Anthropology and the Proliferation of Border Walls
**AAA Initiative on Border Walls**

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, there were only about 15 border or security walls in place, or under construction, globally. Today, there are more than 70 walls worldwide. Walls on nation-state borders are an increasingly prominent focus of modern life with far-reaching impacts on human culture and well-being, and the environment we live in. Border walls have always been political symbols and today transformations of these walls (such as “virtual walls”) remain a hot topic of discussion. Border barriers are ever-present and continue to be implemented throughout the world.

Our work touches on many diverse areas of concern:

1. **Mobility** is a natural human behavior that walls attempt to void. Currently, capital and commodities move more freely than people. Walls create unequal mobility in which privileged and functional workers pass. Those who are not allowed to pass face the payment of large sums, and debt to human smugglers, and risk physical injury and death in the dangerous journey around walls. Walls—and, more widely, restrictions, checkpoints, and barriers—have cut off normal social-cultural ties across regional and local border communities that depend on informal mobility.

2. Limiting mobility chips away at human rights. Enclosures set limits on basic and meaningful human goals and needs: to gain a livelihood, seek asylum, or avoid danger. But there is also a “domino effect” when people do not even try to move through walls and other barriers, despite fear of persecution and hope for a better life. They recognize that the path to such hopes is physically dangerous, and often lined with victimizers. The accumulation of waiting people in camps and towns in the midst of danger and extreme exploitation, and even the trips never taken, despite compelling reasons, need much more penetrating attention.

3. Walls politicize space. Symbolic or political drivers, such as nationalism, underlie and are the foundation of walls. The discrepancy between official formal policy claims for a supposed need of walls and the actual reality and results of walls spotlight the political symbolism embedded in the ideology of walls. An enclosed inside distinguished from an “othered” outside, or a “threatening other” contained from spilling out. Walls are often implemented after periods of “crisis,” mostly national, but also class-based in the case of gated communities. This includes the closure that concentrates refugees and asylum seekers into camps and settlements.

4. Walls are not limited to human-made physical barriers. Obstacles to entry include checkpoints on movement paths or belts of concentrated enforcement near boundaries. New detection technologies, “virtual walls,” identify moving people and conveyances, and aim to inhibit them. Geographic obstacles, such as the Mediterranean Sea or perilous deserts, may be used as barriers by design. Walls are materialized forms of spatial-social exclusion, deployed unequally against some but not all people.

5. Placing rigid barriers across the landscape obstructs ecology. The result of such physical borders is a disruption to breeding diversity for many moving animals; habitat destruction through wall building itself, and reconnecting or blocking the flow of surface water. These walls also damage cultures tied to the free flow of ecology.

6. Walls have important effects on health. People are harmed by actually trying to cross a border (sometimes falling from the wall, or being shot at by border guards), but walls also bar people from seeking out better healthcare services.

**Walls of the Past**

Regional barriers have existed since the eighth millennium BCE in ancient Western Asia. The first long walls were not meant to exclude people or animals, but rather to corner wild herd animals in collective hunts. It was not until the late third millennium BCE that politically centralized regimes of sedentary populations erected walls against mobile human groups: purportedly barbaric nomads.

With the major empires around the beginning of the Common Era in China, Persia, and ancient Rome, walls became a widespread political means that fundamentally transformed geographies of power. Typical “border zones” were characterized by an economic boom in the wake of a strong external military presence; increasing intensity of trade through checkpoints and thus a mutual cultural development of hybridization on both sides of a supposedly rigid border; an economization of border maintenance through the use of natural elements, such as rivers, vegetation, and dry river beds; and the gradual disintegration of border regimes, primarily brought about by political and/or economic change. Although even then, there was great social—and often class-based—division whether walls were a good idea or a successful enterprise worth maintaining.

Eventually, all walls collapse or are demolished and therefore will be a failure, as is the case for all political regimes, monuments, and other projects that are meant to last for eternity. If anything, the uselessness of walls can be measured economically, but the main simplifier in present-day imaginations is the framing of historical walls as sanitized tourist sites.

Cover photo: The Berlin Wall. Credit: Ievgen Shyypko, Adobe Stock

Walls of the Past

Fortress in Ivangorod, on the western border of Russia. Credit: IgiGoSokolov, Stock

Narva Castle in Estonia and Ivangorod Castle in Russia. Credit: Nauhm, Adobe Stock
Checkpoints as “Walls”

If mobility occupies a central place in human history, obstacles to mobility in the form of low- and hi-tech mechanisms to control, monitor, and regulate it have been an integral part of that history. With checkpoints, the right to mobility becomes twisted into a privilege for some and a contingent, monitored, and controlled system of encumbrances and violence for others.

