

Bringing the border closer to home, one immersion trip at a time

April 19 2019, by Gary John Adler Jr

Many if not most Americans have never crossed the U.S. border with Mexico by land or spent any time in that region.

This unfamiliarity can make it easy for politicians to distort what's going on there and hard for immigration advocates and [social movements](#) to muster support for their primary goal: making U.S. policies toward undocumented people and asylum-seekers more humane.

What can advocates for immigrants do about that? One solution is a form of awareness-raising I call "[immersion travel](#)."

Immersion travel

Even if you've never heard of immersion travel you might be familiar with it. Every year, tens of thousands of Americans take [alternative spring breaks](#) and [mission trips](#) or embark on "[voluntourism](#)" journeys. In 2012 alone, [27% of U.S. religious congregations](#) sponsored foreign travel.

Just as the presence of immigrants in many [U.S. communities](#) was growing in the 1990s, [colleges](#) and [universities](#), [congregations](#) and seminaries tried to help U.S.-born Americans get more familiar with the foreign places from which they came.

I took a similar trip when I was a 16-year-old high school student in

Terre Haute, Indiana. For an upper-middle-class teenager attuned to varsity soccer and Nirvana, going to central Appalachia opened my eyes to the social causes of poverty. A decade later, I traveled again, this time to the U.S.-Mexico [border](#) with faculty members from [Saint Mary's College of California](#), where I helped coordinate a service-learning program.

Those experiences changed my life, inspiring me to [become a sociologist](#) who studies religious nonprofits and volunteering. Some of the most meaningful trips of this kind occur along the U.S. border.

Experiencing the border

To explore how immersion travel in that region builds empathy for undocumented immigrants, I spent three years studying [BorderLinks](#) – a group that takes hundreds of [college students](#), church-goers, and seminarians to places like Nogales and Douglas, Arizona, every year. The Presbyterian activists John Fife and Rick Ufford-Chase formed BorderLinks after spending years as leaders of the [Sanctuary Movement](#) in the 1980s, through which progressive and religious U.S. citizens aided Central American asylum-seekers and refugees and advocated on their behalf.

Since 1990, [similar immersion travel organizations](#) have arisen along the border. Often run by [religious groups](#), such as the [Jesuits](#), the [Maryknoll Missionaries](#), [Lutherans](#) or [Presbyterians](#), they host thousands of travelers a year while supporting local immigrant service providers.

I tagged along on six BorderLinks trips. After following up with more than 200 of the people who took them through surveys and interviews, I wrote a [book about](#) what happens to these travelers.

Learning to feel

These travelers see the border wall and observe deportation proceedings. They also meet local clergy, humanitarian aid activists, ranchers and immigrant service providers. The organizers, who overwhelmingly support more humanitarian immigration policies, such as the decriminalization of unauthorized border crossings and granting people who came to the United States as children without papers permission to stay here as adults, also include meetings with border officials to promote neutrality and foster opportunities for open-ended discussions.

In many ways, what these travelers learn about life on the border is secondary to changes in [how they feel](#) about it. Research about empathy finds that being far-removed from suffering can limit your ability to relate to problems that others experience. It also makes people not feel urgency to do something to address and resolve injustices.

Immersion trip organizers typically use two approaches that I call [empathy strategies](#) to help Americans personally relate to what immigrants go through.

One is simply spending [time together](#). Travelers ate with immigrants, prayed with immigrants and had opportunities to speak [one-on-one](#) with immigrants. This doesn't always work, I found when interviewing the travelers after they'd gone home. Many travelers recalled feeling sorrowful or helpless when listening to immigrants tell their stories.

The other is [role-playing](#). A group of students and professors from an elite liberal arts college, for example, hiked through the remote Sonoran desert on trails that [undocumented immigrants](#) used at night. During our two-hour walk 15 miles north of the border, we encountered empty water bottles and tuna cans, discarded clothing and cards printed with prayers in Spanish.

We heard from an activist about the dangers of the desert while we tripped on rocks and dodged thorns. We could see and hear Border Patrol vehicles in the distance. "I wish I could go on the desert hike again," a student I'll call Anne Marie to protect her privacy told me. "I feel solidarity in the other things we've done, but then we were really walking where immigrants walk."

Months later, the immersion travelers often recounted similar feelings that they found impossible to shake. Jonathan, another student from Anne Marie's group, was struck by the objects the group had seen. "I think about what or who those objects represent," he said. "These people are leaving their homes, leaving their families, to go and pursue a better life in the U.S."

In my view, it would have been impossible for these students to achieve such a deep understanding about immigration any other way.

What happens later

My research suggests that immersion [travel to the U.S.-Mexico border](#) can influence how Americans feel about the region and the people who come to the United States without papers – and not just for the people who take these trips. Once they went home or back to school, [they became storytellers](#), sharing what they had seen with their friends, families and organizations.

To be sure, they were a self-selected group of people. Most embarked on these trips with liberal worldviews. At the same time, their attitudes toward immigration and their feelings toward immigrants did change and many got involved with [immigrant](#) organizations back home.

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