

Border Arrests Rise as U.S. Debates Immigration Issue

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SAN DIEGO - Outside a shelter for migrants in the teeming Mexican city of Tijuana, Jesús Lugo Díaz clutched a creased paper with names and numbers of people in the United States scrawled over it -- and clung to the hope of sneaking across the border.

It would be his fifth try.

"One way or the other you're going to cross," Mr. Díaz, 36, said as he waited for the shelter to open and offer him a bed and food for the night, a few days after the United States Border Patrol had last caught him and sent him back.

Here on the American side, a Border Patrol agent, Richard Kite, surveyed an array of fences, stadium lights and sensors. Mr. Kite kept a wary eye on several men loitering just across the border, singling out one perched atop a billboard.

"He's probably a spotter," Mr. Kite said.

The cat-and-mouse game along the 1,900-mile border with Mexico proceeds as it always has, even as the national debate over revamping immigration laws intensifies. The chanting in the streets of America's big cities and the arguing in the halls of Congress serve mostly as background noise.

The ebb and flow of arrests also goes on, with the Border Patrol watching a dip in central Arizona and a spike in San Diego and other developed areas for signs of shifting smuggling patterns.

Some suggest that a Senate proposal to adopt a guest worker program, possibly leading to legal residency and citizenship for many of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States, might be inspiring more people to try a crossing. Others say the larger numbers indicate nothing more than stepped up enforcement or even a statistical aberration. Nobody really knows.

The peaks and valleys of arrests over the years reflect a variety of social, economic and political influences, including the pull of jobs and family here, a lack of opportunity on the other side, or even the weather.

What is certain is the United States keeps building up its border defenses, with more planned this year, including adding 1,500 agents and spending some \$35 million in Arizona alone on surveillance equipment.

People still keep trying to get in, tucked under the dashboards of cars, tunneling under the fences -- more than a dozen passages have been found this year -- throwing bicycles over the barriers and pedaling away like weekend enthusiasts, crawling through brush, and walking, walking and walking -- sometimes dying in the desert.

"They are ingenious sometimes," Mr. Kite said.

Fresh off a four-day bus ride from León, Mexico, Roberto Estrada, 43, toted a small plastic grocery bag with his belongings and planned to bed down the night before making contact with a smuggler. He said he had heard nothing about the immigration debate in the United States and was simply itching for work, maybe in a restaurant, but he would not get picky.

"I'll take whatever job," Mr. Estrada said.

After a peak of 1,676,438 arrests in 2000, apprehensions dropped, but they have drifted upward again to 1,189,067 in 2005 from 931,557 in 2003.

While the Border Patrol attributes the increase to the build up of security, scholars who study the border said it was more likely that migration was rebounding from an economic slump after the Sept. 11 attacks and years of diminished back-and-forth crossings by repeat crossers.

In the San Diego sector, which includes some of the Border Patrol's heaviest fortifications, federal agents have apprehended 90,843 people since October, a 33 percent increase over the same period a year before.

Along the busiest stretch for crossings, a 1,000-mile stretch from San Diego to the Texas state line, there have been 699,609 arrests over the same period, a 6 percent increase.

But arrest figures fluctuate, so the Border Patrol cannot declare a trend. As a rule of thumb, the agency estimates that for every person arrested two or three get through. But because of repeat arrests the number of apprehensions does not necessarily reflect the actual number of people trying to cross.

Still, people familiar with the border crossings, including the head of the union representing the border agents, suggest that the crossing attempts are growing, with some of those inspired by the prospect of a guest worker program.

"I think we are starting to see the early stage of a rush to take advantage of what is perceived to be a shift in immigration policy," said T. J. Bonner, president of the union, the National Border Patrol Council.

Mr. Bonner said some of the people arrested had told agents that they believed Congress had approved a guest worker program that would make their presence in the United States legal.

Mario Martinez, a spokesman for the Border Patrol in Washington, did not dismiss the guest worker program as a factor in the rising numbers of crossing efforts, but he said other influences, like jobs and reuniting with family, could also account for the increase.

Wayne A. Cornelius, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego, said researchers there recently surveyed prospective migrants from the Yucatán Peninsula. They found that 60 percent of them had heard of the guest worker debate and that 30 percent said it would make them more likely to go the United States if it was approved. Only one who had already made the trip said the program was the main reason.

Operators of shelters in Mexico said they had noticed an increase in the number of people passing through, but they were also unsure of the cause.

The director of the Casa del Migrante shelter in Tijuana, the Rev. Luíz Kendzierski, said shelter visits had increased about 20 percent in the past year. More than anything, he said, grinding poverty in parts of Mexico and Central America and word from relatives about the ease of finding jobs in the United States have pushed most people to try crossing.

At Casa Betania, a shelter in Mexicali, Mexico, Tomás Reyes Hernández, the director, said he had heard only a few people mention the prospect of legalization as a reason for crossing.

"Most people don't know what is going on in the United States," he said.

At the Tijuana shelter, men flowed in and out, trading stories about their journey to the border and comparing notes on promising smugglers.

More and more people use guides, known as coyotes or polleros, because of the dangers of the desert and the strengthened enforcement.

"It's not that hard if you're willing to pay a good smuggler," said a 23-year-old man deported from Los Angeles after an arrest for domestic violence. "The hard part is getting the \$2,000, \$3,000 it costs for a good one. But sometimes they can get you across right here in Tijuana in the trunk or under the seat of a van."