

# The complexity of the illegal immigration issue in america as told through the de...

[Sociology](#), [Immigration](#)



The issue of illegal immigration is one that has plagued this country for decades - in the last twenty years or so, the topic has stirred up a great deal of controversy, particularly given the phenomenon of Mexican immigrants smuggling themselves illegally into the country. However, the issue from the perspective of the illegal immigrant is often not discussed or considered. Far too many people believe that it is far too easy for them to sneak into our country and take jobs or otherwise "leech" off the American Dream; very few people consider the enormous dangers and costs that they have to incur. In Luis Albert Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, one such pitfall is explored in depth; the issue of the Border Patrol and the various attempts to circumvent them. By using detail and objectivity in telling the harrowing story of 26 Mexicans who crossed the border between Mexico and the United States, Urrea offers a unique perspective on the hardships that many illegals face for just the chance to work and make it in America - something that I, for one thing, did not know as much about as I thought.

Going into the reading of this book, I was somewhat curious. I did not know much about the subject of illegal immigration, other than what I had seen on the news and on television. From what I could gather, people were angry because Mexican immigrants were piling into the country en masse, working jobs that Americans would not work for half the pay, and overall not contributing to the system. One common complaint I would hear from friends and family members would be, "Why don't they just legally come in here, and then they can work as much as they want?" The issue seemed to be that they were 'cheating,' making an easy way of getting the American Dream when others had to work so hard to get them. People that I know seem to

have the image in their heads of people simply jumping a fence and getting to America. What Urrea's book does is to tear open that curtain and dispel the notion that getting to America, legal or not, is an incredibly difficult task, one which could endanger your life.

At the opening of the book, I learned quickly the terrifying cost of those who do not make it to America - the book begins when the Border Patrol discovers the remaining refugees, who were dying in the desert. Fourteen or more of the original group had already died; at the same time, Urrea shows us just how the Border Patrol sees these individuals, and the details that open the book are absolutely haunting. The men were "so sunstruck they didn't know their own names, couldn't remember where they'd come from, had forgotten how long they'd been lost, burned nearly black, their lips huge and cracking" (p. 3). These horrifying details are used to great effect to immediately put us in the mindset of sympathy towards this fateful group of illegal immigrants; it is much less easy for me to dehumanize illegals and reduce them to their single crime of immigration.

One of the most significant ways in which Urrea's prose changes the minds of those who have only a cursory view of illegal immigration - namely, mine - is the astonishingly positive portrayal he gives to many Border Patrol officials. When the Border Patrol finds this group, they rush out to save them instead of judging them unsalvageable because of their crime. This was a dramatically different view of border officials than I was used to - I was familiar with media portrayals of border patrol officials who seem like angry rednecks out to let out impotent, racist rage on poor Mexicans. However,

despite their obligation to stop illegals from crossing the border, it does seem as though they have a tremendous respect for those who attempt the journey, and are compassionate for their often tragic situations. At the same time, this is leavened by references to Mexicans as 'tonks,' so named because that is the sound it makes when a patrolman hits one on the head with a flashlight. They also play practical jokes on them from time to time. In the case of this haggard group, however, the Border Patrol officials show a decided compassion for them, something that surprised me.

Another perspective that I never even considered was that of the " Coyotes" - the smugglers who make a living ferrying Mexicans across the border to America. In the case of the Yuma 14, who are the people in the main group who died in their journey along the Devil's Highway, they were abandoned after robbing them blind. Again, this was an aspect of the journey to America I was completely blind to - I had no idea that Mexican immigrants experienced such hardship, and that there was an entire business dedicated to the art of smuggling them across the border. Having Urrea talk about the actual mechanics of the smuggling operation itself, and the coyote's potential for treachery, gave me a much more compassionate perspective for those illegals who hazard the journey.

Urrea's description of the Devil's Highway and all of its dangers is performed in excruciating detail, which creates a coldly clinical look at the actual process of immigration and the politics around it. This had the effect of never truly forcing a perspective on me (despite Urrea calling the politics of the border situation " the politics of stupidity"), allowing me to take from the

book my own appraisal of the situation on the border. Given the hardships that Mexicans face, does my compassion for their straits equate to tacit endorsement of illegal immigration? Of course not, but perhaps it may lead to a greater understanding of the factors that illegals go through for just the slight chance at a modest living. When Urrea describes the feeling and the process of death by hyperthermia, one is able to put themselves immediately in the shoes of one of the Yuma 14, understanding every sensation just for the shot at working a menial job in America.

The result of Urrea's prose, for me at least, is a greater understanding of the politics of border maintenance and the character of the American Southwest. It is telling that the Devil's Highway has always been treacherous, not just for illegals: "As long as there have been people, there have been deaths in the western desert. When the Devil's Highway was a faint scratch of desert bighorn hoof marks, and the first hunters ran along it, someone died. But the brown and red men who ran the paths left no record outside of faded songs and rock paintings we still don't understand" (p. 5). By making this distinction clear, I understood the area as not just a microcosm of the difficulties that illegal immigrants face getting to America, but as a metaphor for life in the area altogether. Everyone - the Border Patrol, immigrants, Coyotes - are trying to make their way, and understanding their perspectives lends me a greater understanding of the situation on the border.

In conclusion, The Devil's Highway used a surprising level of objectivity to show me every side of the story from the perspective of cold details and honest opinions. The book showed me the harrowing desperation of the

illegals who will risk their lives for a short stay in America to do manual labor, and the coldness of the Coyotes who run scams to disenfranchise and abandon ambitious Mexicans. The Border Patrol attempt to maintain their humanity, but the heat and treachery of the border have left them cynical to the dumbfounded attempts to cross and the smugglers who effectively murder their customers for money. I definitely have a greater understanding of just how hard illegals have it trying to make it in America, as they sacrifice a great deal more than the media or my friends would have me believe. One sentence in Urrea's work summed up the ultimate response to what my friends would ask (" Why don't they just stay in Mexico?") - " If only Mexico paid workers a decent wage" (p. 206). This book is one of the most comprehensive portrayals I've seen of the illegal immigration controversy, and has opened my eyes to the complexity of the illegal immigration issue. Instead of it being a simple matter of justice and law that illegals shouldn't come to America, I understand that many feel they have no choice, as Mexico doesn't offer them anything else in return.

## **Works Cited**

Urrea, Luis Alberto. *The Devil's Highway*.