



Briefing Paper

**IDENTIFYING LOW RISK CROSSERS IN ORDER
TO ENHANCE SECURITY AT PORTS OF ENTRY
INTO THE UNITED STATES**

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IDENTIFYING LOW RISK CROSSERS IN ORDER TO ENHANCE SECURITY AT PORTS OF ENTRY INTO THE UNITED STATES

Once low risk border crossers are identified, law-enforcement can be improved by exploring “alternative inspection systems that allow for facilitation of low risk travelers while focusing on high-risk travelers,” as INS Commissioner James Ziglar has pointed out.¹ In other words, good, solid information on who is showing up at the border provides a better basis for law enforcement than trying to inspect thoroughly every vehicle and person when they show up at the ports of entry. Expediting the flow of low risk travelers across the border is also a boon to commerce and tourism.

Who Crosses the Border?

In 1994 San Diego Dialogue published the results of the only full-scale survey of border crossers that has been applied in the San Diego/Tijuana metropolitan region.² Close to 6,000 randomly selected interviews were held, in a manner that ensured that the survey population accurately reflected the flow of traffic. After the data were collected, wait times were obtained for the time of the survey’s administration to develop a factor used to create a sample weight for each observation.

According to data from *Who Crosses the Border* provided by the INS and U.S. Customs Service at the time, northbound border crossings at the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa ports of entry were on average more than 5 million a month, making San Diego the most important port of entry into the United States. However, because of the extraordinary frequency with which a small group of citizens cross the border, many of them more than 20 times a month, it was calculated that the total number of crossers amounted to only 521,000 individuals, and the survey showed that these were distributed in the following manner:

<i>Type of crosser</i>	<i>Proportion of crossers</i>	<i>Number of crossers</i>	<i>Proportion of crossings</i>
<i>Frequent crossers (4-19 times/month)</i>	34.9%	182,000	96%
<i>Very frequent (20 or more/month)</i>	25.1%	131,000	
<i>First time</i>	17.3%	90,000	4%
<i>Occasional (under one/month)</i>	8.8%	46,000	
<i>Low frequency (1-3 times/month)</i>	13.8%	72,000	
TOTAL	100%	521,000	100%

Who Crosses the Border provided evidence that the vast majority of border crossings were made by only 300,000 or so residents of the San Diego/Tijuana region,³ of which close to 40% were in

¹ Statement before the Senate Judiciary Committee. October 17, 2001.

² *Who Crosses the Border: A View of the San Diego/Tijuana Metropolitan Region*. A Report of San Diego Dialogue, April 1994.

³ The number of frequent crossers that account for over 95% of all crossings might in fact be smaller than this. Social, commercial and economic trends suggest that the number of frequent crossers and the frequency of their crossings

fact American citizens. The survey also revealed that most of these travelers were willing to be investigated by United States federal agencies in order to receive pre-clearance for rapid access across the border.

The implications of these figures for law enforcement are great. If 150,000 frequent and very frequent crossers at the San Diego/Tijuana border could be enrolled into a preclearance and preenrollment program, the need for detailed inspections at the POEs could be reduced practically in half, which would generate a much greater capacity to address the inspection of high-risk travelers. If 300,000 frequent and very frequent crossers were enrolled, law-enforcement agencies would have detailed information, background checks and pre-clearance on border crossers accounting for more than 90% of all crossings, a fact that would greatly simplify and enhance border security.

These considerations were instrumental in the creation of the **Secure Electronic Network for Travelers' Rapid Inspection (SENTRI)** Program, which was designed by a team of law enforcement experts from the INS, U.S. Customs Service, Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Transportation, and the United States Attorney to the Southern District of California. The SENTRI Program identifies travelers who pose little risk to security in the San Diego-Mexico border, verifies their low risk status through extensive record checks, and screens approved participants and their vehicles, each and every time they enter the United States.

With the firm support of then San Diego Congresswoman Lynn Schenk, the United States Congress approved, in 1994, the implementation of the SENTRI lane program at Otay Mesa, which began the following year. The success of this pilot program led to the decision to expand the service to other U.S.-Mexico land ports of entry, most notably that in El Paso, Texas, and modified versions have been implemented at the border with Canada in Buffalo and in Detroit. To the satisfaction of the San Diego/Tijuana community, the SENTRI Program began operating at the San Ysidro port of entry starting in September of 2000.

