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Arizona's Real Problem: Drug Crime

The vicious violence the border states are experiencing is not committed by migrant laborers.

By MARY ANASTASIA O'GRADY



The organized-crime epidemic in Latin America, spawned by a U.S. drug policy more than four decades in the making, seems to be leeching into American cities. Powerful underworld networks supplying gringo drug users are becoming increasingly bold about expanding their businesses. In 2008, U.S. officials said that Mexican drug cartels were serving their customers in 195 American cities.

The violence is only a fraction of what Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia live with everyday. Yet it is notable. Kidnapping rates in Phoenix, for example, are through the roof and some spectacular murders targeting law enforcement have also grabbed headlines.

While this has been happening, would-be busboys, roofers and lawn mowers from Mexico and Central America have been using the Arizona desert to get to the U.S. because legal paths are closed and they want work.

Technically both groups are law breakers. But it is a tragic mistake to paint them with the same brush. Doing so could inflict serious economic and moral damage on the most successful nation of immigrants in human history. Blaming the migrants for the increase in organized crime also has another downside: While it may make people feel good about equality for a time, it will do nothing to stem the growth of gangster violence in the U.S.—which is the greater threat to national security.

It's tempting to couch the organized crime problem as an issue of sovereignty (i.e., Mexicans are invading!) but that ignores the role of the demand for drugs. The solution has to start with acknowledging that drug trafficking through Arizona—a key concern of citizens of that state—is the product of a complex set of federal policy failures.

It's hard to fault Arizonans for what seems to be nothing more than a desire to enforce the rule of law. That's the idea behind the controversial new legislation allowing police to ask for documentation from individuals stopped for other reasons. As one Tucson local told me last week, there is a "feeling of insecurity because of the migration of so many illegals." Other things that seem to have sparked cries to "do something" include crowded emergency rooms, migrant trespassing, and a very human reaction to a feeling of overwhelming change in a short period of time.

Most Americans understand intuitively that immigrants are an asset. The migrants who come north are ambitious. Many travel far, trudging through the desert for days or accepting high risks with human traffickers. They come in search of a paying job, a chance to build a business or simply hope for a better future. Their journey is the very essence of the work ethic.

It is a sorry fact of American politics that Arizona's migrant problem was created by the feds. For much of the last

decade the U.S. has needed young, hungry labor and Latin America has had an excess supply of it. But Washington worthies have refused to devise a legal immigration plan that could respond to this market reality. Congress preferred instead to wall off the California border.

Anyone remotely familiar with immigrant aspirations could have predicted that the masses yearning to be free would find another way. They did, through the desert and into Arizona. The concentrated migrant flow through that one state is a major reason that Arizonans are reacting.

It is important, though, to distinguish the drug-related violence that rates headlines from the overall pattern of immigrant behavior. Mexican migrants have not provoked a crime wave in Arizona, as some politicians and pundits argue.

Citing Justice Department statistics, Dan Griswold, a Cato Institute scholar who has written extensively on immigration, reported last month on his blog that "the crime rate in Arizona in 2008 was the lowest it has been in four decades. In the past decade, as the number of illegal immigrants in the state grew rapidly, the violent crime rate dropped by 23 percent, the property crime rate by 28 percent." Mr. Griswold also says "census data show that immigrants are actually less likely to commit crimes than their native-born counterparts."

This doesn't mean that drug cartels are not upending the peace. On a visit to the Journal last year, Texas Gov. Rick Perry worried about drug-related gang violence in his state's big cities. In a March letter to the editor of the Journal, El Paso City Council member Beto O'Rourke described the violence across the border in Juarez and expressed concern about the high costs for both cities which are an economically integrated region.

The war on the supply of drugs was launched more than 40 years ago because the U.S. found that prohibition failed to contain Americans' appetite for drugs. Thousands of Latinos have since died for the cause. In 2008, according to the National Survey of Drug Use and Health, 36 million Americans had used illicit drugs in the past year. Rounding up low-skilled Mexican workers and walling off the entire border is not likely to solve the problem.

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