Leaders' Summit (NALS) days before our delegation, "We are not just neighbors and partners. Our people share bonds of family and friendship and value – above all else – freedom, justice, human rights, equality, and democracy. This is the North American DNA."

WHY IT MATTERS

The U.S.-Mexico border is nearly 2,000 miles long, with approximately one million border crossings per day and cross-border trade of more than US\$1m per minute. The 10 U.S. and Mexican border states' combined GDP represents more than one-quarter of the total GDP of both countries. The border is also the site of the largest migrant wave to reach the U.S. in more than two decades, with more than 2.4 million 'encounters' in FY2022 and an increase in the number of migrants from Central America and countries other than Mexico, including Russia, Ukraine, and Eastern European countries. U.S. policymakers are debating how and how many migrants to receive (or expel), while Mexican authorities and NGOs are working to provide temporary shelter as migrants await an opportunity to enter the U.S. or decide what their next step is.

As the largest binational urban area on the border, the San Diego-Tijuana region is unique for its size, while the integration between the two cities also creates opportunities for local, state and federal authorities, as well as civil society, to innovate on cross-border cooperation. As the CaliBaja region continues to integrate, it could test opportunities for regional actors to augment federal policies.

**\$1 million
USD**

2000 miles

1 million

The amount generated per minute via cross-border trade

The length of the U.S.-Mexico border

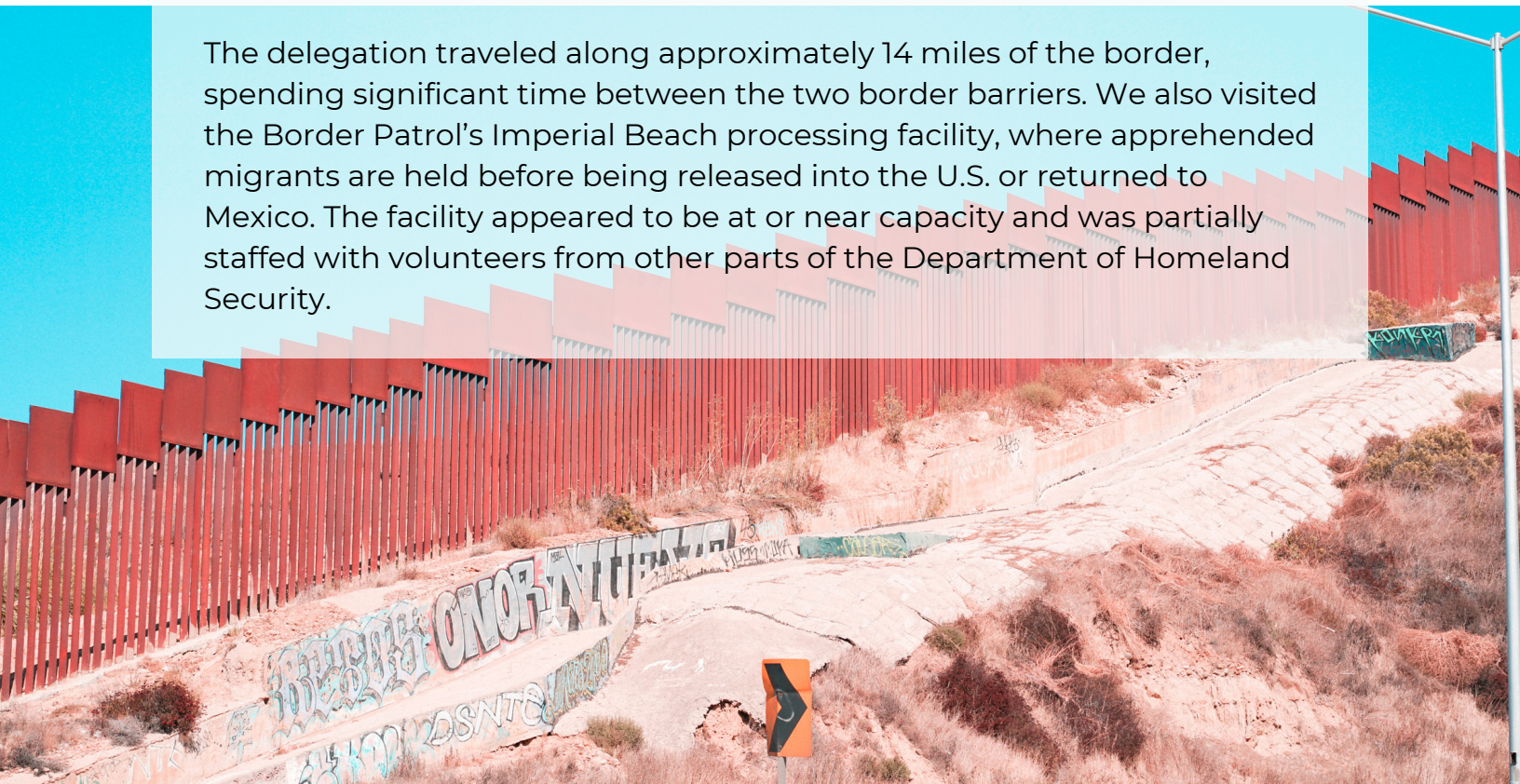
The number of U.S.-Mexico border crossings per day

