

Motherhood, Mobility and the Maquiladora in Mexico: Women's Migration from
Veracruz to Reynosa

Summer Funds Research Report
Center for Latin American Social Policy
Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies
The University of Texas at Austin

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September 4, 2006

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I. Introduction

The following report provides a description of the field research I conducted during May, June and July of 2006 in Reynosa, Tamaulipas and Tuxpan, Veracruz, Mexico. The study focuses on female migration from the state of Veracruz to the border town of Reynosa, a city which boasts a thriving *maquiladora* (export-oriented assembly plant) industry and an ever increasing population of *veracruzano* immigrants. The primary aim of my summer research was to conduct interviews with *veracruzanas* who migrated to the border with the intention of working in the maquiladora factories. My goals were to learn how migrant women conceived of and managed dual work responsibilities in the domestic and public spheres and to better understand the *veracruzana* immigrant experience in Reynosa. Furthermore, as there exists very little academic scholarship that focuses on the voices and experiences of maquiladora workers in Reynosa, my research takes an important step toward filling that void.

II. Research objectives

My objective during the summer of 2006 was to explore *veracruzanas*' migration histories and their day-to-day experiences as mothers, wives, factory workers, heads of household and women living on Mexico's northern border with the United States. My primary research questions included: What factors influence women's decisions to relocate to Reynosa from Veracruz? Do *veracruzana* immigrants face certain challenges upon arriving and adapting to a new geographic and cultural milieu? And finally, what are the impacts of migration and maquiladora factory work on women's everyday lives? In my fieldwork interviews I also inquired as to whether these women desired to see any changes made within their communities and if they ever contemplated returning home to Veracruz.

As a summer volunteer with the *Comité Fronterizo de Obreras* (Border Committee of Women Workers or CFO), I had a unique opportunity to collaborate with maquiladora workers and labor organizers in Reynosa. The CFO is a women-led, grassroots organization that operates in five cities along the Mexico-U.S. border, namely,

Ciudad Juárez, Ciudad Acuña, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa. The organization's headquarters is in Piedras Negras, Coahuila and is under the direction of coordinator Julia Quiñonez, herself a former maquiladora employee. Since 1986, CFO staff and organizers have been working to empower and educate maquiladora workers about their rights under Mexican labor law, promote independent unionization and develop strategies to solve problems or disputes within the factories. According to the CFO's website, the organization's overriding goal is "to improve working conditions and the quality of life for workers in the maquiladoras, especially for women and their families" (CFO 2005).

Since October 2005 I have been actively involved in Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (Austin So Close to the Border or ATCF), a local nonprofit group affiliated with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) that organizes quarterly delegations to Mexican border towns. Over the course of three days, groups of 5 to 12 delegates learn about the realities of corporate-led globalization along the border and have the opportunity to speak with maquiladora workers and CFO organizers in their homes and communities (AFSC 2005). I have served as a Spanish-English translator on numerous ATCF border delegations.

Over the summer I spent five weeks living with a CFO organizer and her teenage daughter in a *colonia* (community) forty-five minutes by bus outside of Reynosa's city center. Herself a *veracruzana* and a former maquiladora worker, my host, Ángela Morales¹, introduced me to a number of her female friends and acquaintances who also hailed from the state of Veracruz and were currently or previously employed in Reynosa's maquiladora factories. This experience allowed me a rare glimpse of the inner-workings of the CFO, as I was able to witness both the triumphs and struggles faced by members of a small, yet highly dedicated nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote and secure justice in the workplace.

My duties as a CFO volunteer were:

- (1) To provide basic lessons in computation, keyboarding, the Internet and conversational English to CFO affiliates and other interested persons.

¹ In this report the names of *veracruzana* interviewees have been substituted with pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

- (2) To assist CFO volunteers and organizers in setting up personal e-mail accounts and sending weekly reports to the CFO office in Piedras Negras.
- (3) To attend reunions, meetings and home visits with CFO organizers and maquiladora workers.
- (4) To share my research with the CFO and ultimately incorporate my findings into future ATCF delegations and the CFO website.

After my time at the border I spent the month of July in my host's hometown of Tuxpan, Veracruz, living with her sister, brother-in-law and three nephews. Ángela's daughter also accompanied me on the trip, as she always spends her school vacations back home in Veracruz. While in Tuxpan I conducted informal interviews and spent time getting to know my host's extended family.

III. Research methodology

In terms of my research methodology, I adopted three interrelated approaches: (1) in-depth, semi-structured oral history interviews, (2) participant observation and (3) photographic narratives. One of my goals in conducting qualitative ethnographic research was to respond to and challenge the depersonalizing effects of corporate globalization. In our contemporary age of mass-production, U.S. consumers are often unaware of how many human hands participated in the creation of their foreign-made goods, be they automobiles, athletic apparel, or kitchen appliances. Therefore, rather than concentrating solely on women's roles as maquiladora workers, I wanted my research to take a more holistic approach. My aim was thus to create fuller and more intimate portrayals of *veracruzana* immigrants' lives beyond the factory floor and assembly line.

Snowball sampling played a crucial part in getting my investigation off the ground. Shortly after arriving in Reynosa, my host provided me with a list of names and phone numbers of women who could be potential participants in my project. She also accompanied me to their homes for our preliminary meetings in order to help me navigate the local bus routes, familiarize myself with the *colonias* and, perhaps most importantly, to foster a sense of trust between her *compañeras* and myself.

In-depth, semi-structured oral history interviews

During the preliminary visits I introduced myself, explained the purpose of my project and gave potential participants a written statement detailing my research goals. After women gave their verbal consent to be interviewed, we coordinated interview dates and times in person or via telephone and arranged to meet in their homes. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to one-and-a-half hours in length and were recorded, with the permission of each participant, using a digital voice recorder. While I came prepared with a specific list of questions in mind, interviewees were encouraged to speak at length on topics that inspired them. The interviews centered around the following themes: women's biographical backgrounds and personal migration histories; their general thoughts on female migration; how women living at the border manage to simultaneously balance work outside of the home with domestic responsibilities; women's opinions on maquiladora factory work; their overall experiences living in Reynosa; and the phenomenon of return migration.

Participant observation

In addition to conducting qualitative interviews, participant observation played a major part in my data collection. I attended CFO meetings and reunions, accompanied my host on visits to maquiladora workers' homes and lived in her house for five weeks. Ania's living room served as an office when factory workers visited her with work-related questions or complaints, and a makeshift classroom when CFO *compañeras* arrived for their weekly computer classes. This experience gave me an intimate look at my host's work responsibilities, home life and the effects that migration had on her family.

