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Navigating the US-Mexico border: the crossing strategies of undocumented workers in Tijuana, Mexico

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Abstract
What strategies do undocumented workers employ to cross the US-Mexico border? And how does the implementation of border enforcement affect crossing strategies? Drawing on ethnographic research, I compare the border crossing patterns of undocumented and documented migrants in Tijuana who cross the border to work without authorization in the US. My findings suggest that, prior to border enforcement, crossers entered informally and without documentation. In some instances, these undocumented workers crossed the border alone or relied on local smugglers to avoid detection. In other instances, undocumented crossers gained entry by declaring their connections to US employers. Now, border enforcement has drastically reduced undocumented crossings through Tijuana. In this new era, the primary way to obtain undocumented work is by acquiring a Border Crossing Card that allows a migrant to cross (but not work) legally. This group of Mexican migrants are now authorized to cross the border but not to work in the US, and so it is imperative to conceal all evidence of their labours from port officials.

Keywords: Border enforcement; migrant workers; undocumented migration; labour markets; ethnicity; smugglers.

Many people say that it is luck to be able to cross the border everyday, but it depends on who you get [state official] to be able to get lucky... Viviana Ramos, daily border crosser.

Introduction
Operation Gatekeeper was instituted at the Tijuana-San Diego border sector in 1994 to curtail the flow of clandestine crossings. Gatekeeper
was part of a United States campaign known as ‘Prevention through Deterrence’. Its purpose was to reduce clandestine border crossings in heavily-transited points such as El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, California. As an immigration law enforcement strategy, Gatekeeper increased the number of patrol agents, introduced sophisticated surveillance technology, and increased the miles of iron fence separating Mexico from the US. Before Gatekeeper, 50 per cent of undocumented Mexican migrants crossed through Tijuana; 98 per cent of California-bound migrants crossed the border here (Bustamante 1990, p. 215; Massey, Durand and Malone 2002, p. 108). Gatekeeper’s new enforcement tactics transformed how and where migrants entered the US.

This study compares the border crossing practices of undocumented and documented border crossers before and after border enforcement was introduced in the Tijuana-San Diego sector. I focus on these two groups to examine the variety of strategies that migrants use to cross international borders to gain access to undocumented work, arguing that each group uses different strategies. These strategies are historically specific and reflective of the border policies that govern international travel. I suggest that these crossing strategies are also based on the opportunities available to migrants.

First, a distinction: by **undocumented crossers**, I refer to two groups of people who crossed the border by evading inspection at the US port of entry prior to the escalation of border enforcement in 1994. This includes **transient undocumented crossers** who used Tijuana as a point of entry for interior US labour markets as well as **daily undocumented crossers** who circulated on a daily basis to access regional agricultural markets along the US-Mexico boundary. By **documented crossers**, I refer to those who use Border Crossing Cards (BCCs) to seek out unauthorized US employment during an era of border enforcement. A BCC, issued by the US consular offices in Mexico, entitles the bearer to enter the US for a period of seventy two hours within a twenty-five-mile radius solely for tourism, shopping, and social visits, but does not allow for employment on either a temporary or long-term basis.

To date, most studies on border enforcement have focused on how policies have rerouted migration and crossing patterns for long-distance, undocumented crossers (Singer and Massey 1998; Andreas 2000; Cornelius 2005; Donato et al. 2008; Spener 2009). These studies, however, have not addressed the experiences of people who live in Mexico but cross the border each day to work in the US. Recent studies suggest that migration patterns to and from border cities operate under distinct principles because residents have access to formal channels for entering the US (Herzog 1995; Alegria 2002; Fussell 2004). As such, I focus specifically on the border crossing
experience of migrants as they attempt to navigate their entry into the US, and I address three questions: first, what strategies do undocumented workers employ to cross the US-Mexico border? Second, how does the implementation of border enforcement affect crossing strategies? Finally, how does access to legal documents alter the mode of crossing and strategies used?

Review of the literature

Because migration is a costly and risky behaviour, potential migrants use a variety of strategies to ensure safe passage. Migrants typically draw on the social support of family and friends to provide assistance ranging from paying a smuggler to finding work and housing once they arrive in the US (Mines 1981; Massey et al. 1987; Durand, Massey and Zenteno 2001). When migrants do not have a social structure that supports international migration, some studies suggest they engage in a ‘step-migration’ that consists of moving to another state to obtain assistance from other migrants, employers, and smugglers who are lacking in their communities of origin (Young 1994; Zabin and Hughes 1995; Fussell 2004). One shortcoming of these migration studies is that they limit their analysis to how migrants use resources at either the point of origin or destination, never looking at the actual border crossing experience.

