



Searching for Safety and Researching for Justice: Documenting Migrant Experiences in the Paso del Norte Border Region

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How can higher education advance knowledge of the harmful conditions faced by migrants fleeing violence and poverty in ways that support ongoing efforts to achieve change in how they are perceived and treated in the U.S.? This chapter seeks to address this question through discussion of the National Science Foundation-Research Experience for Undergraduates

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B. Murray et al. (eds.), *Migration, Displacement, and Higher
Education*, Political Pedagogies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12350-4_10

(NSF-REU) Site Program on Immigration Policy and Border Communities, co-directed by Neil Harvey and Jeremy Slack since 2018.¹

The program focuses on the challenges facing migrants and residents of border communities in the Paso del Norte region (comprising Las Cruces, Southern New Mexico, El Paso, and Ciudad Juárez). It brings together ten undergraduate students from across the country for ten weeks each summer in which a faculty team provides training and mentoring in qualitative research methods and immigration policy. Students are divided into groups of three or four and partnered with local immigrant advocacy groups on a variety of projects important to these groups and the wider community (Table 1).

The program uses a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach in which students, faculty, and community partners identify the most meaningful topics or needs for research with an eye to supporting more just and humane ways of responding to forced migration. This approach is discussed in more detail below, but, at its core, CBPR allows

¹The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the National Science Foundation (Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences, SBE Division) [Award # 1659195](#) that made the work described in this chapter possible. We also thank all of the staff of our community partner organizations for their time and collaboration: Hope Border Institute, ACLU-Regional Center for Border Rights, Border Network for Human Rights, New Mexico Comunidades en Acción y de Fe (NM CAFe), Advocate Visitors With Immigrants in Detention (AVID), Las Américas Immigrant Advocacy Center and the El Paso Immigration Collaborative, as well as faculty mentors Cynthia Bejarano, Sabine Hirschauer and Megan Finno-Velasquez (at NMSU), and Cristina Morales, Josiah Heyman and Gina Núñez-Mchiri (at UTEP), and our graduate assistants, Luis Siura and Ana Fuentes at UTEP and Kelsey Bowman, Ricardo Trejo and Angeline Sunday at NMSU. For details about our program's activities, syllabi and products, see our website: <https://borderreu.nmsu.edu/>. This program has been renewed for three years (2022–25) with NSF Award #2149499.

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Table 1 NSF REU Site Program on Immigration Policy and Border Communities (2018–2021): Summary of Community Partner Organizations and Projects

	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020–2021</i>
American Civil Liberties (ACLU)—Regional Center for Border Rights (Las Cruces)	Court observations of Operation Streamline	Court observations of Operation Streamline; Know Your Rights trainings received and given in Spanish; interviews with community leaders regarding sanctuary policies	
Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR), El Paso and Las Cruces	History of BNHR; responses to separation of children under Zero Tolerance		
Hope Border Institute (El Paso and Ciudad Juárez)	Asylum policy research; court observation of asylum hearings	Accompaniment of asylum seekers at El Paso/Juárez border; observation of MPP hearings	Analysis of root causes of migration from Central America; creating an educational program for migrant shelter in Cd. Juárez, Mexico
NM Comunidades en Acción y de Fe (CAFe) (Las Cruces)		Accompaniment in community organizing and outreach work of CAFe in southwest New Mexico	
Advocate Visitors with Immigrants in Detention (AVID) (Las Cruces)			Analysis of conditions in local ICE detention centers during pandemic; analysis of borderland newspaper coverage of immigrant detention; analysis of ICE center inspection reports
Las Américas Immigrant Advocacy Center (El Paso) El Paso Immigration Collaborative (EPIC)			Wellness check: conditions of confinement during Covid-19 pandemic Immigration detention trends under the Biden administration

for more inclusion of community voices in the design, implementation, and evaluation of research compared to more traditional modes of inquiry in which academic expertise is given primacy.