Apart from formal investigation methods, I spent a good deal of time socializing with the women who participated in my study. Through informal visits, outings and casual conversations I was able to develop rapport and a sense of *confianza*, or trust, with these women. I was frequently invited into their homes to chat, share meals, celebrate birthdays and look at family photos. I was also invited on several weekend shopping excursions *en el otro lado*, "on the other side," in McAllen, Texas, with women who had obtained their U.S. tourist visas.

Photographic narratives

In order to add a visual dimension to my project and to include my informants in the creative process, I provided a select group of women with disposable cameras and asked them to take photographs depicting their daily chores and responsibilities, both within the household and, if possible, in and around the workplace. I encouraged them to focus on ways that their everyday routines and duties had changed since migrating from Veracruz and inquired as to whether they would like to see any changes or improvements made in their community. I gave the women a written document designed to guide their photos which included the following prompts:

- Take photographs of things here that attract your attention and are markedly different with respect to your place of origin.
- Take photographs that show how being a mother here is different from being a mother in your place of origin.
- Take photographs that show how your work here (in the home, outside of the home, etc.) is different compared to the work that you did in your place of origin.
- Take photographs that show things in your life that you would like to change in the future.

To more fully illustrate the objectives of my photo novella project, I showed the women a copy of the book, *Visual Voices: 100 Photographs of Village China by the Women of Yunnan Province*. A collaborative effort between China and the United States, *Visual Voices* is the result of a public health investigation carried out in the early 1990s in which a team of Chinese and U.S. researchers used photographs taken by village women in a rural China province to initiate dialogue about women's reproductive health, work and social change. One of the investigation's primary aims was "to inform policymakers about health and community issues that are of greatest concern to rural women. In short, we wanted the process of creating 'little photo stories' to integrate education for empowerment, feminist theory, and documentary photography" (Wu, Burris, et. al. 1995, 116). According to Caroline Wang, one of the project's head researchers, the photo narrative project had an impact well beyond the Yunnan Province. She writes:

It is unlikely that a village woman will ever reach a county-level official or communicate with a Westerner. Her photos can. From the women, their photographs, and their words, we can begin to assess real local needs, in the hope that future work can exert a positive influence on the health status of village women. (4)

Though the text and photo captions were written in Chinese and English, the book's visual images were useful in conveying the overall idea of the photo narrative project to my interviewees. They enjoyed looking at the images and landscapes of rural China and often identified with the scenes of women tending to their children, working in the fields and cooking meals.

After developing the photos, I used the images to prompt guided conversations during our final meetings. As we looked through the photographs together, I asked the women to explain the significance of each image in their lives and why it was important to capture on film. I kept digital CDs of the photos for myself and gave the prints to each of the five participant-photographers to keep.

In addition to sparking rich, meaningful conversations with women about their daily lives and migration experiences, my aim was to use photography as a tool for creating a more collaborative, activist-oriented research project. Guided by Paulo Freire's educational philosophy and feminist theory, the "photovoice" method is a community-based approach to documentary photography that I desired to incorporate into my own research. According to the photovoice website maintained by Wang, one of the pioneers of this method, photovoice is defined as,

a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. It entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for social action and change, in their own communities. It uses the immediacy of the visual image and accompanying stories to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise to create healthful public policy. (Photovoice 2005)

Anthropologist Charles Hale explains that one of the common goals shared by advocacy researchers, or activist-scholars, is "to carry out the research such that a specified group of people can actively participate, thereby learning research skills

themselves, contributing to the data collection, taking an active role in the process of knowledge creation” (Hale 2001, 14). Rather than serving as mere “informants” for my research project, I wanted these women to assume the role of co-collaborators who participated fully in the creation and interpretation of photographs that depicted their everyday lives, families and homes. I also found photography to be an effective way of encouraging women to talk about some of the problems that affected their communities. After compiling these visual narratives I plan to share them with CFO and AFSC staff members, who in turn may incorporate them into their own projects and future ATCF border delegations.

Possible obstacles to the process of data collection

One of the challenges that an investigator may encounter when conducting this type of research is that of finding an individual who will serve as a key informant; that is, a person who is knowledgeable about a specific topic or population (i.e. *veracruzano* migration, maquiladora workers) and is willing to contact or provide the names of friends, relatives or neighbors who may be interested in participating in the investigation. Thanks to my host I was able to easily locate a network of *veracruzana* maquiladora workers residing in Reynosa, many of whom knew each other.

Earning women’s trust and gaining entrance into their homes may have proven difficult without some sort of prior social connection. In my case, I was fortunate to have already established relationships with CFO organizers during several trips I made to the border during the 2005-2006 academic year. My affiliation with the CFO seemed to validate my research project and make many women more comfortable with my presence in their communities.

While my host played a pivotal role in introducing me to her fellow *veracruzanas* and accompanying me to their homes, I found that her presence during the interviews at times detracted from the exchange between myself and the interviewee. As she was very familiar with my project goals, she would often interject her own opinions into the conversations or reword my questions in order to elicit specific answers from my interviewees. However, once I learned my way around town and began to visit women on my own, I no longer faced this particular problem.

Another obstacle that I encountered was the fact that some women did not dedicate much time to the photo narrative project; in fact, several of them ended up taking most of their photographs at the very last minute. This is understandable, given the double shift that women regularly shoulder during the week in the workplace and in the household. One woman who owned and operated a neighborhood grocery store was at first hesitant to participate in my project, as she did not want to lose business by taking part in a lengthy interview. Her partner eventually convinced her to spend one hour speaking with me on their day off, though they never followed through with the photo narrative project, due in part to their busy work schedule.

I also found that not all of the women fully grasped the idea of photographing things in their lives that they would like to change in the future. Perhaps a larger research team with a longer timeframe would have been able to conduct more in-depth camera training sessions with the participants. Finally, given the scope of my project and a limited budget, I did not have enough funds to invest in 35-mm film or digital cameras, which certainly would have produced higher quality photographs.

Having described my research methodology, the following section of this paper provides background on Mexico's maquiladora industry and briefly describes the regions in which I conducted my research.

IV. Context of study

The emergence of the maquiladora industry: A historical sketch

The term *maquila* first originated in Spain when windmill owners would charge local agriculturalists to process their grain (Maquila Portal 2005). Presently, the term *maquiladora* refers to factories where the final stages of manufacturing, assembling, or packaging of previously designed foreign materials take place. These factories, which are predominantly foreign-owned, usually by U.S. companies, import equipment and materials on a duty-free and tariff-free basis. The finished products, which range from garments to automotive parts and electronics, are returned to the original market without paying export fees (Maquiladora Solidarity Network 2005).

