

International Commuters: Border Crossings and Economic Implications of a Border

Culture

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Abstract

When discussing borders, it is essential that we see beyond the geographical border or the political line. We must consider the people inhabit those regions, and more than often interact with each other, share sources and have a common history. This research analyzes specifically the complex economic interdependencies that result from the daily crossings of individuals at the U.S.-México border between Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and El Paso, Texas. We present an examination of the intertwined threads of economic life that arise from this constant daily *migration* and the exchange of goods and services and accompany it. The realities of daily border crossing, and the sacrifices and benefits such as (long waiting times, or enjoying a U.S. dollars check and spend it in pesos) made by those who engage in daily life across this border invite us to think about the impact that these micro-dynamics have on people's lives and highlight their economic motivation and the consequences of a constant flow of people between two international cities that are next to each other. Data for this research is gathered from surveys of individuals who cross for work, school, healthcare, benefits, shopping, and/or leisure.

Introduction

Even though Ciudad Juárez and El Paso are divided by an international, political boundary, their shared culture and socioeconomic system allow them to operate and be deeply geared into each other's dynamics that are properly found in border culture. The constant daily flow of people, capital and cultural exchange between both cities challenges the conventional understanding of national borders. For residents, the border is not only a political barrier but, literally, a bridge for work, entertainment, families, and essential services.

This social integration is mirrored by a powerful, mutual economic cooperation between the two cities. Ciudad Juárez provides a vast, skilled labor force for El Paso's service and manufacturing sectors, especially within the maquiladora sector, and a significant consumer base for its retail sector. Vice versa, El Paso provides jobs paid in a higher-value currency –U.S. dollars— a substantial portion of which is taken back to Juárez, where the greater purchasing power stimulates the local consumer market and supports families. However, the majority of large-scale data that captures international trade and commerce fails to capture the human-level dynamics that truly represent this relationship. While the official data can easily tell the value of goods crossing in trucks, it fails to register, for example, the motives of an individual to earn a dollar's paycheck but live in pesos, their spending habits on one side or the other, or human cost of commuters who wait hours in line.

This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the micro-dynamics of the El Paso- Juárez economic relationship through survey data collected from daily commuters themselves. By focusing on the lived realities of those who navigate this space daily, this research seeks to challenge common narratives of the border as a divided, independent system and instead present it as a binational society that relies on one another. To sustain its argument, this paper will present a brief literature review, outline the survey methodology, followed by the findings on commuter behavior, and finalize with a broader discussion of the implications of these cross-border dynamics and limitations of the research.

Literature Review

The daily movement of workers must be understood not as a single, integrated “transborder labor market,” but as two separate, adjacent labor markets. Alegría (2002), argues that the daily commute, or transmigration, is a response to an economic disparity and the structural difference in

wages between these two markets. According to the analysis, it is not the U.S. labor demand what drives workers to transmigrate, instead is the massive wage gaps that fuel this process; *transmigrants* as defined in the paper, interact with two distinct labor markets by receiving their wages on the U.S. side of the border and after adjusting to the exchange rate, it is primarily spent in the Mexican side. Interestingly enough, the study compares both Tijuana-San Diego and Juárez -El Paso metropolitan areas, with contrasting results. For the Tijuana-San Diego area the reasons for transmigration are the difference in wages, while that for the Juárez-El Paso area, the wage differences have little statistical effect in this daily commute and calls for future research on possible incentives for cross-border employment in Ciudad Juárez, such as occupational availability, certifications and training, and proportion of the Hispanic population (Alegria, 2002).

Orraca-Romano (2019) quantifies the wage gap established by Alegria (2002). Through econometric analysis, Orraca-Romano states that cross-border workers earn nearly double what similarly non-cross-border workers earn, not because they are more skilled or educated, but because the returns on those skills and educations are significantly different in the U.S. market. The economic reward serves as a powerful motivator for workers, since their income duplicates in comparison to their counterparts who remain in México even if they share similar levels of education and skills, enhancing Alegria's claim that there are two distinct economic spheres. This twofold increase in their income also puts cross-border workers in a more privileged position in México; then being a border-cross worker is a powerful strategy for a family to acquire a higher standard of living, consumption and social status, and generally "more successful" in comparison to their Mexican peers and neighbors.

According to the data presented, in 2015, for example, a local Mexican worker would have monthly earnings of \$7,048.7 MXM, while a cross-border worker would have \$17,419.5, showing

a stark difference between wages (Orraca-Romano, 2019). In essence, a family that resides in México gets the most advantages of these two markets: they enjoy the high earning power of the U.S. labor market and become a middle-upper income household within their Mexican community.

