One of the perennial issues facing US policymakers is illegal immigration, particularly from Mexico and Central America. Until the mid 2000s, it was estimated that approximately 850,000 undocumented workers entered the United States every year; and most estimates put the total number of illegal immigrants in the United States at approximately 12 million people, although some figures are as high as 20 million (Washington Post 2010). In this paper I will provide a model that would stem the flow of illegal immigration in a cost-effective way. The model is based on three central premises: I) The United States should lower its investments in the US-Mexico border from the current wasteful amounts to 1993 levels; II) The United States should promote job-creation through the maquiladora program in the Mexican municipios that are the source of most illegal immigrants; and III) The US should deport fewer criminals to Latin America. While the discussion in my paper will center on the immigration of Mexican citizens, the arguments I present are also applicable to other countries from which undocumented migrants originate.

Part I: The failure of heightened investments in border security

The US attempts to strengthen the security of the US-Mexico border can be traced to the early 1990s, amidst increasing anti-immigrant sentiments (that resulted in initiatives such as Proposition 187). Particularly in light of the upcoming 1996 election, in an effort to boost the president’s approval ratings and counter his image as being lax on illegal immigration, the executive branch sought to create a “highly visible show of force on the border” (Cornelius 778). The result was that between 1993 and up until the end of Clinton’s term in 2000, the border enforcement expenditures increased from less than $1 billion to almost $2.5 billion (Cornelius 2005). The new security measures mainly aimed at fortifying the four main crossing areas,
namely around El Paso, San Diego, Central Arizona and South Texas. Some of the actions taken include constructing a ten foot steel fence, setting up a 24-hour surveillance system, as well as the creation of the IDENT system which stores the photos and fingerprints of apprehended illegal immigrants. In addition, the number of border patrol personnel considerably increased, and according to a report by the Council on Foreign Relations, between 1993 and 2008, the number of agents increased five times from only 4,000 to 20,000.

Yet, these attempts at stemming the flow of undocumented workers have largely failed. Although initially these measures increased the number of apprehensions of illegal immigrants, by the early 2000s as the migrants learned ways around the new obstacles, the number of apprehensions fell to pre-1993 levels. As Wayne Cornelius describes, “one of the paradoxes of recent US history is that the explosive growth of unauthorized immigration has been occurring at a time when the United States was spending considerable more on immigration control than ever before, especially on border enforcement” (777). Peter Andreas et al agree with this statement, and call the American border strategy a “politically successful policy failure” (4). The policy was politically successful since it gave the anti-immigration electorate the impression that the government was taking action and that undocumented migration was “under control.” Nevertheless, it was certainly a policy failure since it not only failed to stem the flow of illegal immigration, but also produced three unintended consequences.

Firstly, the new measures led to an increase among immigrants in the use of human smugglers or “coyotes.” According to Cornelius, the percentage of illegal immigrants using coyotes (whose services can cost up to $6000) increased from only 15% to over 41% thus creating what Andreas et al describe as a “serious organized crime problem along and across the border” (4). Secondly, the new measures in fact paradoxically increased the proportion of illegal
migrants who choose to remain permanently in the United States. The enhanced border security makes trips between the US and Mexico riskier, thus increasing the incentives for illegal immigrants not to return. While prior to the new measures 20% of Mexican immigrants returned home within six months, by the early 2000s that figure had fallen to less than 7% (Cornelius 2005). According to the Council for Foreign Relations:

> Once they decide to stay, many attempt to bring their families as well to avoid permanent separation, increasing the population of school-age children and others who receive taxpayer-supported social services. By disrupting long-established patterns of circular migration across the border, U.S. enforcement efforts have had the unintended effect of contributing to increases in the settled population of unauthorized immigrants living permanently in the United States. (42)

Thirdly, the new border enforcement measures have had significant humanitarian consequences. In order to avoid the areas of increased security, many illegal immigrants attempt to cross through extremely hazardous areas such as the Arizona Desert, thus raising the risk of death. Statistically, while in 1995 there were only 61 reported deaths associated with crossing the border, by 2000 this figure had spiked to nearly 500. (Cornelius 2005)

