

Five years of Operation Gatekeeper

US border crackdown sends immigrant deaths soaring

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Five years after the inauguration of Operation Gatekeeper the number of undocumented immigrants arrested while trying to cross the US-Mexican border has been cut by only 1 percent, while the death toll for immigrant workers attempting to cross the heavily guarded frontier has increased six-fold.

These are the grim statistics reported in a recent Mexican study of the initiative undertaken by the Immigration and Naturalization Service under the Clinton administration.

Since 1994, the government has spent nearly \$1 billion in an effort to militarize the border in the area that constituted the most heavily used crossings between Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego, California. The Border Patrol's strength in the southern California sector has risen from 400 to 2,000 and efforts continue to beef up the force. Funds have been budged to add 1,000 agents to the Border Patrol every year until 2001.

In addition, money has been spent to supply these border guards with the most sophisticated technological means for hunting down immigrants. These include motion and sound detectors, infrared telescopes for night detection and military-style helicopters capable of reaching areas where land patrols cannot go.

The net effect of this massive effort has been to seal the borders in the urban areas that immigrant workers are attempting to reach, while pushing them further and further toward mountainous and desert areas where immigrants freeze to death in the winter or die from the heat in the summer.

The official death toll since Operation Gatekeeper began is 405. US authorities acknowledge, however, that many more bodies of immigrants could lie undiscovered in deserted areas of mountains and desert.

In the San Diego area, the INS campaign has registered a record decline in the number of immigrants arrested at the border. The INS spokesman for the sector, Roy Villarreal, reported that last year there were 139,000 arrests, compared with 172,000 the year before, a decline of 24 percent and the lowest absolute number in 19 years.

Meanwhile, in California's Imperial County, where many of the deaths have been reported, arrests have skyrocketed. In one month alone last year, 7,000 men, women and children were caught in the desert after eluding agents at the border. Detected border crossings in the sector have seen a 10-fold increase since 1996. County officials complain that the federal crackdown on the border near San Diego has resulted in local costs of an estimated \$1.5 million a year for search-and-rescue efforts, medical care and coroner and burial fees. Earlier this year the county declared a "state of emergency" over the immigration flood in an unsuccessful attempt to garner federal disaster aid.

While the US government attempts to militarize the border and pursues immigrant workers and their families as if they were some hostile invading army, the relations between US capitalism and the economies of Mexico as well as Central and South America continue to push ever-growing numbers of unemployed and impoverished people north in search of jobs, even if they pay, by North American standards, less than subsistence wages.

Among those who benefit from the combination of this undiminished demand and the intensified border manhunts are the "coyotes," the criminal syndicates that organize the smuggling of immigrants into the US for ever-increasing fees.

So-called immigration reforms legislated in the early 1990s included not only stepped-up border enforcement, but also increased penalties against US employers who hire undocumented immigrants. The enforcement of the law against business interests who reap super profits off the exploitation of those immigrant workers able to elude the Border Patrol, however, has never been pursued with anywhere near the same fervor as hunting down Mexican and Latin American citizens attempting to cross the border.

Thus the brutal forces of the market continue to push thousands upon thousands of people into a death trap created by capitalist oppression and the INS's border crackdown.



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