Nevertheless, the significant economic advantage that comes from border-crossing does not come without toll. The daily experience of crossing and the union of cultures does not erase the political implications that come with a binational system. López (2020) argues that the border is a constant and symbolic barrier that imposes a “burden of disconnection” on families, an emotional drain of separation and division. In the study, participants often relate the border to the long lines and time that they spend physically wanting to cross, and the physical and emotional cost of dividing their lives in between two cities.

There's uncertainty of not knowing whether the Customs and Border Protection agent will be lenient enough to let them cross without too much trouble, or whether they will ask questions that have little to do with the act of crossing and even take them to a long, detailed second inspection to "teach a lesson" to those who express frustration about wait times or failures in the crossing system; going as far as classifying the border as a barrier whose politics classify who belongs to where, having to live negotiating the opportunities and restrictions that are present in the border life (López, 2020). López frames the long waiting times as *powerless waiting* in which the families can do nothing but to wait to cross, wait for their family members to return from their cross-border commute, or wait an indefinite amount of time for a resolution in their immigration status.

Methodology

To investigate the micro-dynamics of the El Paso- Juárez economic relationship, this study employed a quantitative survey methodology designed to capture primary data from daily cross-border commuters. The participants were recruited primarily by distributing the survey online through social media and in-person interactions with border-crossers at diverse international bridges in El Paso- Juárez, with a strong majority going from Juárez to El Paso, because of this reason, the survey was presented in Spanish, though the data will be translated to English. The survey collected demographic information, such as age and city of residence; patterns of mobility and economic behavior, with questions targeting the motives for crossing, regular spending habits and allocation of U.S.-earned income, and finally, a section was added to address the lived experience and human cost of crossing by inquiring about average wait times and open ended questions where the participants could elaborate on why they choose to live in the Mexican side of the border and share comments on how the border affect their daily lives.

Findings

The survey was completed by 20 individuals who are regular cross-border commuters in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez region. The data gives a display of the participants' demographics, economic patterns and personal costs associated with their daily commute.

1. Profile of the Commuter: established in Juárez.

The demographic data revealed that the majority of respondents are established in the Mexican side of the border, with an overwhelming 65% declaring Ciudad Juárez as their primary residency. The commuter population is composed of working-age adults of young age, with 65% of respondents between 18 and 24 years of age.

Demographic Characteristic	Count	Percentage
Primary Residency		
Ciudad Juárez	13	65%
El Paso	7	35%
Age		
18-24	13	65%
25-34	3	15%
35-44	1	5%
45-54	3	15%
55-64	0	0%
Total	20	100%

Figure 1: Demographic profile of survey respondents (N=20).

2. Economic Behavior and Patterns of Mobility

The respondents were given a variety of options to select from when asked about their motives to engage in the daily commute from whatever side of the border and were given freedom to select more than one answer. The options included work, school, healthcare, shopping, procedures (mostly bureaucratic processes) to obtain “benefits,” visit family and/or friends, and leisure time. As shown in Figure 2, the principal motives for crossing are “Visit family/friends” with a 31% share, followed by “Shopping” (20%) and “Work” (13%), somewhat aligning with the ideas presented by Alegría (2002), in which the data for Ciudad Juárez shows that the motives for crossing are not necessarily related to work or demand or labor in the U.S. in comparison to the Tijuana-San Diego area.