It is also important to note the context in which this program has been implemented. The original REU proposal, written in the summer of 2015, already identified key problems, particularly the effects of a rapid expansion of immigration enforcement and border security agencies, the increase in migrants classified as “criminal aliens,” the resulting growth in both detention and deportation, the weak accountability of the agents and practices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), and the marginalization of the voices of border communities (Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey 2020). This set of issues has a long history that, since the early 1990s, has led to a growing association of immigrants with criminality through various legal means that transform minor offenses into far more serious charges when committed by immigrants.

Our original proposal was not accepted, but, on second submission, it was approved by the NSF in early 2017. Due to the tight schedule for recruiting our first summer cohort, our first program ran in the summer of 2018, followed by the second in 2019. The pandemic obliged us to postpone the 2020 program until summer 2021, although we continued to work remotely during this time.

Implementation of this program coincided with the ratcheting up of anti-immigrant rhetoric and practices by then-President Trump. Building on the already expansive structures and agencies of immigration and border enforcement, the new administration took many additional steps designed to make life even more difficult for unauthorized immigrants living in the U.S., as well as for migrants seeking to cross the southern border and seek asylum or reunification with their families. Before discussing how students engaged in research during these years, we briefly describe three significant policy changes: (a) the expansion of those immigrants deemed a priority for deportation, (b) the Zero Tolerance policy announced in May 2018, and (c) the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP or “Remain in Mexico”), implemented in 2019.

(a) *Expanding the Deportable Population and Local Responses: Sanctuary Versus Zero Tolerance (2017)*

President Trump’s Executive Orders of January 25, 2017, ended the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP) established by the Obama administration in July 2015. PEP sought to focus enforcement efforts on

undocumented immigrants who had committed serious, violent crimes, leaving close to 90 percent of the 11 million undocumented population relatively free from the threat of deportation. By eliminating PEP, the Trump administration made *all* undocumented immigrants a priority for removal, leading to an increase in the number of people detained through tactics ranging from highly publicized ICE raids to arrests for minor offenses and traffic charges. This policy separated families and drove fear into immigrant communities. The government tried to enlist local and state police in its crackdown on undocumented immigrants and threatened it would withhold federal funds from cities that refused to comply. Community leaders in Las Cruces and El Paso argued that using local police as part of a wider deportation force would undermine community trust and that such cooperation should be prevented. As a result, the debates over sanctuary versus zero tolerance began to reshape local as well as national politics.

(b) *Zero Tolerance, Family Separation and Operation Streamline (2018)*

In May 2018, just before the start of our first summer program, the then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the government's Zero Tolerance policy toward undocumented immigrants. This policy led to the separation of thousands of children from their parents at the border. Arguing that parents were guilty of human smuggling by bringing their children with them as they attempted to cross the border, Sessions not only dismissed the reality that families seek asylum together, but also produced a new level of suffering by forcibly removing children and placing them in separate camps. In addition, the Zero Tolerance policy increased the number of migrants subjected to mass processing through the Operation Streamline program. This program had started under the second administration of George W. Bush when the then-Secretary of DHS Michael Chertoff introduced the Secure Border Initiative, part of the exponential increase in border enforcement and criminalization of undocumented immigrants. In addition to the well-known "prevention through deterrence" policies of the 1990s, which forced migrants to cross inhospitable deserts between now heavily policed urban areas, the government added the prospect of criminal conviction and detention as further deterrence. This strategy was codified as Operation Streamline, which began at a U.S. federal court in Del Rio, Texas, and by 2008 had expanded to all other border districts (except the Southern District of California). Under Operation Streamline proceedings, more and more people were brought

before immigration judges in large groups of as many as eighty, shackled at their hands and feet, to be processed rapidly without proper legal representation or even clear knowledge of their rights. Advocacy groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) began to document a range of due-process violations in Operation Streamline, and, in this context, some students in our program participated as court observers in Las Cruces to report on such violations and to produce an observation manual for continued use.