Border enforcement studies, however, provide clues about the strategies migrants use as they cross international borders. Singer and Massey (1998), for instance, have found that migrants relied on family or smugglers to cross during their first trip; as migrants gained experience, they depended less on the assistance of others. More recent studies suggest that escalated border enforcement had led to a shift in how and where migrants cross the border (Eschbach et al. 1999; Andreas 2000; Cornelius 2005). One change is a rerouting of patterns away from San Diego and El Paso’s urban areas to crossings in the Sonoran desert. Because these territories are relatively unknown, migrants must now rely on professional smugglers to guide them across (Andreas 2000; Cornelius 2005; Donato et al. 2008; Spener 2009). Taken together, these studies suggest that as border enforcement shifts crossings to the desert, the border crossing experience of previous migrants has become outdated. Further, while these studies suggest previous border crossing experience lowers the odds of apprehension, they do not elaborate on how entry is facilitated by different social actors; the undocumented border crossing experience is treated as static and uniform process. As a result, Spener (2009) suggests that clandestine crossings should be studied as a process which takes into consideration all social actors involved and sees the
strategies employed by the smugglers and smuggled as constantly changing.

Understanding the border crossing experience as an evolving process is important in border communities. A growing number of scholars have identified the distinct strategies used by BCC holders who cross to work without authorization in the US (Bean et al. 1994; Fussell 2004; Hernández-León 2008). Rubén Hernández-León (2008) examines the interactions between border patrol agents and migrants and outlines how immigration authorities attempt to uncover BCC violators. Heyman (2001, 2002, 2009) looks at the same relationship, studying how immigration officials use ethnicity and class to either grant or deny entry. For example, ‘Mexican-looking’ individuals are more likely to be harassed and viewed with suspicion when compared to whites and African Americans. Similarly, working-class BCC holders are more likely to be presumed violators when compared to upper-class Mexicans. Although these studies highlight the experience of BCC holders, they focus on the perspective of state agents rather than the crossers. My study builds on migration and border enforcement studies by examining the variety of strategies and resources that border crossers use over time.

Methods

This study draws on approximately two years of ethnographic research in Tijuana, Mexico (from September 2004 to January 2006 with return visits in 2007 and 2009–10). The study sample is based on ninety one in-depth interviews with respondents who had worked in the US as braceros (guest workers contracted between 1942 and 1964), undocumented migrants, legal migrants, and/or holders of Border Crossing Cards. The sample includes respondents who crossed the border at Tijuana during different historical periods and using a variety of crossing strategies. In addition, I collected detailed information and rich narratives on the respondents’ labour histories, crossing patterns, and network ties, and I obtained employer letters and old photographs to provide context to the fluid nature of crossings. All of the names of migrants and employers that appear in this paper have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Along with in-depth interviews, I conducted hundreds of informal conversations with taxi drivers, street vendors, smugglers, and merchants who helped facilitate the crossings of migrants across borders. I observed interactions as migrants travelled to and from their places of work, including those that took place in the pedestrian and vehicle lanes at the San Ysidro port of entry. I took extensive notes on who crossed and how, and I crossed the border four to six times per week between 4:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m., the peak time for travel to
work, to understand the experiences of this labour community. I also rode the San Diego Trolley and Mexican buses and taxis to document how people moved from their homes in Mexico to their places of work in the US and how they developed connections with other crossers. Finally, I systematically analysed my field notes and interview transcripts to identify key themes and for consistency and variability across data sources.

I arrived in Tijuana ten years after Gatekeeper. By this time, undocumented crossings were almost non-existent – at least compared to previous eras, in which undocumented crossings were the norm (Chavez 1992; Andreas 2000). My findings, then, should not be taken to mean that documented border crossings did not exist before border enforcement or that undocumented crossings never happened afterward. Rather, I suggest that border enforcement during each historical period shapes migrant border crossing strategies and behaviours. Although in 1994 the US government intensified border enforcement in Tijuana-San Diego, people still cross without documents (only now these groups are more often channelled through the Sonoran desert). Today, the most common access to unauthorized US employment through Tijuana is found in navigating formal channels. In the next section, I provide a brief description of the evolution of border enforcement policies, describing the shift from undocumented to documented crossings.