The successful deployment of the SENTRI Program has confirmed to border authorities and community alike that dedicated commuter lanes are perhaps the best possible way of reconciling law enforcement and facilitation objectives, through the use of technology combined with a decentralized process of pre-clearing frequent users.⁴ Experience has borne out the fact that applicants to the SENTRI Program are extremely low-risk for illegal activities, since they have to

could have actually increased in the past 8 or 10 years, so that a smaller proportion of crossers at the San Diego/Tijuana border might now account for an even greater proportion of total crossings. In addition to this, recent statistics published by the U.S. Department of Transportation show that the combined number of crossings at San Ysidro and Otay Mesa are only around 4.2 million on average every month. This means that the total number of crossers today may be closer to only 400,000, of which fewer than 250,000 frequent and very frequent crossers would be responsible for over 95% of all crossings.,

⁴ As Doris Meissner, commissioner of the INS throughout the Clinton administration, told the audience at the San Diego Dialogue Forum *Fronterizo* on December 13, SENTRI "is the best tool available and operational today to insure border security because it takes the guesswork away. It basically moves a vast majority of people who are lawful and law-abiding and allows the resources to be focused on the people who could be questionable, the people that are first time crossers, the people who are high risk...The SENTRI lanes really represent the wave of the future in this new era."

go through an extensive background check and are easily identified residents of the region. Pre-clearing these individuals liberates human and infrastructure resources at the ports of entry that can then be better employed to focus law enforcement procedures on non-frequent users who are higher security risks.

Security at the Border Can Best be Obtained by Expanding the Dedicated Commuter Lane Program and Introducing a Pedestrian Frequent Crosser Program

Expanding the dedicated commuter lane program is one of the best and most effective investments the government can make for improving security at the border. Individuals who register for the SENTRI Program in San Diego are fingerprinted and undergo background checks more rigorous than any they would be likely to face at a port of entry. They are known and easily identifiable residents of the border area, with family, jobs and economic interests in the region.

The SENTRI Program has been tried and shown effective. It is, however, expanding at a much slower rate than would be desirable for it to have a real impact on improving security and facilitation at the border. Only 12,500 people have been able to enroll in the program so far, and the rate of enrollment is approximately 560 a month.⁵ SENTRI usage at San Ysidro has recently gone over the 70,000 vehicle crossings per month mark, but this is still a very small proportion – less than 6% - of the million and a quarter vehicles that on average cross this port of entry every month (see Appendix).

Long wait times of six months to apply for the Program and another three months or more to be approved, together with a cost of \$129 per year, are a deterrent for potential users. Despite this fact, there is a long waiting list to join SENTRI. This suggests that a great number of border crossers are very interested in the program, and surely many more if the annual fee and the waiting time to enroll were to be reduced or eliminated.

The goal – to put it succinctly – should be to get **all** 300,000 or so low-risk frequent crossers into SENTRI or a similar program for pedestrians. This would do much to solve the security and the facilitation problems at the San Diego/Tijuana border and at many of the other ports of entry into the United States. To make participation in SENTRI more attractive, a reasonable goal would be to reduce the processing time for joining the program to a maximum of six weeks. The yearly fee should also be reduced or, alternatively, it should be made to count for five years instead of one, thereby cutting down on re-enrollment time and expenses.

The establishment of a Rapid Inspection Program for pedestrians would be as warranted and as effective as the SENTRI Program is in the case of passenger vehicle crossers. Pedestrian crossers have been particularly affected by enhanced security measures at the border after 9/11, and sometimes have to stand for two hours or more in unsheltered areas with no facilities. A frequent crosser program for pedestrians would be most successful if it is free of charge, as is the case with the INS Travelers' Rapid Inspection Programs in place for passengers at several U.S. airports.

⁵ Nine thousand applicants have enrolled since September 2000, according to an INS report presented in early January of 2002.

Because of its experience with SENTRI and its high number of pedestrian crosser, San Ysidro is an excellent candidate to begin implementation of this type of program.⁶

There is no doubt that the crash enrollment program for SENTRI we are advocating will require more personnel, equipment and inter-agency cooperation. However, we are certain that the resources invested to expand programs like SENTRI will be more than compensated by the benefits of freeing part of the resources now being used for “normal” border inspections and by the enhanced capacity of law enforcement agencies to accomplish their mission.