Liliana Goldín explains that countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Philippines, and Guatemala “offer investors tariff free zones with an abundant labor force willing to

work for extremely low wages and often in conditions that would be unacceptable or illegal for the workers of developed countries” (Goldin 2001, 32). A site characterized by free trade privileges and tax exemptions – not to mention extreme poverty and environmental degradation (Environmental Protection Agency 2003) – Mexico’s northern border has transformed into a paradise for foreign-owned transnational corporations. A brief historical examination of the political-economic relationships between the United States and Mexico is crucial in understanding the context in which the maquiladora industry emerged in the late-20th century.

Labor at the border: Past and present

The United States and Mexico share a 1,951 mile-long border that extends from San Diego, California and Tijuana, Baja California in the west, to Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas in the east. The back-and-forth movement of individuals, families, labor and goods across the U.S.-Mexico border is a longstanding phenomenon dating back to the 19th century.

A precursor to the contemporary border export-manufacturing regime was the Mexican Farm Labor Program, popularly known as the Bracero Program. As an emergency measure intended to remedy the labor shortages created by World War II, the United States signed the Bracero Treaty in 1942, which allowed for the temporary legal immigration of Mexican agricultural laborers to the American Southwest. Over a twenty-two year period the Bracero Program brought nearly half a million Mexican workers to the United States to assist in railroad construction and to cultivate and harvest staple crops (Hahamovitch 1999). Large groups of impoverished Mexican peasants abandoned their rural communities and traveled by train to the northern border, “chasing a rumor of economic boom in the United States” (Public Broadcasting Service 1999). The enormous influx of workers from the Mexican interior to the United States contributed tremendously to the revitalization and growth of the U.S. agriculture industry and, in effect, transformed the social and economic fabric of many towns in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands region (Gutiérrez 1999).

The Johnson administration’s unilateral decision to terminate the Bracero Program in 1964 left nearly two hundred thousand *braceros* idle and unemployed while

migration to the border continued unabated (Fernandez-Kelly 1983, 26). The following year, under President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, the Mexican government launched the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), designed to encourage industrialization in the northern regions of Mexico and to increase occupational opportunities for the vast population of unemployed seasonal migrant laborers in the area (EPA 2003, 168). The BIP, also known as the Maquiladora Program, was a novel national strategy which offered incentives to foreign-owned corporations willing to locate manufacturing plants across the Mexico-U.S. border. David Gutiérrez notes that the “expansion of industrial production in the Mexican border states...combined with the ever-present lure of possible work in the United States, has drawn millions of people into an expanding *zona fronteriza* (frontier zone) straddling the international border” (Gutiérrez 1999, 505).

Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) provides a wealth of historical information on the emergence of the maquiladora industry in its Methodological Summary of Maquiladora Export Statistics (EIME). According to this report, with the initiation of Mexico’s Border Industrialization Program in 1966, the first industrial park was built in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. The first maquiladora factory in this location specialized in the manufacturing of televisions. Two years later, a second industrial park was founded in Nogales, Sonora, where a plastics manufacturing plant was established. The year 1973 marked the emergence of industrial parks all along Mexico’s northern border, with the majority of factories concentrated in the states of Baja California and Tamaulipas. In the latter state, fifty-six maquiladoras were distributed among the municipalities of Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and Matamoros (EIME 2004, 7-8). While the Mexican *bracero* workforce was comprised almost exclusively of male contract workers, the advent of the maquiladora industry spurred a dramatic shift in the gender demographics along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Recruitment of female labor

After the termination of the Bracero Program, rather than hiring the thousands of unemployed men returning from the United States, the maquiladoras recruited a new labor force: Mexican women, the majority of whom were young, single, and childless, with only basic levels of education (Iglesias Prieto 1997, x). Indeed, studies show that the

preferred labor force in Mexico's maquiladora industry has historically been "female, very young, and with little or no previous work experience" (Cravey 1998, 6). While some plant managers may claim that women's "docility" and "nimble fingers make them more suited for the long hours and repetitive motions entailed by assembly line work," (AFSC 2005) others argue that women are a more vulnerable and exploitable than their male counterparts, and are therefore selectively recruited by corporate employers.

Though women indeed comprised a majority of the maquiladora workforce in the early years of the Border Industrialization Program, recent data show that an increasing number of men are being recruited to work in Mexico's export-processing industry. In some factories, for example, employees are required to work in extremely hot conditions or with hazardous chemicals and materials. Because such working environments can pose severe health risks to pregnant women, certain factories tend to contract predominantly or exclusively male personnel (Ania Lucero Lárraga, personal conversation, 15 June 2006).

Corporations and *campesinos*: Migration to the border

At present, the dominant discourse on globalization tends to emphasize hypermobility, the ubiquity of electronic markets, and instant communication, often downplaying or even negating the importance of distance and place (Sassen 2004, 254). However, it is important to recognize that companies, national markets and even transnational corporations require geographically specific sites of production in order to thrive. Geographer Saskia Sassen points out that "many of the resources necessary for global economic activities are not hypermobile and are, on the contrary, deeply embedded in place, including such sites as global cities and export processing zones" (257). The U.S.-Mexico border is a prime example of a geographically strategic site of production, where powerful multinational corporations take advantage of the profit opportunities offered by cheap foreign labor and the lax enforcement of environmental regulations.

After the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, the United States and Mexico in 1994, U.S. manufacturers increasingly began to relocate their production plants to the low-wage environment of Mexico's northern border, a process also known as offshore manufacturing. While NAFTA

guaranteed increased employment and prosperity in all three countries, research shows that the agreement has not lived up to the promises of its supporters (AFSC Trade Matters, 2005).

For example, between 1994 and 2003 an estimated 9.3 million people entered Mexico's workforce while only 3 million new jobs were created, thus requiring people to find work in the informal sector or look for jobs at the Mexico-U.S. border or in the United States (Nadal et. al 2003, 2). Furthermore, Mexico's agricultural sector has suffered tremendously as a result of imports of subsidized U.S. corn, which have forced small farmers and their families to abandon their lands in search of higher wage opportunities in the industrial north. Inextricably tied to south-north migration trends in Mexico, NAFTA "has fueled the population growth of the border region, focusing the attention of the both the U.S. and Mexican governments on the environmental, social, and political dilemmas" that plague the area (Public Broadcasting Service 1999).