(c) *Remain in Mexico: A Death Sentence for Asylum Seekers*

The MPP (“Remain in Mexico” policy) was negotiated between the U.S. and Mexican governments in November 2018, and was first implemented in San Diego in January 2019 before extending along the entire border. Before MPP, asylum seekers were able to wait in the U.S. until their court appointment. However, under MPP, they were sent to Mexico’s northern border cities to wait, exposing them to some of the most violent places in the world. By April 2020, some 64,000 asylum seekers (mostly from Central America) had been removed from the U.S. under MPP. Stranded in unknown environments, many became prey to organized crime, which has steadily used deported migrants as forced labor in their violent conflicts with rival organizations in the past decade (Slack 2019). Aware of such dangers, community-based advocacy groups such as the Hope Border Institute in El Paso called for an end to MPP and for the U.S. to uphold its commitments under international law to provide protections on U.S. soil for people fleeing gang-related and other forms of violence in their countries of origin.

DOCUMENTING THE HUMAN IMPACTS OF ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES

The sudden announcement of each of these policies and their rapid, dramatic, and harmful impacts on both long-settled immigrants and recent asylum seekers compelled our students to learn quickly about their effects as they were unfolding. The CBPR approach, we argue, proved particularly essential in this context. Community partners were able to make timely use of students’ research, while the students benefited from experiential learning outside the classroom. The following sections discuss the main benefits of CBPR in seeking to understand how forced migration affects immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border during Zero Tolerance. We

first explain why we chose CBPR for this program and then discuss students' experiences, based on their own testimonies.

WHY COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

Schensul et al. provide a useful overview of collaborative research methods (2014). They note that CBPR has three distinctive features: (1) it is based on partnerships between researchers and community organizations, leaders, and residents who live in the areas affected by the issues to be studied, and as such, CBPR tries to minimize inequalities between researchers and research subjects; (2) CBPR seeks to generate new knowledge that can help bring about change; and (3) CBPR involves community members at all stages of research, from identifying key issues for study, to collecting data and evaluating results. Thus, CBPR supports collaborative rather than extractive research, and thereby builds trust for longer-term, change-oriented projects. Expertise comes not only from the work of social scientists but also from the insights and analyses of community residents, leaders, and organizations.

One of the students who researched implementation of MPP, the "Remain in Mexico" policy, in El Paso, Kathryn Garcia, writes:

Working with Hope Border Institute and participating in the NSF REU changed me not only as a student, but as a person as well.... Most of the individuals whom I worked alongside at Hope were from El Paso. They had a greater understanding of the particular challenges within the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez region and welcomed research not for the sake of academic knowledge but to bring about policy change.

LEARNING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES

Table 1 summarizes the range of collaborative projects that students and community organizations have conducted. As mentioned above, the context for this program has been one of rapidly changing, complex legal procedures. One of our main activities has been to try and make sense of such changes and provide migrants with advice on what they mean—despite the difficulty of gaining access to immigration courts, the frequent change in court hearings schedules, and the lack of information on official websites. Daily attendance at asylum hearings in El Paso or at the Operation Streamline cases in Las Cruces gave students firsthand experience of the

injustices migrants face. Student presence also allowed them to hear the off hand statements of judges in ways that revealed their indifference to migrants' experiences and aspirations.

For example, Daniel Avitia helped document asylum hearings for Hope Border Institute in the summer of 2019 and assisted in creating a flow-chart of pathways to asylum or its denial. Although government information on how the asylum process should work in theory is not easily accessible, observers in the courts can see parts of the process as it is experienced. Avitia writes:

observing behavior and interactions from a judge presiding over the El Paso Processing Center (EPPC) immigration court, we documented the following:

- “When we have the exotics is when we have fun” (Referring to defendants who need a translator for a language that is not Spanish or English).
- “Only 5% get asylum, but it’s better than playing the lottery.”

These comments represent the biases of a judge who, while laughing and speaking English without having a translator communicate his jokes, was cryptically exchanging words with his colleagues while also assuming that he was not understood by the “exotics.”