The Escalation of border enforcement

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 marked a major shift in the way the US government handled undocumented migration. First, it legalized the status of almost three million formerly undocumented immigrants. Next, it created sanctions for firms who hired undocumented workers. Finally, IRCA expanded the Border Patrol staff. Although the legislation was intended to stop undocumented migration, IRCA’s success was limited because it focused on the border and not the workplace. IRCA ironically generated waves of undocumented migration as return migrants told their friends and relatives about the plethora of jobs available to them in the US (Cornelius 1989; Andreas 2000; Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). Tijuana became a popular crossing point because, even with increased border enforcement, migrants still had a one in three chance of crossing successfully (Singer and Massey 1998). The still relatively lax border enforcement and high probability of crossing after repeated attempts led to massive groups of undocumented migrants congregating in Tijuana (Chavez 1992; Andreas 2000; Nevins 2002).

To gain control of the border and stop the flow of undocumented immigrants that IRCA had created, the US government instituted
Operation Gatekeeper in 1994. Within four years of Gatekeeper’s implementation, the number of patrol agents was increased from 980 to 2,264, the miles of fencing expanded from nineteen to forty five miles, and the number of underground sensors grew from 448 to 1,214. Two years after Operation Gatekeeper, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 led to further levels of increased surveillance. While one border patrol officer was responsible for 1.1 miles of border in 1975, there was one guard for every 1,000 feet by 2004 (Gathman 2008). Andreas (2000, p. 14) asserts that border enforcement made crossings in Tijuana ‘less visible and more dispersed’ and created an ‘image of a more secure and orderly border’ (my emphasis). In the following section, I chronicle the transition from an ‘open’ to a ‘closed’ border society and discuss the shift from undocumented to documented crossings.

Open border era: undocumented border crossers

During the ‘open border era’, there were two groups of undocumented crossers in Tijuana, and each employed distinct crossing strategies. First, transient undocumented crossers either crossed without anyone’s assistance or used local smugglers for crossing the international border. After arriving in Tijuana, this group moved on to interior labour markets either within a few hours or a couple of days at most. Daily undocumented crossers, on the other hand, relied on their connections to US employers to enter freely. For daily crossers, declaring their occupational status as agricultural workers and asserting their ties to US employers gave them a pass to the regional agricultural labour market. Despite these differences, both groups shared in their circumventing of inspection and their largely informal mode of entry. Illustrating these experiences, I catalogued the three types of border crossing strategies in the open era.

Self-smuggling

One strategy that transient undocumented migrants used was traveling with friends and family members who helped guide them across the border. Because these crossers, people like Rafael, knew the border terrain (or at least had experienced help), they did not hire smugglers. Rafael first came to the US in 1963 as a guest worker, and he continued crossing clandestinely through Tijuana until the mid-1970s. On his first journey, Rafael left his hometown in the state of Michoacán with his brother and several friends. They arrived at the bus terminal and, from there, took a taxi to the isolated Canyon Zapata (a popular entry point). Once night came, Rafael and his friends ran through the canyons and ravines until they reached San...
Ysidro, California. He remembers, ‘the first time I came to Tijuana in 1974 it was really easy. I was the type of person who did not need anyone [smugglers] to help me cross. I crossed with other people and we were told to simply cross the line and wait in San Ysidro, California for someone to pick us up.’ Rafael crossed the border with ease because the border patrol was almost non-existent at the time. Moreover, he journeyed with friends who provided him with money to pay his bus ticket and then guided him across the international border. Once in the US, they were picked up by another group of friends who drove them to Washington State where they picked apples.

All of the undocumented crossers in my study originally left Mexico because they had a difficult time finding steady jobs. Generally, they received subsistence wages and/or surplus goods from the harvest when they worked in Mexico. Therefore, undocumented crossers did not have money to pay smugglers, depending instead on experienced migrants to guide them across the border. In 1980, Chuy Valentino crossed through Tijuana bound for Los Angeles. Like Rafael, Chuy and his friend crossed through Canyon Zapata without a smuggler. They crossed alone because they did not have money, but also because they wanted to prove to others that it was possible to cross without a smuggler. For years, Chuy and his friend repeated the trip, crossing without assistance sometimes walking all the way to Los Angeles (about 130 miles). During their treks, they mapped safe walking routes and developed detours to safely cross the secondary inspection at the San Clemente, California checkpoint. The poorly-guarded border meant that the odds of successfully crossing were high, especially if migrants relied on experienced friends and family members who knew entry routes. However, when undocumented crossers did not know the route, they had to hire local smugglers to help guide them safely to the US.