A 1999 CFO report entitled "Six Years of NAFTA: A Look from Inside the Maquiladoras" elaborates on the deleterious effects of NAFTA on Mexican workers:

In the negotiations over NAFTA, the Mexican government not only accepted conditions that were injurious to both agricultural and industrial production, it also avoided addressing labor concerns. Issues like wage levels or working conditions were not included in the negotiating agenda – to allay any fears by U.S. elites that Mexico would create obstacles to investment, or that foreign firms would be met by workers' protests. (CFO 1999)

While Mexican federal labor standards are very strong, laws surrounding issues such as employee benefits, severance pay and unionization go largely unenforced within the maquiladora industry. When CFO organizers visit with maquiladora workers outside of the factories or in their homes, they always come prepared with a copy of Mexico's Federal Labor Law (*Ley Federal del Trabajo*) book in hand. This thick, red tome is one of the primary tools used by the CFO in their mission to educate workers about their rights and call attention to injustice in the workplace.

While the *veracruzanas* I interviewed at the border cited the lack of job opportunities in Veracruz as a primary reason for migrating north, they confessed that life in Reynosa was not devoid of hardship and struggle, even if jobs were plentiful. If immigrants are successful in finding work in the maquiladoras, they still must grapple

with the high costs of living at the border, which have sky-rocketed since NAFTA went into effect over twelve years ago. According to the CFO report,

the official ‘market basket’ of food, housing, and essential services has risen by 247 percent since 1994. Many products, including gasoline, telephone service, milk, chicken, bread, and even beans, are more expensive on the Mexican side of the border than on the U.S. side. For us, simply feeding our families is becoming more difficult every day. (CFO 1999)

The women I interviewed cited housing as one of the most essential needs of recently-arrived immigrants in Reynosa; at the same time, however, they emphasized the fact that rental costs were prohibitively high. It is for this reason that many immigrants at the border pool resources and share housing and living expenses. According to geographer Michael Yoder, the “bulk of Mexico’s social housing is constructed and/or financed by INFONAVIT, the Institute for the National Fund for Worker Housing” (1991, 3). Nevertheless, government housing is not guaranteed “for the poorest of Mexicans but for lower-income working Mexicans that earn incomes between established minimums and maximums” (3). As the mass industrialization of Mexico’s northern frontier sparked unprecedented rates of migration and population growth, many border cities have witnessed the emergence of *viviendas populares*, self-help housing structures that are frequently found at the urban periphery. The US Geological Survey describes these neighborhoods as “unincorporated settlements that may lack basic infrastructure such as water and sewage systems, electricity, paved roads, and property titles” (USGS 2005).

Though my interviews were conducted exclusively with women living in government-subsidized housing communities, future research should also assess the living and working conditions of residents in Reynosa’s *viviendas populares*. The following section of this report provides further geographical and demographic data on my fieldwork sites.

Tamaulipas

The northeastern state of Tamaulipas is located on the Gulf Coast and borders Texas to the north, Veracruz and San Luis Potosí to the south, and Nuevo León to the west. As figure 1 illustrates, three prominent “sister city” pairs are located along the

state's northern border; these cities include, from west to east, Nuevo Laredo/Laredo, Reynosa/McAllen, and Matamoros/Brownsville. Due in large part to the presence of a burgeoning maquiladora industry, Tamaulipas has the fourth-highest rate of interstate immigration after Baja California, the Federal District and the state of Mexico (INEGI 2000).

Reynosa: The China of the borderlands

In Tamaulipas, the municipality of Reynosa (fig. 2) has the largest population with 420,463 residents, followed by Matamoros (418,141) and Nuevo Laredo (310,915) (INEGI 2001). Reynosa is located just nine miles south of McAllen, Texas across the Rio Grande/Río Bravo River. These mutually-supporting communities are connected by two international bridges “that allow economic and cultural exchanges on a daily basis” (McAllen Economic Development Corporation 2000). While Reynosa has a diverse economic base, including oil, natural gas resources, agriculture and tourism, its strongest industrial sector is without question the maquiladora industry (Reynosa Municipal Development Plan 2005). The Reynosa City Council website offers a telling description of the municipality's two most lucrative industries: “One can observe the difference between the oil and maquiladora industries. While the first generates service goods and employment to the population with high salaries and benefits for its employees, the second only employs in its majority female manual labor” (2005).²

As of May 2006, Reynosa had 134 active maquiladora factories – a significant 39 percent of all factories in the state of Tamaulipas – employing 96,721 workers. These numbers represent a considerable increase when compared with 2001 data, which show the same number of factories employing 67,500 workers (INEGI 2006). Noting the steady rise in the number of employees in Reynosa's maquiladoras during the first quarter of 2005, members of the CFO dubbed Reynosa “*una especie de China en la frontera*,” a sort of China of the borderlands, attracting new hires at record speed (CFO 2005).

² All Spanish-English translations are my own unless otherwise noted. The original Spanish text reads: “Se puede apreciar la diferencia entre la industria petrolera y la maquiladora. Mientras que la primera genera bienes de servicio y de empleo a la población con salarios altos y prestaciones a sus empleados; la segunda sólo ocupa en su mayoría la mano de obra femenina.”

It merits noting that Reynosa has the fourth-highest number of active maquiladoras in all of Mexico after Tijuana, Baja California (587), Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (289), and Mexicali, Baja California (135) (INEGI 2006). Reynosa and Matamoros are home to an estimated one-third of the maquiladoras found along the Texas-Mexico border (Joaquín López 2006). Recent data show that Reynosa's maquiladora sector "has had the fastest job growth along the U.S.-Mexico border since 2000, and it was the only maquiladora industry that did not see employment declines during the most recent U.S. recession" (12). In a 2002 national survey, Reynosa was ranked second to Cancún in terms of economic job growth (Reynosa Community Profile 2005, 2). The rising number of factories and industrial parks in recent years has thus made the area an increasingly popular destination for migrants from Mexico's rural interior, especially those hailing from the state of Veracruz.