As anthropology took up the study of human mobility, checkpoints in Palestine and Sri Lanka became sites for ethnographic research, or “cartographies of anticipated violence.” Identities are at the core of what checkpoints are meant to accomplish: verify identities and determine selective action.

Checkpoints are modular structures, composed of multiple components that are themselves mobile and can be fairly quickly set up and taken down or moved. State borders, whether at an airport, train depot, seaside port, or land border, usually involve a fixed port of entry and checkpoint where identity documents are examined and decisions are made as to entry.

Aside from relatively fixed state checkpoints, there are checkpoints run by non-state actors. These pop up during armed conflict and civil strife with often dangerous and deadly consequences: think Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Palestine, southeast Turkey, Rwanda, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.

At a checkpoint, social orders and hierarchies such as race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and religion are at work, and identity documents become critical in determining rights to mobility and levels of violence inflicted on those seeking to pass. Checkpoints to verify health status may become more prevalent as epidemics travel the globe. These barriers also control the scope and pace of worker movements across international borders.

Today’s Virtual Walls

A virtual wall refers to electronic and optical surveillance over a borderline or zone. It may be combined with physical barriers, or just used to inform enforcement crews. Border enforcement zones are already heavily saturated with passive, but powerful, detection technologies, used by humans, but the common rhetoric of “virtual walls,” both in production and reception, removes human action from the scene, and possibly reduces the sense of (but not the reality of) responsibility for an ethically controversial issue.

Physical barriers may dissuade some casual crossers, but long-distance migrants persistently attempt to cross them. With this in mind, many border patrol agents view sensors and, to a lesser extent, cameras with human operators, as valuable secondary devices aiding border enforcement. But acting on such surveillance fundamentally depends on human policing initiative and coercive force.

Virtual walls are put forward as alternative, improved magical solutions to physical walls, and rely on:

- Satellites
- Drones
- Fixed cameras (that detect light and heat)
- Local and over-the-horizon radar
- Movement sensor data
- Data processed through artificial intelligence.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection has already made two major, expensive, and failed attempts at a virtual wall. Surveillance equipment that works well in laboratory experiments often does poorly under real world conditions, easily confused by livestock and dust storms. The virtual wall is an imagined goal that continually comes back from the operational dead, perhaps for social-political reasons.

Most responses to border technologies and the virtual wall—including critical ones—focus on technology, security studies, and individual privacy. More attention should be focused on the unequal application and consequences, often racialized, of such practices.
Anthropology and the Proliferation of Border Walls

Life in the Borderlands

The “rebuilding” of borders and new construction of physical walls has increased the separation, and “othering” of people and territories globally.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, global borders manifested new forms of openness, flexibility, and cooperation. Increased migration, immigration, and refugee movement from Africa to Europe, Mexico and Central America to the United States exemplified transnational and global processes amplifying the flow and settlement of people, commerce, and trade on and across borders.

For example, the people who live along the Mexico-U.S. border, and in the borderlands, are in origin primarily communities with deep historical roots in the border region. In addition to the people of Mexican descent, this includes Indigenous Native American Communities often absent in the analysis of the Mexico-U.S. Border. The wall imposes tumultuous effects stifling free movement and tribal sovereignty, as well as stripping Indigenous peoples of sacred natural resources.

The “built border” challenges the broadly disseminating process of the borderlands and bi-national communities. From antiquity to the recent present, human settlement, travel, and mobility across and within border regions was part of the broader global demographic present throughout Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, and is perhaps best exemplified in Mexico and the United States. Anthropology illustrated how the Mexico-U.S. border was a membrane, through which people lived their lives strategically.

But today, we see a nation-state dynamic that aims to fortify, block, secure, and systemically control and contain people, while allowing trade, commerce, and non-human objects through nation-state corridors. But the underscoring of immigration controls, antiterrorism, and the actions and policy of countries throughout the world have reinscribed the nation-state on borders and in people’s lives. Walls are now part of these rebuilt borders.

India and Bangladesh

Migration has been a livelihood strategy of East Bengalis for many centuries, and today is still common across Indo-Bangla borders for business, employment, medical treatment, visiting relatives, and so on. The Indian government, however, argues that the scale of this movement is “illegal” and “undocumented.” While some move to visit relatives residing in India after partition of 1947, the vast majority migrate as wage laborers. Reasons for movement across this border tend to be more varied than along the Mexico-U.S. border.