Using local smugglers

In 2004, I met Fidel Ramos. At one time, Fidel had helped guide people across the international border. As a guide, he sometimes charged people $10 dollars, while other times he let migrants name their own price for his instruction on how to jump the international fence and in which direction they should run. The services of local guides like Fidel were purchased by undocumented migrants because the guides could tell where the border patrol waited to catch undocumented crossers. They also knew which border patrol agents monitored the border more closely than others. Fidel and his fellow guides knew the lay of the land and used this knowledge (for a fee) to help undocumented crossers enter successfully even when the border patrol was present. But while they generally provided migrants with
instructions and knowledge on how to successfully cross the border, the guides didn’t actually accompany the migrants across the border.

After several unsuccessful attempts to cross the border through the remote hills of Tijuana, Hugo Campos hired a local smuggler to help him navigate the border. He recalls how he crossed through Playas de Tijuana (a public beach located along the Pacific Ocean) in the 1980s: ‘I crossed by the beach, running – it was really easy. My brother and I crossed pretending to be surfers’. So while some local smugglers’ strategies consisted of evading border patrol agents, Hugo’s smuggler helped him blend into the local surfer culture of Imperial Beach, California, dressing him as a surfer to confuse the border patrol. Other local guides told me that they dressed their clients in athletic clothes and had them jog right past border patrol agents. In these instances, the undocumented crossers were successful because local guides had carefully studied the international border’s weaknesses (including the agents who patrolled it) and passed this knowledge to others. During the open border era, experienced crossers and guides shared knowledge about the best places, times, and ruses to avoid detection and get to the US.

**Daily undocumented crossers**

While transient undocumented crossers depended on the assistance of family, friends, and local guides to cross, another group of undocumented crossers circulated on a daily basis. This population was comprised primarily of men who had settled with their families in Tijuana to be in close proximity to US farm jobs. Some of these daily undocumented crossers were former *braceros* who had participated in the Bracero Guest Worker Program (1942–1964) between the United States and Mexico. After the programme ended, these men became part of a sort of reserve army of labour that lived in Tijuana, but crossed to work in the US.

Daily undocumented crossers formed part of an ‘occupational network’ whose unlawful entry was facilitated by their intermediaries, the US-based crop growers who hired them, and labour contractors who sometimes guided them across the border. If stopped by border patrol agents, these migrants simply declared the grower that had hired them. Jesus Márquez, a foreman at one of the local farms, explained that, until the 1980s, a border crosser stopped by border patrol agents might only need to say the name of his employer, ‘Edwards and Smith’, and he would be allowed to enter the US. Local clandestine crossers were allowed to enter the US labour market, but were reminded by the border patrol to return to Mexico at the end of workday. This relationship was an informal work arrangement
between the border patrol and US growers. In this regional labour market, back-and-forth crossings were tolerated as long as migrants filled labour shortages in farms located along the US-Mexico border.

Cresencio López, an eighty-four year old migrant, has recruited workers in the bars and restaurants of Zona Norte and Colonia Libertad. In the 1970s, he received one dollar per person for recruiting men and guiding them to farms in San Diego County. To ensure that these recruits were not confused for transient undocumented crossers and turned away by the border patrol, Cresencio taught his workers how to respond to authorities if stopped en route to the farm. He instructed the men to give the name of the employer that had hired them. He also explained to them the type of produce and how it would be tended or harvested should authorities further question their travels to work in the US.

Timothy Dunn (1996, p. 13) suggests that in the American Southwest, the border patrol and growers have long had ‘a de facto relationship’ defined by the supply and demand of labour. In Tijuana-San Diego, the border patrol often assisted growers by facilitating the entry of workers. Jesus Marquez, the seventy-one year old former bracero and labour foreman mentioned previously, remembers: ‘back in the time the border patrol would pick you up . . . He would take me to work in Nestor, California. He would give me a ride and leave me there’. Once the border patrol came to know Jesus as a daily crosser with ties to Tijuana, he was allowed to enter the country with his labour crew from Mexico. And Raúl Ramírez, an internal migrant from Michoacán, remembers how his employer threw frequent parties to thank border patrol agents for allowing his Mexican workers to enter the US freely. He explains:

My boss he used to throw a fiesta [party] every 15 days for the border patrol . . . So when we crossed they asked us, “who do you work with?” and we replied, “Martinez” and they would say “ok, come on in!”

