



7 takeaways from a week on the Arizona-Mexico border: Special Report

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CLEVELAND, Ohio – President Donald Trump says there is a crisis at the border – of immigration, crime and drugs. He says the nation should spend billions of tax dollars to build a wall. Yet sheriffs along the border in Arizona say a 1,954-mile wall is not the answer, noting that illegal immigration is at a historic low, crime is down and drugs mostly flow through legal points of entry.

On Sunday, the Plain Dealer and cleveland.com published a [special report about life on both sides of the border wall](#) that separates Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico. The work was based on a reporting in the area by Plain Dealer reporter Michael Sangiacomo and Plain Dealer photographer Lisa DeJong in late January.

These are some of the takeaways:

Sheriffs say illegal immigration is not the crisis

Local law enforcement in Arizona agreed that the border crisis was not people coming into the country. They are more concerned with drugs coming across legal points of entry. While there is evidence of marijuana being transported across the harsh Sonoran Desert, drug traffickers are more likely to just drive right into the United States along with the 2,000 trucks that come through the Port of Nogales every day.

Pima County Sheriff Mark Napier said the government needs to spend more money on additional manpower and new technology on the border to detect illegal substances. At one point, he noted that his deputies arrested a man carrying 11 pounds of heroin, six pounds of cocaine, nine pounds of methamphetamine and 10,000 fentanyl. He said the drugs were headed toward Ohio and that the seizure of the deadly fentanyl “probably saved someone’s life in Ohio.”

Also last month, Customs and Border Protection announced the largest seizure of fentanyl in the agency’s history, at a Nogales port of entry. The drugs were discovered in a truck packed with produce.

There is already a wall

In Nogales, the wall is between 18 and 24 feet tall. It is made of vertical steel beams and topped with coils of razor wire. On Feb. 2, the U.S. Army began installing the razor-sharp concertina wire all the way to the ground, after orders came from Washington D.C. to fortify the wall. They said they needed it to keep people in Mexico from snipping the wire along the top, allowing people to climb over.

Mayor Arturo Garino, who says he knows of no such incidents, was furious about the addition of the razor wire. He says because it comes to the ground in areas close to where people live, it is dangerous and he said it makes his city look like East Berlin.

Families divided by the wall

The wall not only separates Nogales, Arizona, from Nogales, Mexico, it also separates families who live on both sides. Some Mexicans get visas to work in the United States but often it is difficult, if not impossible them to travel back and forth.

Many gather along both sides of a wall for a glimpse of a new grandchild, or a conversation through the barrier. Until last year, they could stretch their arms through the four-inch gap in the beams for an awkward hug, but after the U.S. welded a heavy steel mesh, only their fingers could touch. With the addition of the concertina wire from top to bottom, they are barred from being near one another at all.

“It’s been four years since I was able to hug any of my sons,” said Norma Alicia Miranda Leyva, who moved into an apartment on West International Street, the last street in the United States, so she can catch a glimpse of them now and again.

Ohioans help on both sides of the border

Ohioans, like Rita Henninger Danks, of Kirtland, have traveled to the border to help with the hundreds, sometimes thousands of people, who have journeyed from their homes in Mexico or Central America to seek asylum in the United States. They man shelters and food centers and help to comfort families while they await their chance.

Danks, a former Spanish teacher in Northeast Ohio, volunteers with the Green Valley Samaritans who, in addition to helping families waiting on the border, leave life-saving water, food and blankets in the Sonoran Desert for people that try to cross it. They know they are helping people who are trying to come into the country illegally, or may be smuggling marijuana, but lives are at stake and their work has been applauded by the Border Patrol.

“I keep thinking what would it be like if it were me?” Danks said. “What if I was stranded in the desert...and no one would help?”

On the day The Plain Dealer accompanied them into the desert, only one jug of water needed to be replaced.

“There has been very little activity out here in the last week or two,” on Samaritan says.

Surge in families from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador

Historically, most of the people crossing into Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California came from Mexico. In recent months, the vast majority of the families trying to cross the Southwest border come from a group of countries called The Northern Triangle, which consists of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Migrants from these and other countries live in shelters or makeshift camps in Nogales, Mexico, waiting their chance to ask for asylum in the United States.

They told their stories of beatings, threats, and of witnessing family members' murders by gangs and drug cartels in their home towns and how they felt the need to leave. Fewer than 19 percent of the Central American refugees will be granted asylum, according to those who keep track, and it could take years.

Rev. Rodger Babnew Jr., with St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Nogales, Ariz. said the wait for families to make their case for asylum has grown in recent months. In July, eight or nine families at one time, many groups in a single day could get into the U.S. "Now, we're down to eight or nine a week," he said.

Finding bones in the desert

The Sonoran Desert that surrounds Nogales is a harsh and deadly place, where temperatures can go up to 118 degrees in the summer and below freezing in the winter. That is also where the border wall become no higher than a fence that an average person could step over. Many have tried.

Pima County sheriffs say they find 100 to 130 bodies, mostly skeletons, each year in the part of desert that falls in their jurisdiction. "It's very sad," said Mark Napier, the county sheriff. "The person may have left years ago to get a job, raise money, and return. The families wait for him year after year not knowing if he ever made it out of the desert."

Border crime is down

Part of the argument for the wall is that it is needed to keep dangerous criminals out of the country. And while nationally, some notorious crimes have been committed by people who came to the U.S. illegally, studies indicate that immigrants are less likely than native-born citizens to commit crime.

Sheriffs note that crime across the board was down significantly in Pima County in recent years.

A recent study by conservative think tank The Cato Institute found that native-born Americans are more likely than either legal or undocumented immigrants to be arrested or convicted for any kind of crime, including sexual assault and homicide.

A longtime former sheriff said that people coming to the United States through legal channels or otherwise are "by and large very good people who only want to come here to make money to send back to their families."

Napier says "It's hard for us Americans to understand what they go through. We have what we need, our bellies are full. Should these people come into the United States legally? Yes, but that's not always possible.

"I'm not condoning illegal immigration, but I understand it." he said.