*ALL NUMBERS ARE APPROXIMATE

A DELEGATION TO THE BORDER AT A SIGNIFICANT MOMENT

In March 2022, the number of “southwest land border encounters” reported by Border Patrol rose above 200,000 per month for the first time since March 2000. Since then it has remained above 200,000 per month, and in October, November and December 2022, was well above the corresponding levels in 2021. While the border’s San Diego sector has not seen the levels of migrants as the most transited sectors in Texas, year-over-year encounters have increased by 28.6% comparing the final three months of 2022 and 2021. The San Diego sector has received Department of Homeland Security-coordinated flights of migrants from other sectors awaiting processing in order to relieve processing centers elsewhere that are over capacity.

The delegation traveled along approximately 14 miles of the border, spending significant time between the two border barriers. We also visited the Border Patrol’s Imperial Beach processing facility, where apprehended migrants are held before being released into the U.S. or returned to Mexico. The facility appeared to be at or near capacity and was partially staffed with volunteers from other parts of the Department of Homeland Security.



IMPLEMENTING A CHALLENGING MANDATE



The sharp increase in the number of migrants has stretched U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) resources thin. Because of the focus on controlling and processing the flow of migrants into the United States, CBP has had to task staff with stopping migrants crossing between ports of entry and transporting them to processing centers. Border Patrol highlighted a lack of resources to carry out complementary activities like staffing interior checkpoints miles from the border to screen for illegal goods as well as outbound inspections at the border to prevent illegal guns and cash from entering Mexico. Based on our meetings, it appeared that CBP personnel were facing fatigue from responding to policy decisions made in Washington which pushed them beyond their core mandate.

The number of migrants decreased slightly in January 2023, as compared to the prior year, but it could increase in the short term. The federal government's Title 42 authority to expel migrants without allowing them the opportunity to claim asylum could end in May 2023 when the Biden administration plans to allow the COVID-19 public health emergency declaration to expire. Shortly after the delegation trip, CBP announced the opening of a new, larger processing facility in the San Diego sector, capable of handling 500 individuals at a time.

TIJUANA SHELTERS MIGRANTS IN LIMBO

Crossing into Mexico, the delegation met with the National Institute of Migration (INAMI), which described its policies to support Mexicans deported from the U.S. In addition to returning Mexicans, significant numbers of migrants and refugees from other countries have made the city their (temporary) home. In 2022, Mexico issued more than 115,000 humanitarian visitor permits for foreigners in the country, an increase of more than 167% compared to 2021. These permits remain valid as long as the conditions for which they were granted persist. Recipients of the permits mostly included people from Cuba, Haiti, Honduras, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. As a point of comparison, in early January the Biden administration announced that it would grant up to 30,000 citizens of Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela “humanitarian parole” per month, as part of an expansion of the government’s Title 42 authority to expel irregular migrants from these countries to Mexico. By late January, the U.S. had approved some 7,500 humanitarian parole applications.

The delegation visited one government and two non-governmental shelters in Tijuana: Unidad Deportiva Reforma, a temporary facility, and Casa del Migrante and Instituto Madre Asunta. The non-governmental shelters provided a range of services to migrants, including education and assistance in finding permanent shelter. The government-operated temporary shelter was established during a migrant surge in November 2022 as the result of unprecedented cooperation between local, state, and federal authorities in coordination with the United Nations’ International Organization for Migration (IOM). At the shelters, delegates interacted with policymakers as well as migrants. Policymakers at the Unidad Deportiva Reforma temporary shelter highlighted their success in standing up the shelter during the migrant surge with an eye toward sharing the model with other cities in Mexico. At the same shelter, migrants approached the IOM staff accompanying the delegation seeking assistance navigating the new CBP One app and explaining how its malfunctions were not allowing many of them to schedule appointments, pointing out flaws in this new system designed to help manage the flow of asylum seekers entering the United States. News reports have corroborated these migrants’ troubling experiences.



