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Immigration

Study Says Cross-Border Arrangements Characterize Work-Life in San Diego-Tijuana

SAN DIEGO—Growth in the San Diego-Tijuana border region has created a labor market characterized by binational work-life arrangements for those taking advantage of proximity to the international dividing line, according to a report by a local philanthropic organization.

Blurred Borders: Transboundary Issues and Solutions in the San Diego/Tijuana Border Region was produced by the San Diego-based International Community Foundation and released March 23.

As its title suggests, the report examines the transformation of what was once a "physical line or wall," separating Mexico and the United States. The report describes the border as "the front line where impacts of globalization and human migration collide along the geopolitical fault line of the industrialized and developing world."

It noted how commercial agreements have expanded the movement of "borderlanders" for business purposes 45 miles into each country, while the 1982 U.S.-Mexico Border Environment Agreement defined the region as "encompassing 100 kilometers on either side" of the divide, or about 62 miles.

The study depicts a region where Mexican nationals, or "transborder residents" with H-2A agricultural guestworker permits, F-1 student visas, or normalized residency make daily border crossings to the United States and derive greater advantage from the U.S.

economy than those who have migrated permanently. The study also notes that many U.S. natives and workers move to Tijuana in search of lower living costs.

"In this sense," the study asserted, "the border has increasingly become a blur with poverty and relative prosperity predicated, in part, by visa or migratory status."

Native Baja Californians and, increasingly, San Diego transplants to the adjacent Mexican state gain a strategic advantage over others in the labor market thanks to border proximity and the ability to earn a living in, or from, the U.S. economy, the report said.

The report cited a survey by the San Diego South County Economic Development Council wherein 14 percent of border-area employers responded that over 61 percent of their employees resided south of the border.

Mexico's 2000 census data found 27,386 residents of Tijuana and Rosarito reporting their primary place of employment as the United States. The U.S. Consulate in Tijuana has 196,000 U.S. citizens residing in its consular district either full- or part-time, according to the study.

Conversely, "due to rising public safety concerns, a sizable number of Tijuana's professional class now lives on the other side of the line," in suburban San Diego, it said.

Migrant Supply Uncertain. As many as 15,000 Mexican transnational farmworkers still live in migrant camps without water, according to the report, "while nearby sit well-appointed housing developments and estates."

Population pressures in the region sparked by maquiladora-led growth have posed new environmental challenges, strained water supplies, and caused housing shortages, so that the presence of a stable migrant labor force in the region is no longer assured, it said.

Maquiladoras are export-oriented manufacturing and assembly plants in Mexico that receive duty-free imports of U.S. component parts and then export the finished products to the United States. Almost 4,000 maquiladoras operate in Mexico, employing about 1.3 million workers. Maquiladoras are largely massed along the U.S.-Mexico border for easy access to the U.S. market.

"California's share of new immigrant arrivals," the study said, "dropped sharply between 1990 and 2000 compared with to other regions of the country such as Texas, Georgia, and North Carolina that offer would-be migrants employment opportunities coupled with more affordable housing and lower living costs."

San Diego and Tijuana share the asset of a binational, bicultural, bilingual workforce, and "expanded NAFTA professional visa provisions, as proposed by the current administration, could further strengthen our regional advantage," the study said, referring to President Bush's guestworker proposal under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The report by the philanthropic nonprofit organization focused on potential civic, rather than political, responses to the issues raised.

One of its recommendations was to expand interaction at the commercial and cultural levels between migrant sending and receiving communities in the region.

"Not only will strengthened ties with these communities help local civic leaders better appreciate the unique needs of the region's migrant workers and their families," it concluded, "but expanded economic development and tourism opportunities will, over the long run, decrease the compelling need for would-be migrants to leave their homes in the first place."

The report may be accessed on the Internet at www.icfdn.org.