Finally, it should be considered that the SENTRI Program is probably the best platform for developing the “fully automated and integrated entry-exit data collection system” that the INS is required to deploy at the 50 largest land ports of entry by the end of 2004 to “facilitate the lawful cross-border movement of persons and commerce without compromising the safety and security of the United States”, according to the Data Management Improvement Act passed in 2000. To this end, the same technology used to identify SENTRI users on their way into the United States could be employed to register their departure from the country.

Legislation to Improve Border Security while Facilitating the Transit of Lawful Persons and Commerce

The San Diego community is very encouraged by new legislation presently being discussed in the United States Congress, particularly by the “Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2001” recently approved by the House of Representatives (H.R. 3525) and currently being reviewed in the Senate (S. 1749). This proposed Bill recognizes the pivotal role that preenrollment and preclearance programs such as SENTRI can play in simultaneously improving border security and commerce. It does so by providing additional funds of \$150 million each, to the INS and to U.S. Customs, for improving and expanding technology to enhance border security and facilitate the flow of commerce at the ports of entry, “including improving and expanding programs for preenrollment and preclearance” (Section 102).

In addition, the proposed Act would provide separate funds for installing equipment and software to allow biometric comparison of all travel documents issued to aliens at all ports of entry of the United States, no later than October 26, 2003.

We believe the biometric identification cards and scanners will go a long way towards solving the security and facilitation problems at the border, particularly in the case of pedestrian crossers. However, in the case of passenger vehicles, preenrollment and preclearance programs that utilize transponder technology should remain a high priority, given the benefits of segmenting the large flow of traffic which constantly arrives at the ports of entry.

Another feature of the proposed Act that we find attractive and in consonance with our own findings is the provision that “Federal agencies involved in border security may waive enrollment fees for tech-based programs to encourage alien participation in such programs”. We could add that this will also encourage the participation of American citizens who, as was mentioned, may represent close to 40% of all frequent crossers in the San Diego border.

⁶ The number of pedestrian crossings at San Ysidro in 2000 was over 7.5 million (see Appendix).

Legislation such as the *Enhanced Border Security Act* is needed to provide the SENTRI Program in our region a much needed boost. There is no better investment this country can make for improving border security and facilitating the lawful crossing of people and merchandise, than to enhance preenrollment and preclearance programs like SENTRI. And there is no better place than San Diego – birthplace of SENTRI and largest port of entry into the United States – for initiating the full expansion of this program and the incorporation of pedestrian frequent crossers into it.

Appendix: Border Crossing Statistics

Table 1. CROSSINGS INTO THE UNITED STATES THROUGH THE SAN YSIDRO AND OTAY MESA PORTS OF ENTRY: 1997-2000

	2000	1999	1998	1997
Otay Mesa, CA				
- Pedestrian crossings	648,756	684,047	619,158	621,517
- Passengers on buses	845,775	312,342	235,288	196,190
- Passengers in personal vehicles	10,659,498	9,856,055	9,518,925	8,362,058
Total Otay Mesa	12,154,029	10,852,444	10,373,371	9,179,765
San Ysidro, CA				
- Pedestrian crossings	7,542,450	7,558,174	6,909,382	7,046,923
- Passengers on buses	783,762	854,098	890,614	873,411
- Passengers in personal vehicles	31,025,343	33,593,034	31,844,311	29,069,523
Total San Ysidro	39,351,555	42,005,306	39,644,307	36,989,857
Otay Mesa + San Ysidro				
- Pedestrian crossings	8,191,206	8,242,221	7,528,540	7,668,440
- Passengers on buses	1,629,537	1,166,440	1,125,902	1,069,601
- Passengers in personal vehicles	41,684,841	43,449,089	41,363,236	37,431,581
Total Otay & San Ysidro	51,505,584	52,857,750	50,017,678	46,169,622

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, based on data from U.S. Customs Service, Mission Support Services, Office of Field Operations, Operations Management Database.

Table 2. VEHICLE CROSSINGS INTO THE UNITED STATES THROUGH THE SAN YSIDRO AND OTAY MESA PORTS OF ENTRY: 1997-2000

	2000	1999	1998	1997
Otay Mesa, CA				
- Personal vehicles	4,845,348	4,480,026	4,326,786	3,800,936
- Buses	47,683	46,142	26,978	18,586
- Trucks	688,340	646,587	606,384	567,715
San Ysidro, CA				
- Personal vehicles	14,106,704	15,269,561	14,474,686	13,213,420
- Buses	101,244	108,025	107,563	96,208

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, based on data from U.S. Customs Service, Mission Support Services, Office of Field Operations, Operations Management Database.