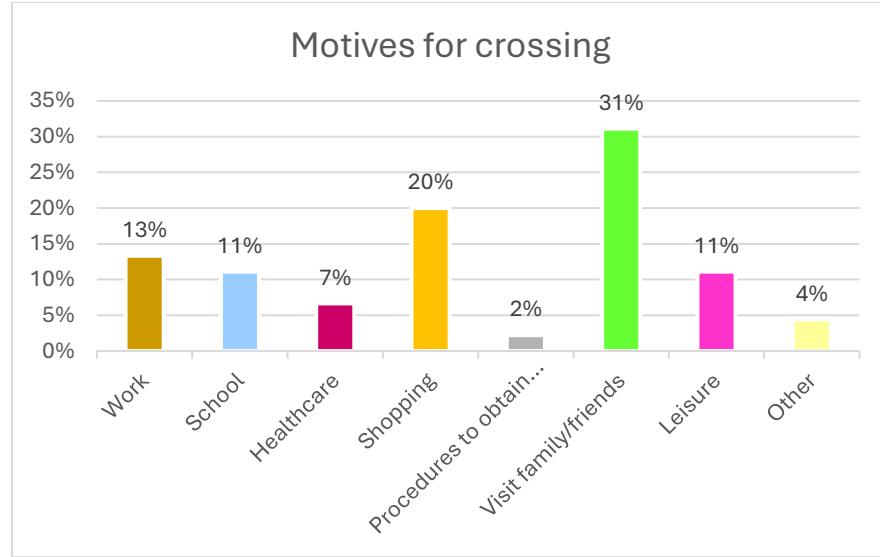


Figure 2: Motives for border-crossing

When inquiring about what side of the border they usually shop on, Figure 3 displays a more proportionate distribution between both cities, where more than half of the participants (55%) express that they do regular shopping on both sides of the border; 25% selected El Paso as to where they usually shop, and the final 20% selected Ciudad Juárez.

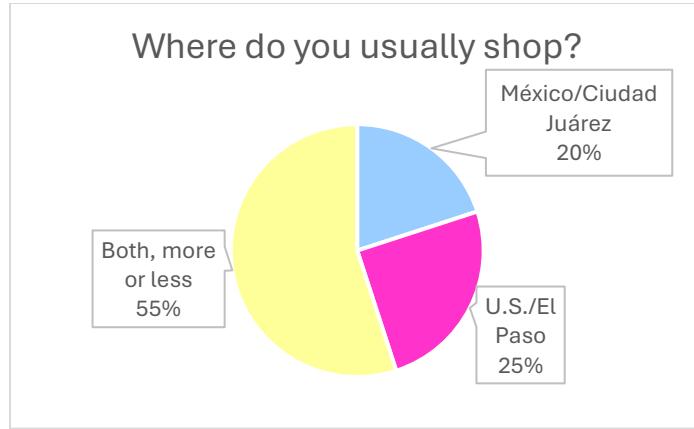


Figure 3: Usual shopping side of the border

Following their spending habits, participants were given an approximate on how much they spend every time they cross the border, measured in USD, with ranges that go as “Less than \$50,” “\$50 to \$150,” \$200-\$500.” To be more precise in their spending habits, the survey prompted them

to select their usual payment methods, whether it's cash in MXM or USD, payment apps such as Zelle or Apple pay, or credit/debit cards.