The undocumented crossers’ narratives depict a border through which migrants circulated freely on a seasonal or daily basis, depending on whether they were transient workers or daily commuters. During the ‘open border era’, crossing patterns were largely characterized as informal due to the lack of institutional regulation controlling labour flows and the close ties between employers and border patrol agents. With border enforcement though, undocumented crossing became almost non-existent in Tijuana after 1994. People continue to cross, only now the primary means of entry has become the presentation of legal documents to immigration agents. I now turn
to the experiences of these people, documented to travel, but undocumented to work.

Closed border era: documented crossers, undocumented workers

Unlike undocumented crossers who circumvented inspection, documented crossers did not evade state authorities. Instead, they used BCCs to come into the US officially at the port of entry. When I arrived in 2004, ten years of Gatekeeper had effectively stopped undocumented crossings in Tijuana and diverted them to the Sonoran desert. Nonetheless, people continued to cross from Tijuana to the US in a new stream comprised of people using BCCs, ostensibly for visitation, but, in truth, to access undocumented employment. After working in Tijuana to save up money and increase their chances of obtaining a BCC, the migrants used that documentation to cross into the US legally and obtain work illegally.

BCCs as a primary mode of entry

Twenty-one year old Carmen Castro moved from Oaxaca to Tijuana with the intention of crossing without documents. When Carmen arrived, she found a job in a department store and began saving money to hire a well-known smuggler to help her cross the border. During that time, her brother and co-worker applied for and successfully obtained BCCs, which they used to work without authorization in the US. Carmen's brother and friend encouraged her to forego the idea of crossing without documents and instead asked her to continue working full-time and open a bank account. After one year, she applied for a BCC. She explains how her friend coached her:

A friend helped me through the process of the BCC everything from which paperwork I needed to take. In fact, she got her [BCC] first then encouraged me to apply and helped me with the paperwork. We also went together to our employer to ask for letters [of recommendation for the BCC].

Once she got her card, Carmen and her friend crossed the international border pretending they were going to eat at a San Diego restaurant. They passed inspection, then took a bus to Los Angeles, where Carmen eventually found employment in a food processing factory.

For Tijuana residents, the BCC is a resource. They can use it to enter the US labour market temporarily, as is the case for daily commuters, or on a permanent basis, like Carmen. As border enforcement makes undocumented crossings all but impossible, the BCC has become the
primary way to enter the US labour market through Tijuana. However, to cross on a regular basis, documented crossers must convince immigration officials that they are not BCC violators. In the sections that follow, I describe the various strategies used to avoid detection when crossing regularly for unauthorized employment.

The documented border crossing experience

At the US port of entry, an immigration official’s job is to stop the flow of contraband (such as drugs) and restrict entry to unauthorized crossers. As a result, immigration officials subjectively assess who they perceive to be in violation of US immigration laws. This subjective approach leads BCC holders to believe that luck matters when crossing the border. Therefore, they are always seeking to increase their chances of success by selecting the correct line and immigration official – these choices can be the difference between being waved through or having a BCC confiscated. Angel García, who began crossing in his early twenties, learned these lessons the hard way. For almost two years, he crossed to work in US construction jobs, but his luck ran out one day and he was suspected of using his BCC to work. Though the US government never proved that he was working in the US, his BCC was revoked. He explains the incident:

The immigration officer asked me, “Hey, so why are you going so early?” I then told him why. I told him that I was going to pick up my father. He told me, “No you are going to work.” He kept telling me and telling me that I was coming to work, and each time, I would say no. He would tell me in English and I would tell him in Spanish. That fucker, must have asked how is it possible that I know English . . . He would then tell me things in English and things in Spanish. He tried to force me to tell him that “yes” I was going to work in the US. But I never admitted that. He told me, “That is a privilege . . . a privilege that we give to Mexicans and we take away the privilege when we want to and today your BCC is cancelled.” But I asked him, why? For what reason? What rule did I break? The official said, “No, we are just going to cancel it right now!”

