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Rebalancing the Border: Investing in Communities for Security and Shared Prosperity

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Executive Summary

The U.S.-Mexico border is consistently viewed through the lens of border enforcement, national security, and migration, often overshadowing the millions of Americans who live in diverse, binational, and bicultural border communities that serve as critical economic hubs between the United States and Mexico.¹

With \$170 billion allocated to the Department of Homeland Security in 2025, the Trump administration has invested unprecedented resources in deterrence while underinvesting in the people and infrastructure that sustain trade and economic activity at the border.² This imbalance limits the region's long-term potential and overlooks its central role in the U.S. economy.

This brief argues that rebalancing federal investment toward border communities is essential for both security and long-term prosperity. By clearly defining border communities, establishing a coordinated federal strategy for border economic development, and modernizing ports of entry, Congress can transform the border from a site of political polarization into a national economic powerhouse.

Background

Defining Border Communities

There is no single definition of what constitutes a “border community” or the “border region” in U.S. policy. Instead, there are multiple definitions across agencies, creating ambiguity rather than clarity. Without a shared framework, there is no consistent guidance on how to target resources or evaluate the impacts of border-related decisions.

Geographically, the U.S.-Mexico border spans 1,954 miles across four U.S. states (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas), connecting hundreds of communities whose proximity to the border shapes daily life and economic activity.

Across the federal government, existing definitions of the border region vary widely depending on agency mission. For example, through an enforcement lens, the Department of Homeland Security defines the border region as extending within 100 air miles of any U.S. boundary, a definition used to expand immigration enforcement.³ From an environmental perspective, the Environmental Protection Agency, under the La Paz Agreement, defines the border region as extending 100 kilometers (62.5 miles) north and south of the international boundary to coordinate binational environmental protection and public health efforts.⁴ In contrast, through a housing and community development lens, the Department of Housing and Urban Development defines the U.S.-Mexico

border region as areas within 150 miles of the border, while excluding large metropolitan areas with populations exceeding one million.⁵ While each definition serves a specific purpose, multiple definitions leave federal policy without a consistent way to identify border communities. Federal policy risks misallocating resources, overlooking underinvested areas, and prioritizing enforcement over community investment and economic opportunity. A clearer definition is a necessary foundation for a more effective, equitable, and accountable border policymaking.

Who Lives and Works in Border Communities

Given a lack of a single definition of the border region, this section uses data within a 100-mile radius to provide a general picture of who lives along the U.S.-Mexico border. Within the U.S., more than 19 million people reside in communities that continue to grow and serve as vital economic hubs.⁶ The majority of border residents live in California (67%), Texas (18%), Arizona (12%), and New Mexico (3%), reflecting an uneven distribution of population and economic activity across the region.⁷

Contrary to popular belief, border communities are not predominantly immigrant.⁸ Many residents are U.S.-born, bilingual, and bicultural, reflecting deep historical and familial ties to the region rather than recent migration alone.⁹

Economic and educational conditions vary widely across each region. Overall educational attainment in border communities is similar to national averages, but varies significantly by state and locality.¹⁰ However, border regions have a higher unemployment rate than the national average (6.23% versus 5.39%).¹¹ For those who are employed, many work in labor-intensive industries such as agriculture, transportation, warehousing, logistics, and supply-chain services, sectors that rely on a stable, locally rooted workforce and are essential to U.S.-Mexico trade.¹²

Understanding who border communities serve and employ is critical for effective workforce policy. Targeted investments in education, skills training, and workforce development can strengthen local economies while supporting national supply chain resilience and bilateral trade with Mexico.

Border Communities as Engines of Trade and Economic Activity

Border communities play a central role in facilitating trade between the United States and Mexico, as more than three-quarters of U.S.-Mexico land trade crosses through Texas ports of entry, and bilateral trade with Mexico totaled nearly \$1 trillion in 2024.¹³ With 47 active land ports of entry, the U.S.-Mexico border is widely recognized as the world's busiest international border for trade and travel.¹⁴ In 2019 alone, the United States imported approximately \$318 billion in commercial cargo through these ports, underscoring the border's importance to national and regional economies.¹⁵

As a result, Mexico is among the top trading partners for border states such as Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, with U.S.-Mexico trade supporting more than one million American jobs.^{16,17} In California, Mexico ranks as the second-largest trading partner and the state's largest export destination, showing the depth of economic integration.¹⁸ These trade flows depend on the businesses and ports of entry that handle the daily functioning of logistics corridors, warehouses, and cross-border supply chains.

