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## No Justice Given

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# No Justice Given

## Abstract

I've spent a considerable amount of time analyzing privilege and looking at how systems in the United States often work to further oppress the vulnerable, while keeping the privileged in power. I have taken note of how my light skin, middle-class background, and young, abled body has given me opportunities and advantages others don't have. But, I hadn't thought too deeply about the privileges that come with being a natural born, American citizen. I've stood up to salute the flag every day in school, watched fireworks on the fourth of July, and generally felt proud to be an American; but, this doesn't mean I really understood the advantages I'd been afforded based on where I happened to be born. After going on an immersion trip to the U.S.-Mexican border, I understand these benefits much more deeply. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, ACLU, American Dream, Border Patrol, citizenship, discrimination, el paso, El Salvador, Gettysburg College, Guatemala, illegal immigration, immersion trip, Immigration, Juarez, Justice, Mexico, Social Justice, Texas, undocumented immigrants

## Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Inequality and Stratification | International and Area Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](https://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

**[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward**

## NO JUSTICE GIVEN

February 3, 2016



I've spent a considerable amount of time analyzing privilege and looking at how systems in the United States often work to further oppress the vulnerable, while keeping the privileged in power. I have taken note of how my light skin, middle-class background, and young, abled body has given me opportunities and advantages others don't have. But, I hadn't thought too deeply about the privileges that come with being a natural born, American citizen. I've stood up to salute the flag every day in school, watched fireworks on the fourth of July, and generally felt proud to be an American; but, this doesn't mean I really understood

the advantages I'd been afforded based on where I happened to be born. After going on an [immersion trip](#) to the U.S.-Mexican border, I understand these benefits much more deeply.

During this immersion trip, my group and I spoke with an immigrant family, visited the New Mexico American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), talked with a worker at a refugee center, visited a homeless shelter for women and children, met with an immigration attorney, and crossed the border into Juarez, Mexico, a place where many try to escape from, unsuccessfully, each year. The political and media narrative surrounding immigration in this country often goes something like this: immigrants are here to steal hard-working Americans' jobs; they come here to have "anchor babies" and abuse benefits and social programs that American taxpayers finance. They don't look like us; they aren't like us. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, these days, it is nearly impossible to cross the border legally. There are numerous reasons for this. First, the United States gives out a set number of visas per country per year. The demand for visas is much larger than their supply.

Through this trip I learned that the way the immigration process is now, in the post 9/11 era, was not the way it always was. For instance, prior to 2005, it was technically illegal to cross the border into the United States, but it was treated as an administrative issue—people passed through the border and were sent back, without detention or extreme legal action. One El Paso judge we talked to estimated that some immigrants might cross 15-25 times before any legal repercussions were taken. After 9/11 and the

creation of the Patriot Act, crossing the border once became a misdemeanor crime; immigrants are sent back to their country and given a five or ten year ban before they can try to return. If they re-enter the country a second time illegally, they are deported again and given a 20 year ban. The third time, it's a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison. If convicted, the person may have to serve prison time in the U.S. before being sent back to their country of origin; they are then given a lifetime ban and can never again apply for permanent residency or citizenship in the U.S. Can you imagine what type of situation this creates for families? For instance, we talked to a mother who tearfully explained how her husband, and father to their three children, went back to Mexico to visit his sick mother after illegally crossing into the U.S. years before. When he tried to return to his family in the U.S., he was denied access after border patrol discovered he had overstayed his travel permit (which allows for a 72 hour stay within the El Paso border area). His only way to try to return to his family and three young children was to hire coyotes (smugglers) to help him cross, at a steep price; it took over three years for him to finally reunite with his loved ones.