While the three papers by the Council on Foreign Relations, Cornelius, and Andreas et al clearly indicate the that the new investments in the US-Mexico border have essentially been wasteful spending, what they are all missing is a discussion on the most cost-effective amount that the US should spend. Should the United States revert to 1993 funding levels, or should the US spend negligible amounts of money on the Mexican frontier and mimic the “undefended border” it has with Canada? I would like to propose that American policy-makers revert to 1993 funding levels equivalent to slightly over one billion dollars per year in today’s money when adjusted for inflation. The basis for my argument is that investments in border security exhibit diminishing marginal returns. For the majority of people, reasonable border security measures including a barbed wire, the presence of some border patrol agents and the risks in getting caught
are enough to deter them from trying to cross. For example, although a poll by the Mexican Investment Group indicated that 17% of Mexicans would be willing to live illegally in the United States, during the pre-1994 period before the enactment of the security measures only a small fraction of these Mexicans actually decided to cross the border illegally (less than 300,000 people per year). The limited border enforcement measures were a strong enough deterrent for the vast majority of Mexicans willing to live illegally in the US, and thus it is imperative that the US spend at least the amount that it did in 1993 to not encourage a greater proportion of this group to try to cross. Although the marginal return on money spent for limited border enforcement measures is very high, as I have described earlier throughout this section, the marginal benefit of the additional dollars spent on the border after 1993 has been very small; the increase of funding from $1 billion to well over $4 billion in the mid to late 2000s has done little to curb the numbers of undocumented migrants entering the US.

In short, the most cost-efficient border policy to deter illegal immigrants would be for the US to spend approximately 1 billion dollars per year on securing the frontier with Mexico. Although this sum of money is necessary as a deterrent for the majority of citizens wishing to cross illegally, hindsight has proven that more money has not only failed to reverse the wave of illegal immigrants, but also had the three negative consequences described above.

Part II: Reducing illegal immigration through the promotion of maquiladoras

One of the most important “push” factors which causes citizens of nations such as Mexico to move to the United States is economic conditions, and according to Carlos Rico, immigration is “fundamentally driven by economic considerations” (235). Indeed, the origins of the illegal migration of Mexican workers to the United States lie in the fact that once the Bracero
Program (a program where Mexican workers could work on a seasonal basis in the agricultural sector of the US) ended in 1964, this caused massive unemployment in Northern Mexico. The Council on Foreign Relations adds that:

The economic gains in moving from Mexico to the United States are substantial...[and] migration to the United States would increase the wage of a typical twenty-five-year-old male with nine years of education from $2.30 per hour to $8.50 per hour, adjusting for cost-for-living differences. Migration from Mexico to the United States also appears to rise when the Mexican economy has been at its weakest relative to the U.S. economy. Apprehensions at the border—the primary measure of the Department of Homeland Security to estimate illegal migration across the U.S. border—rose sharply, for instance, in 1983, 1987, and 1995. Each year corresponds to an economic crisis in Mexico. (40)

In his paper, Cornelius notes that the majority of Mexican illegal immigrants come from the poorest 5% of Mexican municipios which have high unemployment rates. While he writes that “in the long run, the most effective approach to immigration control would be to create alternatives to emigration by stimulating job-creating development in key migrant-sending areas” (789), he does not offer any concrete mechanisms through which the US could achieve this.

Therefore, I would like to add to Cornelius’s argument and propose that the US aid emigrant regions in Mexico through helping to expand the maquiladora program. The maquiladora program was originally created by the Mexican government in 1965 (as part of the Border Industrialization Program) after the Bracero program ended to combat the unemployment in the border regions. The concept of the program would be to stimulate jobs throughout northern Mexico by enabling foreign companies to open up manufacturing plants and allowing them to import inputs (e.g. individual car parts) tax free as long as the final assembled product was exported. The export-oriented industrialization strategy of the maquiladora program was very successful, and not only stimulated the creation of numerous jobs, but also lowered the emigration rates in areas where the manufacturing plants were opened. Throughout his paper, “Maquiladoras and U.S.-Bound Migration in Central Mexico,” Richard Jones writes that
“proximity to maquiladoras boosts employment in nearby high-emigration municipios, and this employment lowers U.S. migration rates” (210). Since 80% of the illegal immigrants to the United States from Mexico come from the poorest 141 out of 2394 municipios (Jones 2001), a targeted expansion of maquiladoras to these areas would certainly substantially curb the number of illegal immigrants seeking entry into the United States.