Therefore, border regions function as a binational economic engine, where efficiency directly affects U.S. competitiveness, regional development, and supply chain resilience.¹⁹ When ports of entry experience delays or long wait times, the economic costs affect businesses beyond the border, disrupting industries nationwide.²⁰ As a result, it is critical to invest in border communities and port infrastructure, given the economic implications. Improving the flow of goods can reduce costs, strengthen supply chains, and deliver returns to the U.S. economy.

Problem Analysis

Border Communities Are Framed as Security Liabilities Rather Than Economic Assets

The United States has shifted dramatically in how it frames and governs the U.S.-Mexico border. Earlier immigration policy, including programs like the Bracero Program, treated migration in economic terms, responding to labor shortages and supporting U.S. industries.²¹ Over time, this framing gave way to prevention through deterrence that increasingly treated migration as a threat rather than a workforce or economic issue.²²

The attacks on September 11th served as a catalyst, as managing the border and immigration quickly became a matter of national security requiring control, surveillance, and deterrence.²³ Federal policy decisions, such as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2002 and the passage of the Secure Fence Act of 2006, further institutionalized this approach by prioritizing physical barriers and enforcement infrastructure over community investment or economic integration.²⁴ This enforcement-first strategy has been responsible for the death of tens of thousands of migrants, as policies intentionally pushed migration into remote and dangerous terrain.²⁵

As a result, border communities came to be viewed primarily as security liabilities rather than economic assets.²⁶ National rhetoric and policy have focused on criminality, unauthorized migration, and enforcement capacity, despite research consistently showing that immigration is not associated with increased crime.²⁷ This framing overshadows the reality of border communities as places of work, commerce, and daily life, and their central role in facilitating trade and sustaining cross-border labor markets.²⁸

Federal Spending Prioritizes Enforcement and Border Militarization Over Trade and Community Capacity

Federal spending patterns reflect the security-first framing of the border. Over the past decades, investment in immigration enforcement and border militarization has grown substantially.

By fiscal year 2025, more than \$170 billion was allocated to the Department of Homeland Security, representing the largest investment in border and immigration enforcement in U.S. history.²⁹ While border security is a legitimate federal responsibility, this level of spending illustrates a clear imbalance. Resources have been concentrated on enforcement between ports of entry, even as ports themselves, the primary sites of legal trade and travel, remain underinvested.³⁰

This misalignment carries economic costs. Staffing shortages, outdated inspection technology, and inadequate infrastructure at ports of entry contribute to congestion and delays that disrupt supply chains and raise costs for businesses and consumers nationwide.³¹ Research consistently shows that even modest improvements in port efficiency can yield significant economic returns by reducing wait times and strengthening trade flows.³²

Despite these benefits, enforcement continues to dominate federal border spending, limiting investment in trade facilitation, workforce capacity, and community infrastructure. As a result, border policy prioritizes deterrence over efficiency, weakening the economic environment in border communities and constraining the performance of supply chains critical to U.S. competitiveness.³³

The Absence of a Coherent Federal Strategy for Border Economic Development

Despite the border's central role in U.S. trade and supply-chain resilience, the federal government lacks a comprehensive strategy focused on border economic development. Existing border policy remains fragmented across agencies, with most attention directed toward enforcement, migration management, or political objectives rather than sustained economic planning.³⁴

Responsibilities related to trade facilitation, workforce development, infrastructure investment, and environmental management are spread across multiple agencies, including DHS, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency, without a unifying framework. This approach limits coordination between enforcement and economic policy, even though both depend on the same ports of entry, transportation corridors, and local communities.³⁵

As a result, border communities that manage critical U.S.-Mexico supply chains face persistent challenges not because of a lack of economic importance, but because no federal strategy aligns security priorities with economic performance. Without a national approach that treats the border as an economic ecosystem, federal policy will continue to underutilize one of the United States' most important regions.³⁶

Policy Recommendation

Congress Should Establish a Clear Definition of the Border Region Through a Joint Resolution

Without a clear definition of what constitutes the border region, allocating federal resources becomes difficult if there is no consistent framework for determining which communities should be prioritized. Congress can address this gap through a joint resolution that formally recognizes the importance of the border region, defines its scope, and emphasizes its central role in U.S. trade and economic competitiveness. Based on my lived experience growing up on the border, I recommend a tiered definition that reflects how border communities actually function rather than how they are policed.