Being physically present also allows students to contrast their own experiences with the portrayal of migrants and their advocates often found in the mainstream media. For example, Alondra Aca Garcia writes of her visit to a migrant shelter in Ciudad Juárez in June 2019. She was accompanying one of the staff of Hope Border Institute to educate asylum seekers about their rights under MPP. This and similar efforts were reported in some newspapers as a suspicious attempt to “coach” the migrants on how to cheat the system. She writes:

We walked into a small office where we waited for a while. Edith (the representative from Hope Border Institute) introduced the research group and asked if we could talk to migrants waiting at the church, which by now had been transformed into a shelter... Wanting to explain the asylum process and hold screening interviews was part of this meeting. Having clearly mentioned that we were not giving legal advice nor that anyone in the group

were legal attorneys, we carried out our interviews for that morning. After having interviewed the migrants and explaining their rights to them, we left.

Aca Garcia then asks an important question for all researchers and advocates: “Seeing the distortion of our training in the media was overwhelming and frankly disturbing, given that we had been portrayed as some kind of ‘criminals.’ Since when is informing people of their rights a crime?”

Another benefit of engaging in community-based research is that it can change or complicate perceptions of political activism. Rather than assuming that all community organizations share the same strategies and aspirations, it is important to recognize how complex is the resistance to anti-immigrant policies. For example, to what extent must local organizations accept the large presence of ICE and CBP in their communities while trying to hold them accountable for documented violations of civil rights? Does such a stance contradict the demand to end militarization and defund such agencies? These are the kinds of questions that Nancy Mateo raised when participating with the Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR) in the summer of 2018. Based on her experience in the program, she argued:

At a time when there is a national call for defunding of police, which includes enforcement agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), how do we reconcile two opposing objectives: improving relations and shutting down detention centers? The ideas clash and cannot possibly coexist. My greatest takeaway from my participation in this program is that solutions to border enforcement and immigration policies must extend beyond negotiations with politicians and enforcement agencies.

The program encouraged students to pay attention to daily events, such as the words spoken in immigration court, the way that informational meetings can be misrepresented in the media, or by participant observation in community-led protests. Students were required to keep field notes in which they documented not only their activities but also their feelings and changing perspectives. The importance of field notes is described here by Ava McElhone Yates, who worked with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)’s Regional Center for Border Rights in Las Cruces in the summer of 2019:

In these field notes, I can see my own thought process and confidence develop, writing one week into the program that the court observation process was “uncomfortable but okay because we were clearly part of a class” and, by the end of the program, that I felt I could “confidently convey our research and why it matters” to a variety of audiences including the county Sheriff and a Department of Homeland Security grant analyst in a series of self-initiated interviews.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has described the benefits of CBPR for the study of forced migration, specifically the difficulties faced by migrants in the Paso del Norte region of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Students’ testimonies highlight some of the successful research projects they carried out while also highlighting the connections to local organizations and people affected by U.S. border enforcement policies. Connecting students in real time to the issues they study creates a rich learning environment. While each experience is unique, at least three main lessons are shared by participants in this program, which may offer ideas for similar initiatives from universities and colleges.

First, students find that CBPR is a supportive framework for documenting the social impacts of immigration policy. Being connected to local advocacy groups in mutually agreed-upon projects helps students see first-hand how complex and rapidly changing policies require adaptability in the face of unfolding challenges.

Second, participating in hands-on research like this requires the discipline to concentrate on daily events and details that are easily overlooked. We require students to write a daily field journal to document not only their activities but also their feelings and interpretations. These journals became vital resources for preparing conference presentations and writing papers. They also serve as an important record of the damages created by the Trump presidency along the border.

Third, the experience of completing a research project is enhanced by the meaningful contributions that students make to promoting immigrant rights. This can be achieved in a wide variety of ways, such as court observation manuals and Know Your Rights trainings for asylum seekers, as well as several presentations at academic conferences and the annual REU Symposium organized by the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR).

In sum, programs such as ours can help students not only to become more knowledgeable about immigration policy, but also to empower them to advocate for change in collaboration with community organizations. In the process, students learn to adapt to new circumstances, reflect closely on their experiences, and create concrete tools that migrants and activists can use in the ongoing struggle for immigrant rights.

FURTHER READING

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