Border walls, ports of entry, checkpoints, and surveillance systems are political acts. Anthropological investigation enables us to see how they have unstated goals and effects that are essential in their social analysis.

In the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands are small bazaars filled with Indian goods and offering money exchange, mobile phones, and Internet services. There are also a high number of borderland wage laborers from Bangladesh connecting their homesteads (baris) and their fields to the other side of the fence. These paddy fields have all been managed by Bangladesh peasants. Their livelihoods are threatened by the Indian militarization and their surveillance through building fence walls.

The everyday interactions between Bangladesh and Indian citizens make it clear that the inhabitants need to maintain informal relations with the border guards and many other brokers to enter. In both ends, inhabitants are keen to attend social events, such as weddings and funerals, and engage in agricultural activities as laborers.

As at the Mexico-U.S. border, many attempt to keep their personal relations with kin residing in the United States. In contrast to many other borders in the world, however, Bangladesh and Indian families are sharply divided by the number of fences, which are clearly visible.

The hierarchy of the country influences the borderlands. A weak state like Bangladesh always maintains “friendship” when border disputes happen. With a situation of human rights violation facing many migrants across the borderlands, the study of the impact of walls has recently become urgent to many scholars, both inside and outside anthropology.
Anthropology and the Proliferation of Border Walls

On the Mexico-U.S. border, U.S. policy is victimizing people fleeing violence, including children, through the expansion of immigration detention, the separation of families, and the curtailment of asylum rights. The path for people to the U.S. border is rife with threats of violence from cartels and gangs. Women are especially vulnerable and report threats, sexual violence, and rape. Asylum seekers have experienced physical violence, beatings, kidnaps for ransom, and shootings.

The U.S. Government’s “Migrant Protection Protocols” (MPP) implemented in January 2019, seeks to prevent asylum seekers from entering and remaining in the United States and forces them to stay in Mexico. Migrant families that have been forced to stay in Mexico have been subjected to kidnaps, beatings, and rape, especially at the hands of drug cartels.

Under MPP guidelines, exemptions for “vulnerable” people are being ignored as, for example, LGBT asylum seekers have been deported even though they are targeted with violence. Migrants returned to Mexico risk homelessness as shelters are overwhelmed and at capacity. Thousands of migrants who came during the 2018 migrant caravan remain in Tijuana.

The United States is the only country in the world that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and has violated the obligations under international human rights conventions by separating children from their parents, placing them in immigration detention, and in some cases pressuring parents to accept deportation in order to reunite with their children. Approximately 8,000 families were separated from their children at the border.

Meanwhile in Palestine, Israel has occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem for over 50 years. The illegal occupation systematically discriminates against the indigenous Palestinian population through a complex set of mechanisms and policies of control that include a wall, checkpoints, permit and identity card systems, land confiscations, and house demolition. These areas are divided by:

- An eight-meter-high wall, cutting deeply into the occupied West Bank, dividing communities and separating villages from their cultivated and common-use lands.
- Gates and checkpoints controlling Palestinian entry and exit. Over 500 checkpoints in the West Bank control and monitor Palestinian mobility.
- Israel’s unlawful appropriation of property by an occupying power amounts to “pillage,” prohibited by The Hague Regulations and Fourth Geneva Convention, and is a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Barbed wire fence, Germany.
Credit: manfredxy, iStock

Human Rights Violations

Global Environmental Impact of Walls

With 80 percent of its densely populated landmass lying near sea level, Bangladesh is often hailed as “ground zero” for climate change. It is predicted that a one-meter rise in sea level could flood almost one-fifth of the country. Some of the most vulnerable coastal districts in Bangladesh—Khulna, Satkhira, and Bagerhat—lie along India’s border and would be the worst hit. According to the Indian government, the fence is meant to prevent terrorism, smuggling, and “infiltration” into the country. But as climate change potentially forces millions of Bangladeshis from their homes, the fence will also prevent many of them from finding shelter in India.

Changes to river management in upstream India will also cause profound effects on river flow in downstream Bangladesh, which has historically relied on high levels of irrigation, both from rainfall and its deltaic rivers, for food production. The Israeli wall around the West Bank threatens local flora and fauna and causes environmental degradation. The wall isolates, fragments and, in some cases, has inflicted significant damage on agricultural land, forests, grasslands, and water resources. Along with the wall, the continued building of settlements and bypass roads are pushing many species of local flora and fauna to the brink of extinction and pose a threat to local biodiversity. Most significantly, the impact of prolonged occupation and its measures to impede Palestinian development and acquire their lands have worked to rupture the ties between the indigenous population and its land and natural resources.