Immediate Border Communities (0–15 miles) include areas where the border is a daily lived experience. These communities host ports of entry, form binational sister city pairs, and experience constant cross-border movement of workers, students, shoppers, and commercial traffic. Policy decisions related to staffing, inspection technology, and port infrastructure directly shape daily life and local economies in this zone, making focused federal investment essential.

Border Economic Zone (15–75 miles) recognizes that the economic impact of the border extends beyond the fence line. This zone includes logistics hubs, warehousing centers, agricultural regions, and workforce institutions whose success depends on efficient ports of entry. Although these communities are not directly adjacent to the border, they absorb economic shocks caused by congestion and underinvestment.

The resolution can serve as a standard for federal agencies to use this tiered definition when designing border-related grant programs, infrastructure investments, and economic development initiatives.

Establish an Interagency National Strategy to Address Border Communities

Because border policy has long prioritized enforcement, there is little coordination across the federal government to address the broader needs of border communities. This fragmented approach leaves economic development, workforce investment, infrastructure, and trade facilitation scattered across agencies without a shared strategy.³⁷ As a result, policies that affect the same communities often operate in silos, limiting their effectiveness and leaving long-term economic potential unrealized.³⁸

Establishing an interagency national strategy would allow the federal government to approach the border more coherently and intentionally. Agencies such as the Department of Commerce, the Department of State, and the Department of Homeland Security, among others, already have overlapping interests in security, economic stability, and growth in the border region. Bringing these efforts under a unified framework would better align enforcement with economic priorities and ensure border communities are supported not only as security zones, but as engines of national prosperity.

This strategy could be implemented through legislation like the Economic Opportunity for Border Communities Act, led by Representative Gabe Vasquez, which directs the Department of Commerce to lead an interagency economic plan, set job-creation and trade goals, coordinate infrastructure and housing policy, and report concrete policy recommendations to Congress within one year.³⁹

Rebalance Federal Border Spending Toward Ports of Entry and Trade-Enabling Infrastructure

Congress should rebalance federal border spending by directing a greater share of resources toward modernizing ports of entry by prioritizing funding for expanded inspection lanes, modern non-intrusive inspection technology, and upgraded port infrastructure that allows cargo and travelers to be processed more quickly and safely. While enforcement remains an important responsibility of the Department of Homeland Security, ports of entry are where nearly all legal trade and travel occur and where investment can deliver the greatest economic returns.⁴⁰ Chronic underinvestment in staffing, inspection technology, and physical infrastructure contributes to congestion and delays that disrupt supply chains and raise costs for businesses and consumers nationwide.⁴¹

Even modest reductions in wait times would generate significant economic returns and improve the flow of goods between the United States and Mexico.⁴² This would strengthen bilateral trade while directly benefiting border communities that depend on trade-related industries. Rebalancing spending toward infrastructure would align border security with economic growth, treating border communities as critical contributors to trade and the national economy.

Conclusion

The U.S.-Mexico border is most often discussed in terms of enforcement and security, rather than as a region that supports trade, jobs, and daily life for millions of Americans. This narrow framing has real consequences. When border communities are viewed strictly through a security lens, federal policy fails to support the people, infrastructure, and economic systems that keep trade moving and regional economies strong. As this brief shows, the absence of a clear definition, a coordinated federal strategy, and balanced investment has limited the border's economic potential.

Rebalancing border policy realigns security with economic growth and community investment. By clearly defining border communities, modernizing ports of entry, coordinating federal action, and investing in workforce and infrastructure, Congress can move beyond polarization and take a more effective approach to the border. Border communities are essential to the national economy, and federal policy should reflect that reality.

Endnotes

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