If caught by Border Patrol without documentation, immigrants are detained. Immigration detention centers are one of the biggest bloodstains on America's hands. They have been in our history since the 1890's, but post-9/11, their numbers and power have surged, particularly in the last few years as there has been an increase in Central American immigrants fleeing violence and persecution in countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala. Government officials justify this increase in detention centers by claiming they don't know what to do with immigrants once they've been caught without documentation. The government made contracts with private prison corporations to "house" these peoples. Corporations profit handsomely from these deals; it is estimated that it costs about \$5.5 million each day to maintain these centers. There are even detention centers specifically for families, which lock up women and children for the crime of trying to make a better life for their families, or for fleeing violence or abuse. These detention centers are headed by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which was created under the Department of Homeland Security in 2003. Their stated goal is to deport 400,000 non citizens every year.

People often wonder why immigrants don't come here legally. It seems that even the most conservative and anti-immigrant citizens admit that they would be fine with immigrants coming here in a legal process, but they don't, so they deserve to be deported. This is because many people assume, based on common political rhetoric, that it's easy to cross the border. In previous years, this was fairly accurate. In the years since, however, the border has become highly militarized and guarded. The fences are no longer porous and easy to pass through; border patrol is made up of 22,000 workers (up from 9,000 prior to the 9/11 attacks), and 18,000 of them are on the U.S.-Mexican border; floodlights surround parts of the fence, as well as underground sensors that can detect motion. Some areas of the border have floodlights, horse or car patrol, or video surveillance. New, 18-foot fences have been added to parts of the border where the fence has been deemed unfit, which cost the United States about \$2.4 billion, all under the rhetoric of securing and tightening our borders.

Beyond this, once a person petitions for a permanent residency status (green card), it can take twenty or more years for their application to be looked at. At this moment, United States Citizens who petition for their 21-year old+ child to come to the U.S. from Mexico can expect to have their application looked at in 21 years; applications from December 1994 are currently being looked at. Many Gettysburg students have lived their entire lives in the time that a Mexican citizen has waited to come here legally. Is that a realistic expectation for people who are searching for better pay to be able to support their families, to

send themselves or their children to college? They should wait two decades because the U.S. decides to give a limited number of visas through a slow and unjust process?

These types of harsh immigration policies have broken apart families, most of whom just want a better life, and some of whom are escaping extreme violence. How can a country as powerful and as wealthy as ours, one that espouses the virtues of freedom, constitutional rights, and the “American Dream” so harshly criminalize normal people, militarize ports of entry, and detain and deport people by the thousands? It’s true that America needs to keep its borders safe, and protect American citizens, but the militarization of the border seems ridiculous when the vast majority of people coming in are not violent criminals, but simply workers seeking better wages and more opportunity. America must care for its people, but we all live on the same Earth, and we occupy the same home, regardless of man-made boundaries. If we are truly proud to be Americans, we will protect those trying to flee violence; we will uphold constitutional rights for people who were not born here or don’t have the same skin color as us; and we will support policies that do not criminalize crossing a fence, that support people who seek the U.S. no harm, and, most importantly, uphold America’s ideals of freedom, opportunity, and hope.

One day during the immersion trip, we visited the border between El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico. A dusty, desert area where a nine or ten foot metal fence separates one country from another, one impoverished city from one safe and middle-class one, one life from another. While I talked with our guide, two little girls, one on a bike, approached us from their side of the fence. They spoke in Spanish, asked us how we were; we chatted briefly. They pointed to the house they lived in, not too far away. I noted that it was a weekday, but they weren’t in school. The girls were maybe six and ten, youthful innocence and curiosity driving them towards us. The fence didn’t seem to dissuade them from approaching us, the way it was maybe designed to do. Perhaps someone in their family was trying to cross this fence legally. Perhaps people they knew had tried. Certainly they didn’t fit the faces of the “illegal aliens” the United States loves to talk about: the job thieves, the lazy Mexicans. They smiled at us, a bit curiously, and said their goodbyes. As they biked away, we watched them from our side of the fence, the United States side, the promised land. We were so close, just feet apart. But I’d never felt farther away from two people.

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