AN ECONOMICALLY DYNAMIC
REGION FUELED BY MIGRATION AND
CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY OF
PEOPLE AND GOODS

Contrasting with the challenges faced by recent migrants and refugees in Tijuana, the CaliBaja region (San Diego and Imperial counties in California and Ensenada, Mexicali, Rosarito, San Quintin, Tecate, and Tijuana municipalities in Baja California) is an integrated economy, billed by some local experts as a ‘third country’. Migration to Tijuana is a significant contributor to the region’s dynamism. Non-governmental and economic development experts in Tijuana told the delegation about Mexicans moving to the city to fill an abundance of open positions as well as new arrivals from other countries seeking to cross the U.S. border and instead finding work in Tijuana, whether temporarily or permanently. Tijuana is home to nearly 600 factories, approximately two-thirds of the total in the region, which employ 260,000 people.

While there is significant cross-border mobility—US\$200m in goods, and more than 54,000 people northbound and 4,700 southbound crossing each day for work—experts told the delegation that increased mobility was key to promoting integration and strengthening the binational regional economy. The medical device manufacturing sector has grown in the region, increasing from 43,015 employees in 2008 to 74,331 in 2018. The region’s investment promoters are now pushing for CaliBaja’s consolidation as the “BioMedTech Valley”. The delegation visited a California-headquartered manufacturing company’s Tijuana plant, which has expanded and entered this growing sector.

A Future Together

Individuals, organizations, and government officials are already hard at work facing the region's shared challenges on both sides of the border. The delegation observed challenges and opportunities in equal measure. While far from exhaustive, we can highlight some opportunities for mutually beneficial actions where the Pacific Council Mexico Initiative, our partners, and other stakeholders together can have a regional impact.



Improving cross-border mobility: The San Ysidro/El Chaparral border crossing is recognized as the busiest land-border crossing in the world, and wait times to enter the U.S. can stretch into hours. Both countries have invested in physical infrastructure at regional border crossings, including the upcoming Otay Mesa East port of entry, but policy decisions on irregular migration impact lawful cross-border travel as well.

- Allocate adequate resources so CBP can implement its mission to facilitate lawful travel and trade, while also responding to Washington's policy decisions regarding irregular migration.
- Continue to expand existing and create new legal pathways for migration.
- Streamline and speed up the visa application process at U.S. consulates throughout Mexico.
- Expand trusted and known traveler programs.

Interdicting the flow of illegal weapons and cash from the U.S. to Mexico:

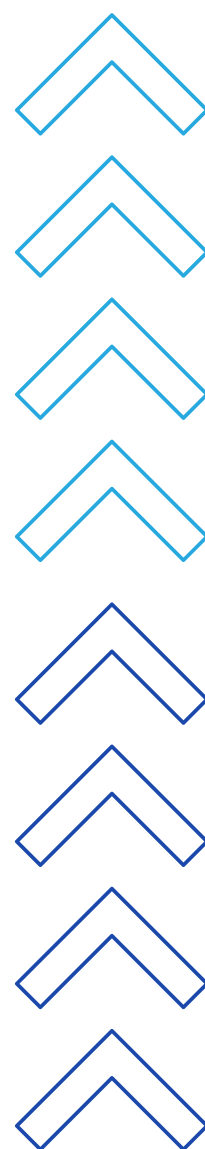
Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) operate smuggling networks that illegally move goods and persons into the United States. They are also fueled by cash earned from illicit activities and subsequently transported back to Mexico, frequently through legal ports of entry. And, the 'iron river' of illegal guns flowing south ensures they have access to firepower enabling them to assert control of territory and intimidate citizens and government officials.

- Ensure CBP has adequate resources to consistently conduct outbound screening of travelers from the U.S. to Mexico. When this screening occurs, CBP seizes arms and cash.
- Seriously partner with Mexico to disrupt the flow of arms south from the U.S., which would strengthen the rule of law in Mexico and reduce internal displacement caused by the destabilizing effects of TCO-led armed violence.

Meeting the demand for workers in the U.S.:

A drop in net immigration during the pandemic was one contributor to a shortage of workers in recent years. In California, more than 300,000 migrant workers are employed via temporary work visas, and 6.6m immigrant workers comprised one-third of the state's workforce in 2018. Undocumented workers made up 9% of California's labor force in 2016.

- Increase access to identification documents and work authorizations for migrants on both sides of the border so that workers and employers can legally fill an abundance of open positions.
- Streamline the H-2A temporary worker visa application process for returning agricultural workers, reducing the processing burden on U.S. consulate staff and facilitating migration in response to demand for workers.



The Pacific Council's January 2023 delegation to the San Diego-Tijuana border spotlighted a region that is unique along the U.S.-Mexico border, in terms of size, trade flows, and economic and cultural integration. At the same time, the CaliBaja region faces some of the same challenges and opportunities as other border communities, and local leaders have proposed solutions that could increase integration and shared success in border communities and the U.S. and Mexico more broadly. Follow the Mexico Initiative as we continue to discuss, explore, and look for opportunities and solutions on issues including migration, arms trafficking, human mobility, and other emerging issues in the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

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