Migration from Veracruz

...the *veracruzano* expansion is a phenomenon that extends to other border states and is growing increasingly intense. This migratory phenomenon has brought as a consequence the demand for new and improved urban spaces, infrastructure, equipment, dwellings, etc. for these new inhabitants, but at the same time, it has meant an enrichment and fusion of customs that combine with local ones and enrich the cultural melting pot that characterizes border cities.³ (Reynosa Municipal Development Plan 2005, 18)

This official city council report, coupled with demographic data, illustrates the significant impact that *veracruzano* migration has had on the municipality of Reynosa over the past three decades. As the sociologist-historian Cirila Quintero of *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte* noted during a meeting in her Matamoros office, the worker profile in Reynosa "*ha veracruzizado*," has become "Veracruzitized," in recent years (personal communication, 20 June 2006). Indeed, many of the women I interviewed would playfully refer to the city as "Reynosa, *Veracruz*, Mexico." Reynosa's *veracruzano*

³ The original Spanish text reads: "...la expansión veracruzana es un fenómeno que se extiende a otros estados fronterizos y cada vez es más intenso. Este fenómeno migratorio ha traído como consecuencia la demanda de nuevos y mejores espacios urbanizados, infraestructura, equipamiento, vivienda, etc., para estos nuevos habitantes, pero al mismo tiempo ha significado un enriquecimiento y fusión de costumbres que se combinan con las locales y que enriquecen el crisol cultural que caracteriza a las ciudades fronterizas."

population is so large, they told me, that the city transforms into a virtual ghost town at Christmastime, when out-of-state residents travel back home to visit their families. After the holiday season, *veracruzanos* returning to Reynosa frequently bring along family members or friends who want to try their hand at earning a more lucrative income at the border. Studies reveal that social networks developed between friends, relatives and community members play a vital role in creating self-perpetuating migratory circuits between the host and home communities (see Iglesias Prieto 1985, Jones 1995, Massey 1999).

According to Mexico's National Statistics, Geography and Informatics Institute (INEGI), *veracruzanos* comprise the largest immigrant population in the municipality of Reynosa, numbering 62,195 residents, followed by natives of Nuevo León (22,181) and San Luis Potosí (17,873). In the year 2000, *veracruzanos* made up 15% of Reynosa's total population (INEGI 2005). Table 1 lists the migrant populations of the six most prominent sending states to Reynosa from 1960 until 1990. The table also provides an illustration of how rapidly immigration from Veracruz eclipsed immigration from Nuevo León in the ten years between 1990 and 2000. In the coming semester I plan to further investigate the reasons behind this dramatic change in *veracruzano* migratory trends.

The 2003 Reynosa Community Profile (RCP) report provides further documentation of the large population of *veracruzanos* living in the municipality. The report shows that 61 percent of Reynosa's population is native-born, with 35.6 percent born in other Mexican states. Natives of Veracruz comprise a vast 41.6 percent of all Mexicans born out-of-state (RCP 2003, 7). Finally, statistics show that the *veracruzano* population in Reynosa is fairly evenly split in terms of sex (50.1% male, 49.9% female) (INEGI 2000). These data support my observation that men as well as women are relocating to the border in search of work in the maquiladoras.

Addressing a lacuna in Mexican migration research

Surprisingly, despite the significant rise in *veracruzano* migration to Reynosa in recent decades, this phenomenon has been given very little attention within the academic community. An investigator at the Reynosa-based *Centro de estudios fronterizos y de promoción de los derechos humanos* (Center for Border Studies and Promotion of Human

Rights or CEFPRODHAC) explained to me that Mexican researchers have not focused on internal migration chiefly because Mexicans have the liberty to travel anywhere they want to within the Republic. Attempting to justify the lack of scholarship on this topic, she stated that in Reynosa, *veracruzano* immigrants are not looked down upon or mistreated as are undocumented immigrants that cross the border into the United States (personal communication, 13 June 2006). My research findings, however, indicate otherwise. Throughout my fieldwork I frequently observed that discrimination does indeed exist against *veracruzanos* in Reynosa. The border town is hardly the all-embracing “cultural melting pot” that Reynosa’s municipal government describes it as being.

Discrimination against *veracruzanos* in Reynosa

The theme of discrimination manifested itself almost immediately upon my arrival to Reynosa. The first night of my stay, my *veracruzana* host and I were invited to eat dinner with her friend, Sara, a native *reynosense* and a fellow CFO volunteer. At one point, Sara’s teenage son made a sarcastic remark that his mother did not appreciate, especially in the presence of guests. “You would think he’s *veracruzano*,” she said, visibly embarrassed by her son’s behavior, “but he’s not.” I was not sure what to make of this comment, so I asked Sara what she had meant. She explained to me that in Reynosa, to call someone a *veracruzano* was considered a pejorative remark or an insult.

Thus began a very dynamic – and for me, edifying – discussion between the two friends. During our conversation, Ángela mentioned to me that *veracruzanos* were highly sought after to fill labor-intensive jobs in Reynosa because of their reputation as hard workers. Sara quickly countered that *veracruzanos* weren’t particularly hard workers; they were simply the only people willing to accept a meager wage of 400 to 500 pesos (roughly \$40 to \$50 USD) per week to perform laborious, menial work that natives of Reynosa refused to do. Ángela concurred momentarily: for many people who migrate north from poor *ranchos* in Veracruz, she explained, the “low wages” at the border are much higher than those offered back home. “For *veracruzanos*,” Ángela attested, “it is a fortune” (personal communication, 27 May 2006).

A comment that then struck me as particularly intriguing came from Sara. “For us,” she said bluntly, “the United States is in the United States. For *veracruzanos*, the United States is here in Reynosa” (personal communication, 27 May 2006). As my research project unfolded, I discovered a striking parallel between the situation of *veracruzanos* in Reynosa and that of Latin American immigrant workers in the United States. I encountered the familiar rhetoric about an “invasion” of a foreign workforce, which echoed the way in which anti-immigration activists describe the current wave of Mexican migration to the United States. This is an important topic that I intend to investigate in further detail in the coming year as part of my Master’s thesis research.

V. Description of the communities visited

Reynosa, Tamaulipas

While in Reynosa I visited a number of *colonias* in which the vast majority of residents, both male and female, were maquiladora workers. These neighborhoods, all of which were government-subsidized housing complexes, included Villas de la Joya, Villas de Imaq, Villas Esmeralda, Colonia Juárez and Colonia Jarachina. These communities had a smattering of public spaces such as parks, plazas and soccer fields. In some *colonias* the streets were unpaved, very poorly maintained and remained flooded for days following rainstorms.

The primary means of transportation in the *colonias* were the *peseras*, many of which were converted U.S. school buses painted white, with their bench seats rearranged to accommodate as many passengers as possible. Vans equipped with powerful, echoing bullhorns would occasionally drive through the neighborhoods announcing job openings in maquiladora factories, often encouraging all to apply, regardless of their education credentials. Trucks selling *agua purificada*, potable drinking water, made their daily rounds, blaring through their speakers a catchy, tape-recorded jingle that reminded me of the ice cream trucks of small-town Americana.