Unfortunately substantial difficulties exist in the opening of additional maquiladoras in the poorest regions of Mexico, since as Jones notes, employers are dissuaded to invest in these areas because of a lack of basic infrastructure. In this regard, I would recommend that the US invest money into improving the infrastructure and amenities in these parts of Mexico in an effort to encourage investors to open up more maquila plants. I propose that the money for improving the infrastructure come from the revenues that would result from lowering the spending on the US-Mexico border.

While the promotion of maquiladoras by the US government in the poorest regions of Mexico would almost certainly slow down the flow of illegal immigration, critics might raise two concerns. The first is the fear that Mexican workers would be exploited through low wages; and the second concern is that maquiladoras would effectively take away US jobs, particularly in border states. Lane Kirkland, the former president of the AFL-ICO, summarized these worries when he said that the program has “shut down factories in the States and relocated them in the maquiladora areas” and caused more than a half-million Mexicans to join “the ranks of the most crudely exploited humans on the planet.” Yet, these statements are largely unfounded, and in their book, The United States and Mexico, Domínguez and De Castro put these worries into perspective. They write that “maquiladora workers had incomes and education substantially above those prevailing elsewhere in Mexico” (139) and also note that US border communities
benefited because of the increased consumer spending by Mexicans employed in maquiladoras. As well, a 1991 Business Horizons article claims that:

…funneling work to maquiladoras does not rob U.S. workers of jobs. In a 1987 survey of maquiladoras, the U.S. Department of Labor said that the maquiladora operations support 1.07 million U.S. jobs. (82)

Part III: Reducing illegal immigration through deporting fewer convicted criminals

The third recommendation that I would make for the US to stem the flow of illegal immigration would be to deport fewer criminal aliens to Latin America. While the link between illegal immigration and criminal deportations is not obvious, throughout this section I will demonstrate how the two are related.

Over the past several years, security concerns in Latin America and particularly Mexico have intensified, as noted by Domínguez and De Castro who write about the “increased power of drug cartels and criminal organizations” (196). While part of the reason for this lawlessness has to do with factors such as corruption (notably among the police force), the US has significantly contributed to the problem of insecurity. Throughout the past two decades, the US has increasingly deported non-citizens convicted of criminal activity. De Castro and Rosales explain that many of these deportees begin to engage in violence in their home countries “with dangerous skills acquired in the United States” (251) and Cristina Eguizábal adds that “massive deportations resulted in the emergence of transnational youth gangs” (77). These criminal networks significantly hinder economic development, since as the former Mexican Finance Secretary Agustín Carstens explains, “the country's insecurity was stopping companies from investing and creating fewer jobs” (BBC 2008). A BBC article also shows that crime and violence in Mexico have had the adverse indirect consequence of reducing overall GDP growth
by 1%. As a result of the insecurity that reduces job creation, illegal immigration increases; and this concept is illustrated in the following flowchart:

While deporting fewer criminals to Latin America would over time lower illegal immigration, the policy would be difficult for US politicians to “sell” to the public; since the new policy would not produce the immediate results that an electorate, particularly anti-immigration hardliners, seeks. Because of the three steps illustrated in the above diagram, there would be a significant lag time between the moment when the US decides to deport fewer criminals and when illegal immigration decreases. Nevertheless, policymakers would definitely be able to overcome this problem and gain public support by framing the question of deporting criminals to Latin America not in terms of fighting illegal immigration, but rather drug trafficking which is a problem widely recognized to have grave economic and social consequences for the US. De Castro and Rosales write that many of the deported criminals engage in narcotics operations, and claim that because local governments often lacked “the means and ability to fight crime…[there was] a rise in drug-related crime, particularly narco-trafficking, in recent years” (251).

By emphasizing to the public the direct link that De Castro and Rosales write about between deported criminals and increased drug trafficking, American policymakers would certainly be able to garner support for keeping alien criminals in the US rather than sending them to their home countries. As I have shown, in time this policy would not only have the positive effect of reducing narco-trafficking, but also illegal immigration.
Conclusion

In short, throughout this paper I have proposed a cost-efficient model that the US could implement to curb illegal immigration. My model involves reducing the current wasteful spending on border security to 1993 levels, promoting of the maquiladora system in “feeder” areas of illegal immigrants, and diminishing the numbers of deported criminals to Latin America. Illegal immigration is a serious issue facing American policymakers today, and I believe that this model would provide an effective strategy that would benefit not only the United States, but also Mexico and other Latin American countries.
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