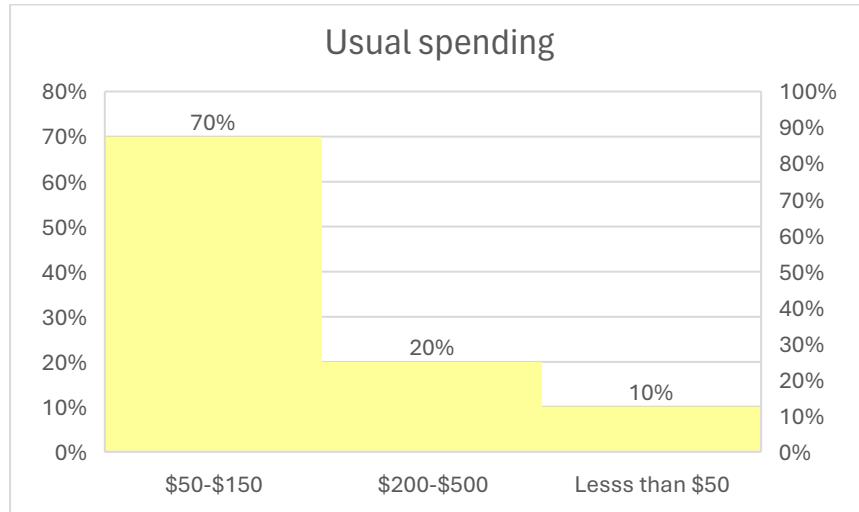


Figure 4: Spending ranges in USD

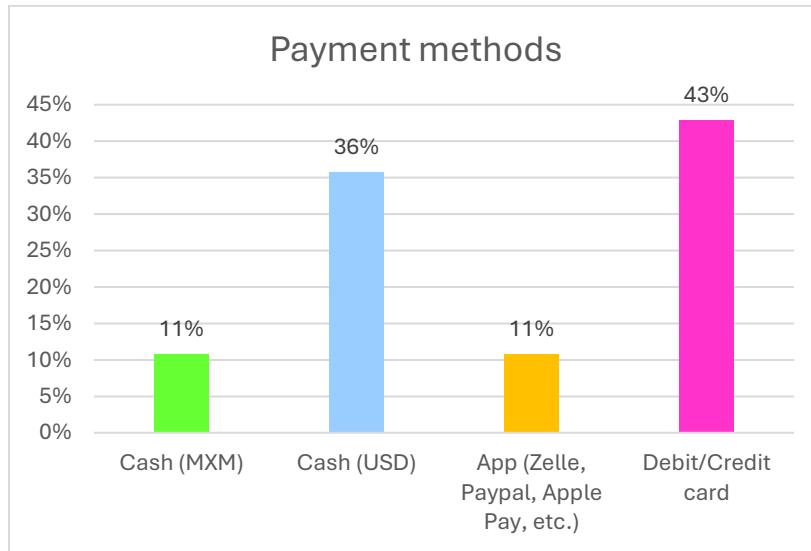


Figure 5: Common payment methods among border-crossers

As shown in Figure 4, the most common spending range is between \$50 to \$150, followed by a much smaller proportion of \$200 to \$500, implying that it might be more worthwhile to cross when they consider spending a little more money. Conversely, Figure 5 could align with the claims made by Orraca-Romano (2019), declaring that since the U.S. dollar has a higher purchasing power, it is preferred by border-crossers when it comes to spending. Even though the data for

Ciudad Juárez shows that USD do have some explanatory power in spending, it is actually credit and debit cards explaining most of the spending with a 43% in comparison to the 36% of the USD. This raises the question of whether the exchange rate of USD and MXM is better through credit and debit cards, and/or ATMs on either side of the border instead of exchange houses.

When it comes to the most common documents used by cross-borders to visit the other side of the border, it is important to mention that while México does not require any type of visa or permit to entry the country, cross-borders must carry official documentation to enter the U.S. Participants were given options among “Passport,” which specifies for an American passport for American nationals residing in México; “Visa” for any type of visa, either tourist, student or work; “Green Card” for residents of the U.S., “SENTRI” also known as Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection, a program that allows expedited clearance for pre-approved, low-risk travelers upon arrival in the United States (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2025); and “Other.”

Figure 6 shows that Visa (35%) and Passport (30%) followed by SENTRI (20%) are the most commonly used documents. As of Green Card, the percentage is much lower (10%) as frequent crossing for Green Card holders represents a higher risk of losing their legal status in hands of immigration authorities (San Diego Red, 2025).

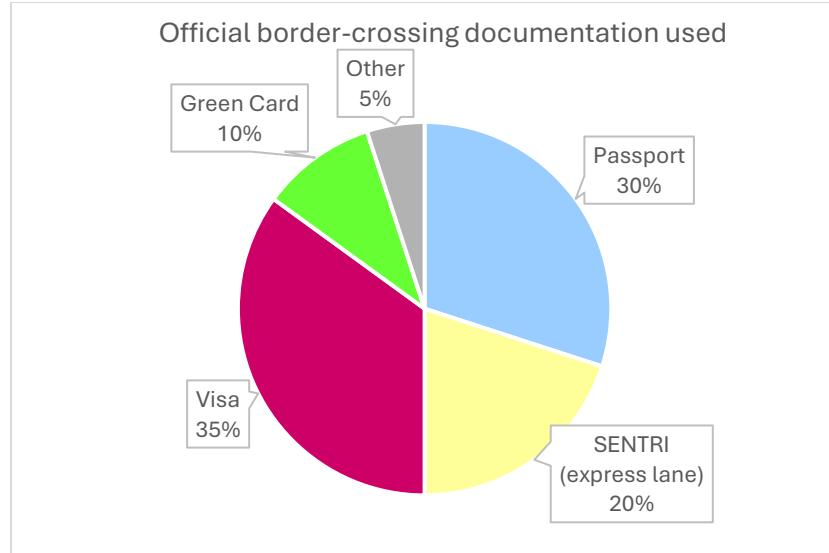


Figure 6: Most common documents used to cross the border

Finally, Figure 7 estimates the average waiting times that border-crossers spend in the bridge lines and using ranges that went “Less than 30 mins,” “30 mins to 1 hour,” “1 to 2 hours,” and “More than 2 hours.” The data presented that “30 mins to 1 hour” and “1 to 2 hours” and are the most common waiting times, each with a share of 35%. Curiously, the option “Less than 30 mins,” (25%) alginates more or less with the proportion of SENTRI users (20%) from Figure 6, as the purpose of a SENTRI card is to mostly reduce the waiting time by having status as a trusted traveler allowing for a faster inspection at border points of entry.