Many residents in the *colonias* set up informal *negocios*, or personal businesses, in order to supplement their household income. These include *chispas*, or arcade games (wildly popular among young boys), video rentals, food stands, and selling home-made tortillas, *mole*, or frozen fruit-flavored treats called *bolis*. Other people donate blood

regularly across the border in McAllen or Brownsville, Texas or sell refreshments, perform skits or play instruments on the *peseras* in order to earn extra money.

Though I took necessary safety precautions and generally felt secure during my stay in Reynosa, personal safety was a critical issue in my *colonia*, especially for women traveling alone after dark. During an interview with a neighbor down the street, I learned about what had happened to her 16 year-old daughter upon returning home from a late shift at the factory. One night around 10:30 p.m., after getting off the bus one block away from her home, she was accosted by two men who covered her mouth and attempted to force her into a nearby car. Luckily, the girl was able to escape by fighting back and screaming for help. A male passerby witnessed the struggle and chased the would-be kidnappers away. This episode occurred three weeks into my stay in Reynosa.

Tuxpan, Veracruz

During my month-long stay in Tuxpan (also written Túpam), Veracruz I lived in the community of La Barra, the precise location where the Tuxpan River flows into the Gulf of Mexico. A coastal city located in the state's northeast Huasteca Veracruzana region (see fig. 3), Tuxpan has a tropical climate and lush vegetation – a stark contrast to Reynosa's arid, dusty environment. According to the INEGI census of 2000, Tuxpan had 126,616 inhabitants, with 74 percent residing in the municipality's 3 urban localities and 26 percent of the population spread out among 430 rural localities. Census data estimated Tuxpan's indigenous population at 2,846 inhabitants (Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz 2002).

Tuxpan is an important site for maritime imports and exports, as it is the closest port to Mexico City, approximately 300 kilometers (186 miles) away. Mexico's state-owned, nationalized oil company, *Petróleos Mexicanos* (PEMEX), operates tanker ships that transfer petroleum products back and forth through offshore links to oil pipelines. While the municipality's primary source of income is oil, other significant exports include corn, soybeans and grain (Wikipedia 2006).

It quickly became clear to me that PEMEX was the main source of employment in the area. During my time in Tuxpan, I met many young people who had attended college three hours to the north in Tampico, Tamaulipas, earned a degree, and returned home to

forge a career in PEMEX. Other work opportunities in the region are indeed scarce. Visiting Tuxpan, as well as the nearby municipality of Poza Rica, allowed me to develop a clearer understanding of what *home* meant to the *veracruzanos* who migrated to Reynosa, and what exactly it was they left behind. As two of my interviewees in Reynosa were native *tuxpeñas*, I was able to meet and spend time with their family members in Veracruz.

Interestingly, not a single woman I interviewed at the border expressed a desire to return home permanently. Women shared with me that they were proud of having “gotten ahead” (*salir adelante*) and progressed in life by going to work in the maquiladoras. The majority of my female interviewees had never worked outside of the home before relocating to Reynosa. Most of the women expressed contentment and satisfaction with their work and had acclimated themselves to the lifestyle *en la frontera*. Despite a palpable nostalgia and longing to reunite with family members back home, returning to Veracruz was out of the question for these women.

VI. Community needs and policy implications

In order to identify some of the basic needs and social concerns of the *veracruzano* community in Reynosa, I asked each of my interviewees to respond to the following questions: *What do you consider to be the most pressing needs of the veracruzano community here in Reynosa?*, and, *If you could change anything about life in Reynosa, what would you change, and why?*

Most of the women responded that securing housing and employment were the most practical needs of recently-arrived *veracruzano* immigrants in Reynosa. They explained that many people arrive with nothing more than the clothes on their back and must rely on relatives or friends for lodging while they search for work. Some of the chief social concerns cited by my interviewees included:

- (1) Difficulties faced by single mothers unable to keep watch over young children, teenagers while working full-time
- (2) Overall sense of insecurity; insufficient police vigilance in *colonias*
- (3) High incidence of drug addiction among youth/adults; drug-related violence and crime; juvenile delinquency

(4) Unpaved and deteriorating neighborhood streets prone to flooding; overflowing sewage drains

(5) New immigrants unaware of their labor rights as maquiladora workers

One of the most frequently recurring themes that arose in my interviews was the hardship faced by single working mothers in Reynosa. It is not uncommon for young children to be left at home unsupervised while their parent, or parents, work long shifts at the factories. The CFO elaborates on the ways in which workers' children are directly affected by the conditions fostered by the maquiladora industry:

In most families, both father and mother must work, taking turns as best they can to care for their children. Child care services are scarce and inadequate; mothers must enroll their children on waiting lists that can last two years or more. Since not even two working parents are sufficient, many children must contribute to their families' income from a young age. The youngest children work in department stores, carrying bags for a tip, including during evening hours. Thousands of children as young as thirteen go to work in the maquiladoras, where their presence is obscured by the massive falsification of birth certificates, a practice that is tolerated and covered up by labor authorities and maquiladora firms alike. (CFO 1999)

My host, herself a single mother, reiterated the fact that many women struggle to raise their children single-handedly in the harsh border environment:

The children here grow up like little animals because, well, if you don't have a relative or another person that you pay to take care of them, they won't educate them for you. They won't teach them: 'Look, my little child, don't do this,' or: 'Look, my little child,' like a relative back home in our *pueblo*, right? I think this would be one of the disadvantages facing mothers who bring their little children or have them here in Reynosa.⁴ (Ángela Morales, personal interview, June 1, 2006)

Another topic of concern that arose repeatedly was that of public safety. As one woman stated during our interview: "Reynosa has everything. It has employment, it has resources, it has schools so you can study. But unfortunately, public safety services are

⁴ "Los niños aquí van creciendo solos como animalitos porque, pues, si no tienes un familiar u otra persona que tú le pagas para que te los cuide, no te los va a educar. No te les va a enseñar: 'Mira, mi hijito, no hagas esto,' o 'Mira, mi hijito,' como un familiar allá en nuestro pueblo, ¿verdad? Yo creo que sería una de las desventajas de las mamás que traen sus hijos pequeños o que los tienen aquí en Reynosa."

not very reliable. Yes, you go out, but you don't know if you're ever going to return home again. This is the only thing I would change about Reynosa"⁵ (Nancy Hernández, personal interview, June 9, 2006). The mother of the young girl who was assaulted upon returning home from work expressed a similar concern:

Sometimes the police will detain a drug addict, but later on they let him go. More than anything, it's this; there should be more security, more than anything, security. Because right now it's very unsafe. There are a lot of people just waiting for the right moment to hurt someone else... If I could change this, I would – one thousand times.⁶ (Laura Flores, personal interview, June 4, 2006)

Apart from personal safety issues, many women also noted poor road conditions as something that they would like to see improved in their neighborhoods. One *veracruzana* I interviewed stated: "I would like it if the streets were paved, if there weren't puddles and everything. Because, really, the city *does* have the means to repair them. I mean, if over there in my *ranchito*, all the streets are paved – in Papantla? *All* of the streets, the stairways; everything, everything is paved"⁷ (Carolina Gutiérrez, personal interview, June 2, 2006).

