

Report from the U.S./Mexico Border

El Paso, Texas
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My daughter and I traveled to El Paso, Texas in April 2019 to volunteer, and to learn.

Here is the view from the migrant shelter of the early morning desert mountains that extend from El Paso to New Mexico. After an exhausting 2,000 mile journey from Central America, migrants at this shelter have typically passed their credible fear interviews. Still, 80% will eventually be denied asylum due to administrative barriers to justice.

Paso del Norte International Bridge

The week before we arrived, hundreds of migrants were being held in cages under the Paso del Norte bridge in El Paso. Children slept on gravel, adults were forced to stand for prolonged periods, and all were subject to 40 degree nighttime temperatures without blankets.





Desert Heat

We also wondered how they withstood the dry desert heat of the daytime. Within 24 hours of our arrival, our lips were cracking and I was sunburnt for the first time in over 20 years.

Welcome to El Paso

This sign stating “Welcome” in Spanish is one of the first signs people see once they cross the Paso del Norte bridge.

On the one hand, this is ironic, given the harsh treatment many migrants face before crossing. On the other hand, the people of El Paso who we met were so warm and welcoming that we were often late for our meetings.





“A Militarized Zone”

Researchers, advocates and attorneys sometimes describe feeling as if they are living in a militarized zone. El Paso is ground zero for U.S. immigration policy, which comes along with heavy police and border patrol presence.

There is a feeling of collective stress among service providers, who witness first-hand the traumatic stories of migrants fleeing violence.



Mental health impacts of trauma

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Responses**
 - Flashbacks, dissociation, hypervigilance, fragmentation of memory
- **Depression symptoms**
 - Hopelessness, difficulty concentrating, insomnia, suicidality
- **Anxiety symptoms**
 - Intrusive memories, nervousness, startle response, nightmares

Mental health impacts vary by individual and their experiences e.g. severity of trauma, number of traumatic events, age at occurrence(s), resilience factors.

Topic: Child Sexual Abuse & Breach of Intimacy
"Separation from family members that is traumatic, which causes people to feel like 'small pieces of people' can't properly bond outside work through their trauma. Did not if they aren't there."
— Interview with a Social Worker, Immigration Center of Portland, Oregon, 2018

Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center



Partnerships for Trauma Recovery provides training and support for advocates, attorneys and volunteers who work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Here, I had the opportunity to meet with attorneys at Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center. The presentation focused on the mental health impacts of trauma on asylum seekers, as well as on the courageous attorneys who represent them. I was inspired by the dedication of these advocates.



The Chihuahuita Community is a neighborhood of about 100 people who live with the border fence and heavy border patrol very close to the Mexico border. Some members of the community oppose the fence, while others feel it keeps them safe. In the past, some families would open their homes to those who climbed the fence, but today, border patrol presence is too heavy.

“Chihuahuita is a reflection of life as a Mexican-American — you never feel like you truly belong on either side. You feel like you don’t speak English well enough for the Americans, but you can’t speak Spanish well enough for the Mexicans either. The Borderland and, especially Chihuahuita, is like a place in between worlds.”

—Sylvia Rodriguez, president of the Chihuahita Neighborhood Association

Behind this children’s playground is a section of the border fence.





On the other side of El Paso, Texas is Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a city whose people have witnessed a devastating, violent drug war and significant violence against women, especially rural women working in U.S.-owned maquiladora factories. In 2011, the city was renamed Heroica Ciudad Juárez to recognize the city's resilience, but this designation was critiqued as attempting to erase the years of violence that have caused so many to suffer.

In these two Sister Cities, individuals and families cross the border daily, not to move or migrate permanently, but because the economies and lives of people across this man-made division are deeply intertwined.

BORDER

LAND



These close connections across the border question what we sometimes take as given about who belongs where and who has the right to be one's neighbor.

We can build walls and speak of the "other" as if they have nothing to do with us, but in reality, we are all connected through our families, our economies, our politics and our histories.

Painting: Sister Cities/Ciudades Hermanas by Ramon Cardenas and Christian Pardo

The Anapra Border Wall

Separating El Paso from Ciudad Juárez is this solid, steel, 18-foot wall with Customs and Border Patrol monitoring the area. Behind the wall is the Anapra neighborhood.

With Diego Adame from Hope Border Institute.





In addition to proposals to expand the physical border wall, a number of unjust administrative barriers prevent asylum seekers from gaining a fair chance to prove their case, despite the legal right to do so.

Organizations like **Hope Border Institute** are researching and advocating at the border, bringing to light how the current administration's policies are impacting the borderland.

Hope Border staff traveled to Guatemala where they met with the families of Jakelín Caal Maquin and Felipe Gómez Alonzo, 2 children who died while in the custody of the Border Patrol in or near El Paso in December.

“It was evident that...both families need psycho-social support and have not received it. A key factor in this is their marginalization in very poor indigenous communities. We are committed to following up on these cases and on generating support for these families...”

-Camilo Perez Bustillo, Hope Border Institute



No matter how great are the walls that divide us, the volunteers, advocates and everyday people who care for the wellbeing of others will find a way to break down those barriers.

Together, we can start creating a just and sustainable immigration system that recognizes that, no matter which walls are built, our shared humanity will bring us together.



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**In honor of these advocates, we invite you to join our
Borderland Solidarity Fundraiser**

For World Refugee Month in June, every dollar you give to support PTR's work with asylum seekers will be matched 100% up to \$10,000 with a contribution to Hope Border Institute, whose on-the-ground research and advocacy in the borderland is strengthening justice for those who seek refuge from violence and persecution.

www.traumapartners.org/donate

Healing the psychological impacts of human rights abuses for a more peaceful tomorrow