Both being granted entry and selected as a suspicious individual were subjective. As Carmen Castro explained, many times this selective enforcement was based on ethnicity.

I have seen that if a white American passes sometimes they will not even ask them for an ID. Or sometimes they check it really quickly. But if a Latino passes, they will ask you were you are going. How long will you be over there [in the US]? They will ask many
questions. They will also ask what you have in your purse. Sometimes I carry my small bag and they will ask, “What do you have in the bag?” I say, “Clothes.” They will then ask, “Where are you going?”

Although immigration officials attempted to identify violators, they did not always regulate entry for documented crossers. Based on observations and interviews, it seemed that officials were well aware that Tijuana was an important source of labour for San Diego County. During the work rush hour at the port of entry, I saw immigration officials quickly wave crossers through, barely examining their identification cards. One of my informants explained, “The US knows that Tijuana is a working-class barrio for San Diego. They allow it because they get free labour and don’t have to provide housing and medical services for transnational workers.” While some BCC holders believe that luck matters when crossing the international border, others prefer to control their own odds of apprehension by altering their behaviours.

**Masking US occupational identity**

To avoid being identified as a violator, BCC holders must convince immigration officials that they are not working in the US. One strategy that respondents identified was mixing modes of entry. For example, people who crossed by car alternated vehicles to prevent immigration officials from documenting a sustained border crossing pattern by tracking their licence plate. These BCC holders borrowed vehicles from friends and family members to confuse immigration officials. Additionally, when possible, BCC holders carpooled with Legal Permanent Residents or US citizens, so immigration officials became distracted by inspecting the vehicle and documents of the driver who had authorization to work in the US. During the check, BCC holders hoped to blend into the background so that immigration officials might forget about their presence.

To further lessen the risk of suspicion, some BCC holders developed plausible stories to hide their real purpose in crossing the border. This method, they hoped, would help avoid extensive questioning about the motives for their travel. And, at all possible costs, BCC holders did not want immigration officials to document their daily crossings either by noting it on the computer or simply registering it on their minds. Cesar Villa, a thirty-three year old BCC holder who works in the shoe department of a US store, explains one strategy he has used.

I used to carry a lot of documentation of my business and almost always, I say that I am going to see my girlfriend. That way when
they ask me, “Why do you cross so much?” Well I tell them that I am going to see my girlfriend. And well they then can’t ask me anymore questions.

By showing that he had a business in Mexico, Cesar could convince immigration officials that his primary employment ties were in Mexico and not the United States. The documents of business ownership relieved any mistrust that immigration officials had about his daily border crossings, and, by mentioning that he had a girlfriend in the US, Cesar presented a convincing story for why he needed to cross the border so often.

Another story that BCC holders used to hide their US occupational status was telling immigration officials that their primary purpose of crossing was one of consumption. However, research participants learned quickly that just mentioning a shopping trip was not enough to convince immigration officials. They had to also memorize the names of restaurants and stores as well as their hours of operation and location. Where possible, these workers even had to learn how to get to these businesses using public transportation. BCC holders like these invent detailed stories to provide convincing evidence of their innocuous visits to relatives or shopping centres in San Diego County. Diego Sánchez, a twenty-three year old internal migrant from Jalisco, for example, told me about his friends who lost their border crossing privileges because they were not prepared when questioned by immigration officials. He explained how you must pay attention to everything if you are to trick the border guards, “Another strategy is to always carry money – approximately $100 dollars – because it would be ridiculous to say you are going shopping but you have no money.”

BCC holders who violate the terms of their card do everything to avoid raising any suspicion of working unlawfully in the US. Viviana Ramos, a twenty-three year old crosser, came across the border on Sundays, travelled to Los Angeles, and worked in a restaurant from Monday through Thursday. Viviana always asked a friend with US citizenship to transport her suitcase so that immigration officials would not question why she brought luggage. She recalls:

On Sunday, I remember that we would get in line [at the international port of entry] and we were all heading to work and well yes one would get nervous because I would cross with everyone who was going to work and they are going to find out that I do not have any papers. But I had a friend who was a really good friend of mine and she was a US citizen. She used to always cross my suitcase for me because I could not cross my suitcase and I would then get in
a different line so that they would not think that I did not have any papers.