The issue of workers' rights also came up frequently in my conversations with CFO staff and volunteers. A conscientious labor organizer, my host explained that it was the CFO's mission to raise consciousness among maquiladora workers and to teach them how to defend themselves before they encountered problems or injustices in the workplace. She expressed a profound desire to educate her fellow *veracruzanos* on their labor rights before they even arrived in Reynosa. Implementing such preliminary training programs would require the presence of CFO organizers in Mexico's interior, preferably in communities with high rates of out-migration to the border. Before relocating CFO organizers further south, however, the CFO staff at the border requires more support and

⁵ "Reynosa lo tiene todo. Tiene trabajo, tiene los medios, tiene escuelas para que estudies. Pero desgraciadamente, la seguridad de las personas no es muy confiable. Sí sales, pero no sabes si vas a regresar a tu casa. Eso es lo único que yo cambiaría de Reynosa."

⁶ "Que a veces los policías agarran a un drogadicto pero mas allá lo dejan suelto. Más que nada eso; que haya más seguridad, más que nada seguridad. Porque ahorita es muy inseguro. Hay muchas gentes que no más están esperando el momento para hacerle daño al otro... Si pudiera cambiar esto, lo cambiaría – mil veces."

⁷ "Me gustaría que tuviera las calles pavimentadas. Que no hubiera charcos y todo eso. Porque realmente, sí hay para componerlas. Porque ¿si allá en mi *ranchito*, todas están pavimentadas – en Papantla? *Todas* las calles, las escalinatas; todo, todo está pavimentado."

funding if it is to adequately address the needs of the growing immigrant workforce in Reynosa. At present, Ángela Morales is the only salaried CFO organizer in Reynosa; several CFO volunteers live in the municipality and in the neighboring town of Río Bravo.

Finally, the issue of occupational health and safety also arose in a discussion I had with Dr. Cirila Quintero of *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte*. During our meeting in her Matamoros office, she mentioned that many maquiladora workers are unaware of the safety hazards that exist within the factories; many refuse to wear protective gloves, goggles or closed toe shoes because they find them to be aesthetically displeasing. An expert on labor and union issues in the maquiladoras, Dr. Quintero stressed the need for rigorous training and orientation of new hires.

Social policy recommendations

In light of the fact that out-migration from Veracruz is not likely to abate in the near future, it is essential that community leaders and municipal officials in Reynosa work to address the social, educational, safety and health needs of the city's fast-growing immigrant population. Based on both my own observations and the suggestions offered by *veracruzana* women living in Reynosa, I propose the following social policy recommendations to address the aforementioned concerns of this community:

- (1) Create more public day-care establishments and after-school programs for school-aged children and teenagers; establish support networks for single mothers.
- (2) Increase security guard presence in *colonias* both during daytime hours and after dark.
- (3) Implement drug-prevention education and rehabilitation programs for high-risk populations, youth and adults.
- (4) Initiate local road infrastructure projects to pave and repair neighborhood streets in order to prevent flooding, particularly in poorer communities located in the city's periphery.
- (5) Increase staff, funding and cross-border support for labor/human rights non-governmental organizations such as the *Comité Fronterizo de Obreras*.

One means of launching drug-prevention and rehabilitation programs would be through the Texas Department of State Health Services Office of Border Health (OBH), which has field staff in seven border communities. According to its website, the OBH collaborates with U.S. and Mexican local, state, and federal entities to reduce community and environmental health hazards in the Texas-Mexico border region. While OBH staff experts are trained in the fields of “sanitation, environmental health, toxicology, epidemiology, food safety, and policy analysis and development” (OBH 2006), the Office’s website makes no mention of drug prevention or rehabilitation services.

According to the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2005 fact sheet, the Counternarcotics and Law Enforcement Country Program has developed bilateral programs with Mexico which

focus on public information and drug prevention education to target high-risk populations, principally in urban areas and in communities along the common border. The projects support community-based, non-governmental organizations working to get young people off the streets, away from drug abuse and crime, and involved in healthy alternative activities. Material support includes printed material and outreach programs, as well as a curriculum for drug abuse and crime prevention. The U.S. also supports a small community-based program in Ciudad Juárez that assists victims of domestic violence associated with partners who abuse alcohol or illicit drugs. (U.S. Department of State 2005)

At present I am unaware as to whether any such projects are being undertaken in Mexican communities in the Rio Grande Valley region. It would be advantageous for other local non-profit organizations such as CEFPROD HAC to play a role in initiating substance abuse prevention and community-building programs in Reynosa.

The annual Border Governors Conference, during which governors of the ten states comprising United States-Mexico border region convene to discuss topics relating to economic development, education, health and the environment, among others, is one forum in which the important issues of personal safety, children’s welfare and community building could and should be addressed (Border Governors Conference 2005). Another is the annual *Foro Social Fronterizo*, or Border Social Forum, which will take place for the first time this October in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (Foro Social Fronterizo, 2006).

Finally, Mexico’s *Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales* (Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources or SEMARNAT) and the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have taken great strides towards improving environmental health in the border region. Efforts made by the Texas-Coahuila-Nuevo León-Tamaulipas Regional Task Force have been particularly successful in reducing water, land and air contamination; reducing exposure to chemicals due to accidental chemical releases; and training border businesses and local governments in pollution prevention (Border 2012 U.S.-Mexico Environmental Program 2006). Future projects should also assess the needs of residents in local communities, particularly those that have sprung up literally in the backyards of Reynosa's industrial parks.

In sum, based on my research findings, I suggest that more should be done in Reynosa in terms of developing community-based initiatives focused on single mother support networks, childcare and after-school activities, safety and transportation issues within the *colonias*, and labor rights in the maquiladora industry.

VII. Future research possibilities and conclusion

Future research on this topic could adopt an even more activist approach, focusing more heavily on the needs of recently-arrived *veracruzana/o* immigrants and lower-income individuals living under precarious conditions in Reynosa's *viviendas populares*. The women whom I interviewed all resided in government-subsidized housing, the majority within a short distance of each other. Moreover, at the time of the interviews they had all been living in Reynosa for a number of years and had stable employment.