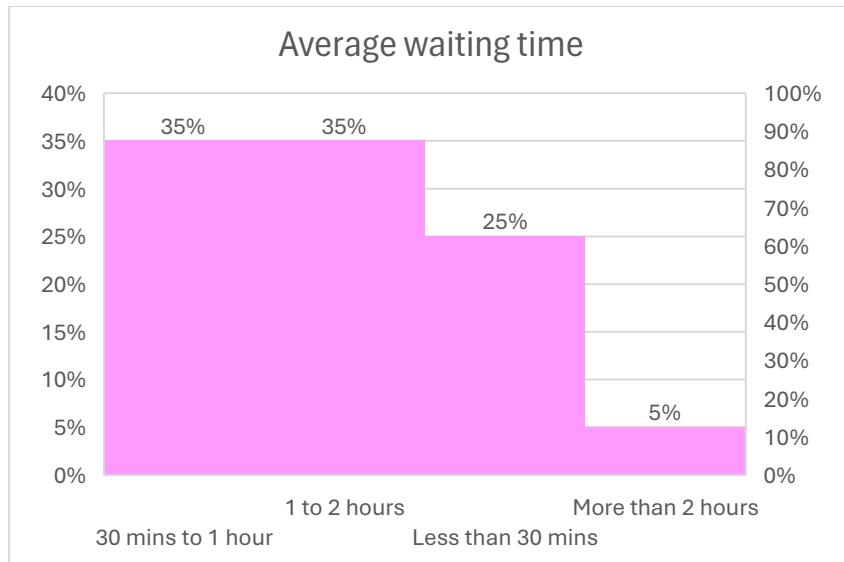


Figure 7: Average waiting times

Some of the contestants who expressed themselves living in El Paso declared that they allocate their income primarily to personal and living expenses such as bills and rent, savings and send money to their families in México. The median weekly income in USD was declared to be around \$530 (approximately \$9.730 MXM as of October of 2025)ⁱ.

3. The Human Cost of Crossing the Border:

Two open ended questions in regards of their living situation and opinions on how border-crossing affects their daily lives were also distributed to assess the human cost and emotional drain that this daily commute represents for them. When asked why not living in El Paso despite working there, most contestants declared that it is a matter of immigration status, and goods and services being cheaper in Juárez.

Among the economic and emotional costs of commuting daily, there are rising concerns about socioeconomic status and vulnerability of the rights Mexican nationals that cross the border every day. They express less hours of sleep and time with family, more money spent in the payment

booths on both sides of the border, using more gasoline, etc. However, they also list the benefits of living on both sides, as medicines and medical appointments are cheaper and more accessible in Juárez, while education and the school system for their children are considered to be of better quality in El Paso.

Discussion

While the literature often defaults to an economic model, the data presented challenges the notion a purely labor-centric view of the El Paso- Juárez relationship, with the top motives being “Visiting family/friends” (31%), “Shopping” (20%), and a far 13% for “Work.” This could address the gap identified by Alegria (2002), suggesting that the El Paso- Juárez dynamic is more unique than what we expected. While these findings find work not as a primary driver of crossing, our finding of 55% of participants shopping on both sides of the border suggests a more modern consumer that might look on either side of the border for certain goods or services with specific characteristics.

The most common payment was credit and debit cards, with a 43% share, only followed by USD cash (36%), suggesting that consumers might be choosing the bank-based exchange rates, raising questions about the digitalization of the binational economy. The survey data also provides ground for the human cost of crossing proposed by López (2020), where the participants express situations as “less hours of sleep/family” and spending money in the payment booths.

The limitations of the research include that because of the political climate as of 2025, the population refrained from answering questions about their income or immigration status. For this reason, these findings might not be general to the entire commuter population. For instance, the clear demographic skew in which 65% of the respondents are between 18 and 24 years old could

explain why “Work” was not statistically significant in comparison to “Visit family/friends” (31%) per se. This young demographic might not be representative of the primary, full-time labor force that commutes daily. Future research should aim to replicate this study with a much larger, and demographically diverse sample to determine if these non-work related motives are dominant across all age groups. Furthermore, the finding on an increase credit/debit card usage opens for research into the digitalization of border economy and its effect on cross-border financial practices.

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¹ Not all participants wished to share their weekly income as a matter of security and privacy, the median was calculated from the income given by those who did share this information.