During heavy rains, drainage channels running under the wall often become blocked by debris. However, Palestinians are not permitted to approach the wall to clear blockages due to security restrictions, which causes sewage waste overflow onto adjacent lands. Soil contamination ensues and the health risks of waterborne diseases increases.

International Border Wall Separating the United States and Mexico.
Credit: CREATISTA, iStock

Alpine meadows in Austria, Steinplatte.
Credit: Ludmila Kormaier, iStock

Environmental activists in Germany identified a large number of animals and plant species in the vicinity of the now-open wall that had found a convenient niche during the wall’s 40-year existence. With some effort by citizens’ initiatives, a protected “Green Belt” was created in place of the former wall. The former “Iron Curtain” became a nature preserve in the mid-1990s.

In the mined strip between North and South Korea, a unique ecological niche has also formed. Despite the immense safety apparatus on both sides, shy animal species find a suitable habitat due to the absence of humans.

It could seem as if a deathbelt for humans represented a welcome lifebelt for fauna and flora; however, this misses the initial large-scale ecological damage from building walls and fencing. It also overlooks the ecological side effects of blocking the movement of people, such as flooding and erosion.
Walling Infectious Diseases Within and Without

Quarantine, in contrast, is the temporary restraint or segregation of people within, or coming into, a society who may have had contact with transmissible pathogens. Lazarettos were one of the most paradigmatic institutions used to observe quarantine during medieval and post-medieval plague outbreaks in Europe, and saw the creation of sanitary policies for humans, goods, and how to avoid infection spread within and outside the quarantine station or lazaretto walls.

Dubrovnik, now part of Croatia, was one of the first medieval cities to organize a pesthouse or lazaretto to fight plague outbreaks starting in 1377. From the mid-18th century, the lazarettos that had been erected in so many different Mediterranean ports still formed a health-related barrier around a civilization.

The COVID-19 pandemic is pushing us to revise the implementation of quarantine beyond quarantine stations. Lazaretto-style quarantine is no longer viable for an entire city or modern urban society, where the globalized and interconnected world makes it quasi-impossible to sustain long periods of isolation for most members of the society.

Instead, creating an immunological wall is a more modern approach. Immunizing humans against infectious disease can create population clusters where virtual immunological walls have been erected and a pathogen is closed out. But "presumed" immunity can concentrate political and economic power, and perhaps generate more powerful and divisive walls than city walls in ancient cities or quarantine stations, with access to immunization often unequal across class and race.

Looking to the Future

The American Anthropological Association’s Task Force Report emphasizes the catastrophic and negative aspects of the regions in which border walls and fences have been constructed. Yet it is crucial to recall that these are also places people call “home,” and in which daily lives are lived. Borders need to be viewed as social systems in which communities are built on specific local strategies through kinship, economy, local politics and the connections between both sides of national demarcations.

The tools of social science are well suited for re-examining overt justifications for border walls. For example, Israeli walls imposed on the Palestinians are openly justified in two ways: the enclosure and transfer of territory within an expansive racist-demographic vision of the future; and protection from external threats. But covertly, Israeli walls or checkpoints also fragment and shatter Palestinian society as a potential polity, deprive them of resources, rendering them more dependent and proletarian, and reinforce long-standing patterns of dependent labor commuting to Israel. Finally, in this overt/covert framework it is always important to remember that state projects are subject to incompleteness and failure, avoidance and resistance, and paradoxical or perverse outcomes.

History consistently shows that using a wall to enclose states and societies has never fully succeeded with its intended outcome. Economic exchanges and social relationships defy borders because borders (including walls) often cross existing human geographies, and because interactions are actually encouraged by borders, resulting in bonds and communities.

The global phenomena of walls, borders, and checkpoints serve as obstacles to mobility, constitute a violation of human rights, and inflict harm and suffering. As such, they are in dire need of re-evaluation. Decades of anthropological research covering the sweep of human history across the cultures of the world provide a substantial case to take action on the intertwined mechanisms to impede human mobility.
Acknowledgments

The Proliferation of Border and Security Walls
Task Force Members:

Josiah Heyman (Chair)
Roberto Álvarez
Julie Peteet
Reinhard Bernbeck
Zahir Ahmed
Fabian Crespo
Jeff Martin, AAA Staff Liaison

Contact:

Jeff Martin
Director, Communications & Public Affairs
American Anthropological Association
2300 Clarendon Blvd.
Suite 1301
Arlington, VA 22201
Phone: 571.483.1163
jmartin@americananthro.org

www.americananthro.org