Immigration Upended: Damien Cave Answers Readers' Questions

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Highlight: Times reporter ***Damien Cave answers readers'*** ***questions*** on the economic, demographic and social changes in Mexico that are suppressing illegal ***immigration*** as much as the poor economy or legal crackdowns in the United States.

Body

2:20 p.m. | Updated Leer el articulo en espanol aqui: *http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/07/world/americas/**immigration**-en-espanol.html*.

First off, a big "thank you" to the *commenters* and *questioners* and *Twitter users* who have added their two cents to my story on how changes in Mexico, good and bad, have ***upended*** illegal ***immigration***. It seems to have surprised some, relieved others and angered a few, all of which is typical of a complicated story on a complicated topic like ***immigration***.

Some of the ***questions*** that have arisen require more research and time than I have now - on the impact of Nafta, for example. But the inquiries have inspired me to look into such issues, and in the meantime, here are a couple of responses to get the conversation started.

Keep the ***questions*** and comments coming.

Q. Trying to reconcile the findings included in the report with the local Mexican news that claim that urban Mexicans with economic means are legally migrating to small and medium cities in USA and Canada due to the increasing criminal activity: extortion to small business and random gun fights on the streets. The numbers should be significant less than illegal ***immigration*** nonetheless crime is pushing people out of the country, as it happened in Mexico's civil war of 1910 or "La Revolucion."

Q.*Via Twitter*, *@maraiflo* writes: "@damiencave don't you think it has to do more with the fear of ending up worse, like in a pit in Tamaulipas?"

A.There have been a few ***questions*** and comments on this theme - what about the drug cartels and violence? I will tackle this subject more fully in a future story, but it is true that the violence along the border in particular is driving some people away. State Department figures show growth, for example, in E-class visas, which allow investors who create at least one job outside their family to move to the United States, and in border-crossing cards issued to Mexicans (which allow people to stay in the United States, near the border, for up to 72 hours).

But this is mostly a border-town phenomenon, and the numbers are nowhere near as large as the waves of people who came illegally during the peak years of illegal migration, in the '90s and just after 2000. More interesting, I think, is the effect of the violence on people who live away from Mexican border towns. In states like Oaxaca and Jalisco, for instance, cartel violence is a big reason for NOT going to the United States because the trip would mean crossing through crime-infested areas at the border. I heard this quite a bit in Jalisco. "It's so much more dangerous. You never know who might kidnap or kill you."

The stories of relatives in trouble are part of the reason why the narrative has changed. But parents of young Mexicans, especially mothers, have also really become more protective. While they used to encourage their children, especially sons, to go north and work, now many of them are advising against crossing illegally. That was the case in the Orozco family. While the sons talked about the range of issues making it harder to justify making the journey, their mom - a sweet woman who makes fantastic tortillas - repeatedly emphasized the risk of violence and crime.

Basically, crime and the cartels are definitely factors, but not necessarily in the way one might expect.

Q. My thought: With a high poverty rate, 40-50%, you're always going to have cross border employment crossings. Many anecdotes are cited; any hard facts--number employed vs. number unemployed in Mexico? - *Monsieur Bronx*

A. One of the most frustrating things about trying to analyze ***immigration*** and Mexican economics is that there are no good numbers for unemployment. Officially the Mexican government puts it at around 5 percent, but economists will tell you that this does not account for the informal economy in Mexico and those who are underemployed. (So all the guys making a few pesos washing your windows at stoplights in Mexico City or Tijuana are considered to be as employed as teachers or lawyers.)

Having spoken to a bunch of economists about this, I've found that the official figures are useful as trend indicators but not as hard numbers. You can see when unemployment goes up and down, but you can't link a specific figure to, say migration patterns.

It is true that people crossing for work are inevitable when wages in the United States are higher than in Mexico, which is still the case. But it's the differential that seems to matter more than actual unemployment rates. As *this study from 2005* noted, most Mexican immigrants give up jobs at home to leave for the United States. The stereotype of jobless Americans heading north seems to be just that - a stereotype that doesn't get at the underlying nuances of the situation.

Q.How did you choose Agua Negra, Jalisco to do your story? I am from there, and the people interviewed are my family. What was your process to choose such a beautiful part of Mexico for this excellent story?