By handing her suitcase off to a US citizen, Viviana avoided extensive questioning from immigration officials. Unless BCC holders have a special permit, they are only allowed to shop and visit relatives within a twenty-five mile radius of the US-Mexico border, so a suitcase would certainly raise alarm.

Other BCC crossers employed strategies, such as never carrying lunch bags or cheque stubs, to conceal evidence that they were working in the US. Omar Gallegos, a twenty-seven year old internal migrant, has successfully crossed the border for four years. During that time, he said he has witnessed many friends lose their BCCs while attempting to smuggle their work uniform in a purse or backpack. Watching these ‘common sense mistakes’ made Omar realize that he needed to conceal his US-based occupation. He said:

Oh, about our uniforms, we had to hide them over there [in the US restaurant], because you could not cross with a uniform, and it was really difficult because you had to leave them in a place and we had to tell someone who could cross [to help us]... someone who could cross and wash the uniforms because we could not cross with the uniforms.

Like Omar, Miguel Alemán has been crossing the border for years and has developed various strategies to travel without raising suspicion. When he arrives at the port of entry, his main goal is to erase any possible signs that he has any affiliation with employers or friends in the US. As he puts it:

Well...first, I never carry nobody’s telephone numbers in the United States not even my work number, never. I never carry business cards from work. Everything can compromise you. You never want to show that you have a relationship to a restaurant or that you know people in the US. If you want to have the number of friends in the US, you should have the area code as 664 for here [in Tijuana] and not 619 [San Diego’s area code], that you know are the right numbers so that they cannot trick you. Because I have friends who this happened to and they took away their BCC.

Miguel points to what I heard time and time again. Namely, the strategies that BCC holders adapted were largely the result of mistakes made by others. BCC holders carefully study these slips and alter their border crossing behaviours and fictitious stories to convince immigration officials into believing that their purposes are legitimate.
stories I have shared illustrate that border policing does not end unauthorized crossings; rather, it reinvents the mechanisms by which people cross borders for employment.

Conclusion

Before Gatekeeper, Tijuana was the preferred border crossing location for undocumented migrants on their way to work in the US. Border enforcement studies have shown that increased policing rerouted undocumented migration patterns from Tijuana to the Sonoran desert and altered the strategies that documented migrants employed to enter the US. This article focused on the experiences of people who crossed the border to work without authorization in the US. Specifically, I focused on the experiences of undocumented crossers who entered without inspection. I compared their experiences to new generations of border crossers whose only means of entry is the (mis)use of BCCs designed for casual visitors (not workers). By comparing these groups with detailed examples, I create a picture of the constantly changing strategies migrants employ to cross borders.

I found that during the open border era, one group of undocumented crossers either crossed alone or relied on smugglers to enter the US labour market. This finding is consistent with migration and border enforcement studies showing the importance of social support in lowering migration risks (Massey et al. 1987; Singer and Massey 1998; Durand, Massey and Zenteno 2001). However, I identified another group of crossers who lived in Mexico but crossed to work in farms adjacent to the US-Mexico border. For these crossers, declaring their occupational affiliation to growers provided them with a ticket to the US. These findings support Spener’s (2009) assertion the border crossing is not a uniform process because each social actor (family, friends, smugglers, and employers) employs a variety of border-crossing strategies leading to distinct crossing outcomes.

In contrast to undocumented crossers, documented crossers depended less on the support of others and more on BCCs that allow them to enter the US, where they work without documents. Rather than circumvent inspection, this group of crossers adopted strategies that operated within formal rules. BCC crossers had to first establish work and residential histories in Mexico. Next, they had to develop strategies that convinced immigration officials that they were not BCC violators by masking their affiliation with US employers. These findings contribute to the growing literature on border enforcement and migration studies illustrating how increased policing alters migration patterns and modes of entry (Bean et al. 1994; Hernández-León 2008; Heyman 2009). But my findings go one step further than previous literature. I have identified unique
strategies documented border crossers employ to enter the US labour market. With the exception of Heyman (2009) and Hernández-León’s (2008) work, BCC holders have remained invisible in the migration and border studies literature. I build on the work of other scholars by showing how migrants like these, with a legal method of entry but an unauthorized purpose for work, negotiate their encounters with border patrol agents as told through their own experiences.

By focusing on the experiences of border crossers, I ultimately address the relationship between structure and agency. Although border enforcement (structure) transformed border crossings after 1994, migrants responded with the development of new strategies (agency) to cope with the new realities of the borderlands.

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