It would also be advantageous to research the strategies of labor recruiters who are targeting increasingly remote *pueblos* and ranches in Veracruz – and in Mexico's rural interior in general – to contract people to work in the maquiladoras along the border. These populations are unfortunately far more exploitable, as they are generally unfamiliar with industrial work and are largely unaware of their labor rights. Recruiters are known to offer people free rides north, coupled with promises of quality housing opportunities, good salaries and optimal working conditions. Unfortunately, however, these often prove to be nothing but empty promises (Nancy Hernández, personal conversation, June 9, 2006).

In addition, future investigations should take into consideration the following questions: As Reynosa continues to grow, what kind of public services will be made

available to the burgeoning immigrant population? And though new jobs are being created, what kind of working conditions do these positions offer?

One of the fundamental goals of the present research project is to spark much-needed discussion on the creation of healthful social policies in the Mexican border town of Reynosa, Tamaulipas. The study brings visibility to the everyday experiences of maquiladora workers living in the heart of Mexico's export-processing zone by incorporating their voices, perspectives and personal photographs into the research. The findings presented in this report are preliminary, as I expect to analyze my interview data more in-depth during the coming semester. In closing, it is my hope that this tapestry of oral histories and photographs will offer a window into the lives of *veracruzana* immigrant women and illustrate how they have been affected by the broader global economy.

VIII. List of people interviewed and contact information

While in Reynosa I interviewed eight women and one man who migrated to the border from the state of Veracruz. All of my *veracruzana* interviewees are, or were at one time, employed in Reynosa's maquiladora industry. During my stay in Tuxpan, Veracruz, I conducted informal interviews with the sister and brother-in-law of my host in Reynosa. Contact information has been withheld in order to protect the privacy of selected interviewees.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Migration from other states in Mexico to the municipality of Reynosa

| YEAR | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| REYNOSA | 62,356 | 54,976 | 39,626 | 93,404 | 162,146 |
| | % | % | % | % | % |
| Coahuila | 13 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 5 |
| Guanajuato | 11 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 4 |
| Nuevo León | 36 | 29 | 25 | 24 | 14 |
| San Luis Potosí | 8 | 10 | 10 | 14 | 11 |
| Veracruz | 2 | 6 | 10 | 15 | 38 |
| Zacatecas | 6 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 2 |
| Other | 30 | 39 | 41 | 32 | 28 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Source: Plan Municipal de Desarrollo 2005-2007. 2005: 18. Reynosa, Tamaulipas City Council.
 Internet. Available at
http://www.reynosa.gob.mx/plan_municipal/plannedesarrollo.pdf; accessed August 10, 2006.

U.S.-Mexico Border Region in Texas and Four Neighboring Mexican States

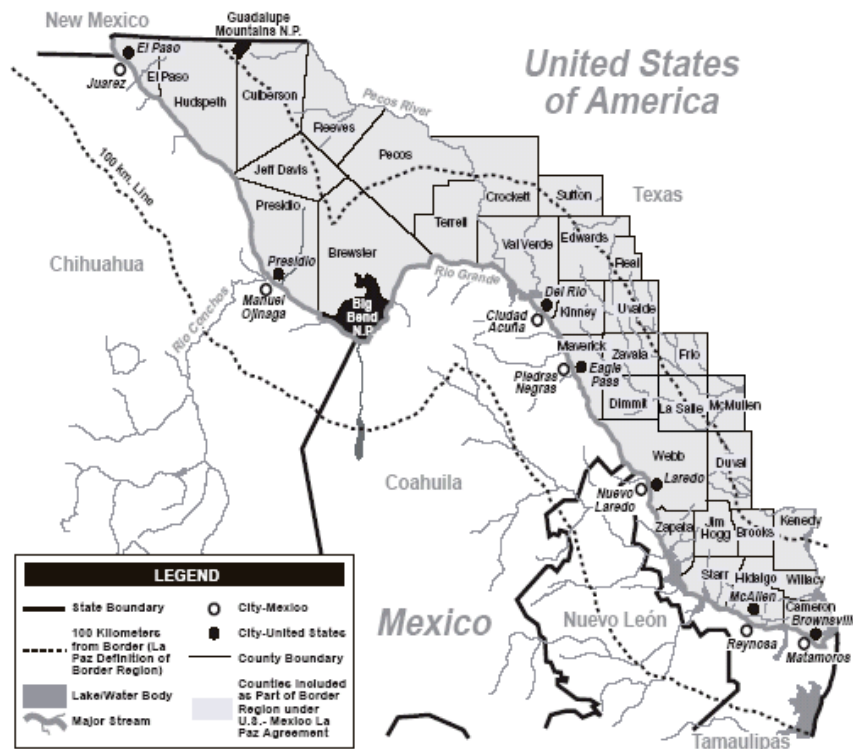


Figure 1 Sister City Pairs along the Texas-Mexico Border

Source: Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Map of U.S.-Mexico Border Region in Texas and Four Neighboring Mexican States. 2005. Internet. Available from http://www.tceq.state.tx.us/assets/public/border/us_mexico_border_region.pdf; accessed August 10, 2006.

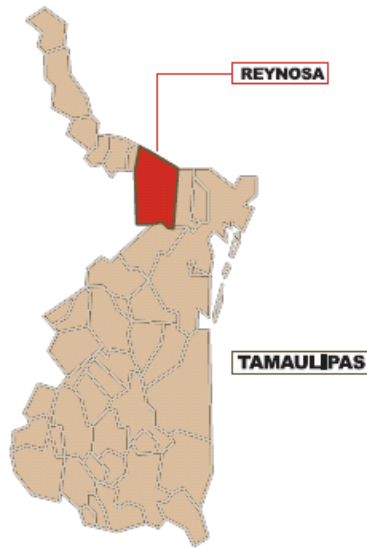


Figure 2 Map of state of Tamaulipas, municipality of Reynosa

Source: Municipal Government of Reynosa. Municipal Development Plan 2005-2007. 2005. Internet. Available from http://www.reynosa.gob.mx/plan_municipal/plandedesarrollo.pdf; accessed August 10, 2006.



Figure 3 Map of municipality of Tuxpam, Veracruz

Source: Municipio de Tuxpam. 2002. Oficina del Programa de Gobierno: Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz. Internet. Available from <http://www.tuxpam.gob.mx/>; accessed August 15, 2006.