A.Gustavo -- how nice to hear from another Jalicense, another Orozco from Agua Negra no less! If you talk to your relatives before I do, tell them I say hello and thank you for letting me into their lives. As to how I found them, it started with data. Carlos Galindo, a wonderful Mexican demographer who is an advisor the Mexican government, helped me dig through the census data to find places that were experiencing population growth or exhibiting other signs of a shift in the migration dynamic. We looked at the handful of states that were historic emigration hubs and found that some of the population increases were especially pronounced. At the same time, the data showed a substantial increase in Mexicans returning home.

Then I started looking for a place in Jalisco that embodied the change. I spoke to economists and experts and Mexico and the United States but I settled on Arandas and Agua Negra because there was a robust historical record of emigration there, with Paul S. Taylor's book from the 30s and a more recent book - *"A Nation of Emigrants" by David Fitzgerald*, a professor at the University of California, San Diego. This was a baseline for me that, I figured, would let me really compare the present moment with the past - it was a way to make sure that the story did not read as supposition, and it let me lay out the narrative of the region in a way that would show the drivers of migration over several generations. I visited in the spring (with a taxi driver who had been illegal and who said his kids only wanted to go to the U.S. for vacation) with little more than a list of names that David Fitzgerald passed on to me. These were people he spoke to several years ago, people who could tell me if there was in fact a change going on. One of those people was Guadalupe Orozco, Antonio's brother. He happens to a very colorful character who did not end up in the story, but who helped me realize that his extended family offered a full portrait of the area's ***immigration*** history and current dynamic. His nephew, Ramon, who works in the government office, knew Agua Negra completely, down to which families had migrants where, and he led me to his brothers and parents. I returned and spent time with them a few weeks ago. It took a long time to find them - but everyone I met in Agua Negra was gracious and friendly. These kinds of stories are impossible if not for people like your relatives,

people brave and gracious enough to let a gringo stranger into their living rooms, their kithchens, their entire lives. I will always be grateful.

Q.*Via Twitter*, *@ThinkMexican* writes: "@damiencave What's with all the mentions of "illegal" in your new article? Check out this page for Journos: *http://ow.ly/5xxoX.*"

A.Ah, the i-word. I was asked about my use of this recently by another journalist writing about the campaign to eliminate use of the word "illegals" and in this case, I think there are two important distinctions that need to be made. First of all, at no point in my story do I describe immigrants themselves as "illegals." Use of that word as a general catch-all strikes me as reductive and unfair. It reduces migrants solely to the issue of whether they are violating the law by being in the United States, and it is a term rarely applied to any group other than immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

That said, using illegal as an adjective - as I do in this story - aims not to insult but rather to differentiate one group of immigrants (legal) from another. I could have instead used undocumented or unauthorized but in a story so focused on the distinction and the interaction between legal and illegal, I felt I had to be as clear as possible. Illegal seemed to be the best way to achieve that.

Q.Hi ***Damien***,Interesting article. What is the source for the Mexican government statistics claiming to show that more Mexicans are crossing with documents in recent years? You mentioned that this is survey data. Can you provide more information on what the survey is measuring? Thanks.

A.These numbers are estimates from CONAPO, the Mexican census analysis agency, based on survey data from bus stations near the border, and other places where migrants congregate. The formal name of the survey is the Encuesta Sobre Migracion en la Frontera and *here is a link*. As I note in the story, the data counts attempted crossings not people and because of how it is conducted - at bus stations, not airports -- it tends to emphasize lower class Mexicans who are the lion's share of illegal immigrants. I didn't include the numbers in the story because my editors and I thought they might be confusing or misinterpreted without all this context, but the data show that an estimated 855,000 Mexicans tried to cross or did cross the border in 2007, a peak year, and that 20 percent of those, or 171,000, told surveyors that they did so with documents. By 2009, the total number had dropped to 630,000 and 38 percent of those, or 239,400 said they did so with ***immigration*** documents. So there was an increase both as a real number and as a proportion of the total. There is a good degree of speculation among experts about what percentage of these documents are real, and it is true that selling fake documents is a big business in Mexico and the United States. But several other data sources confirmed the increased availability of legal options, and in terms of fraud, there have been major advances in preventing it. The new border crossing cards, for instance, include biometric data that make it much harder for people to sell or pass the cards on to someone else.

- ***Reader*** *Q. and A.:* ***Upending Immigration*** *in Mexico*
- *X-Ray Scan Reveals 513 Migrants in 2 Trucks*
- *Tijuana Violence Flares as Chicago's Cools*
- *Money Sent Home by Mexicans Almost Stagnant in 2007*
- *Tear Gas Over Borders*

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