

San Diego's South Bay:

Imperial Beach

A Basic Study Guide

Prepared by the Sierra Service Project

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Introduction

SSP is very excited to be working in San Diego's South Bay this summer. San Diego is a diverse, fascinating and beautiful place. It is California's second largest county and home to over 3 million people. San Diego has beautiful beaches, world-class universities, powerful corporations, military installations, and iconic tourist attractions. Together, San Diego and its southern neighbor, Tijuana, Mexico, compose one of the world's largest bi-national metropolitan regions. Though these two cities exist in different countries, their populations, economies, and social phenomena are incredibly intertwined. As a common phrase explains, "When San Diego sneezes, Tijuana catches a cold."

Our new San Diego site is located in Imperial Beach, one of seven communities and cities that make up the South Bay of San Diego. This beach city will host the majority of our volunteer projects this year. With an estimated population of 27,400, this classic beach town embraces the fact that it remains relatively untouched compared to other coastal communities. The City of Imperial Beach (often referred to as "IB") emphasizes their natural landscapes along the southern coast and their artistic features within their 4.5 square miles. We will also be doing work Chula Vista, National City, and San Ysidro.

Our goal this summer is to celebrate the vibrancy of San Diego while also learning about the various systemic inequalities and challenges the community faces. This study guide will focus on three different aspects of the San Diego South Bay experience: the environment, immigration, and poverty/income inequality.

San Diego: The Basics

San Diego is a large city divided into a number of different areas, which are in turn composed of individual neighborhoods. About 20 miles south of San Diego (5 miles from Imperial Beach) is the U.S.-Mexico border and the city of Tijuana. Some SSP volunteers will be making a day trip to Tijuana this summer. Everyone will have the opportunity to visit the border region, either on the U.S. or Mexico side.

San Diego has a very strong economy overall. It is driven primarily by military and defense-related activities, tourism, international trade and manufacturing.

The greater San Diego region, in contrast to its luxurious popular image, is home to hundreds of thousands of people who struggle to survive in poverty. While the County of San Diego has a poverty rate of 12.4%, the City of San Diego lands at 15%. Imperial Beach surpasses this with a 19.5% poverty rate.

SSP will be staying at the South County Boys and Girls Club, in the heart of the community we intend to serve and understand. It is centrally located in Imperial Beach, surrounded by family friendly facilities like the public library, a spacious park, and a new dog park. City Hall and the Imperial Beach United Methodist Church are just blocks away.

San Diego: A Global Crossroads

We think it is very useful to think about San Diego in terms of three independent phenomena that come together in San Diego in a very unique way:

- 1) The international border,
- 2) Immigration, and
- 3) International refugee resettlement.

The Border: The Line Between Us

You may hear the expression, “We didn’t come to the border; the border came to us.” This expression reflects the fact that the City of San Diego existed long before the current border between the U.S. and Mexico was established in 1850. San Diego continues to be home to a vibrant, local Spanish-speaking community and culture whose roots go back to the Spanish and Mexican period.

San Diego grew rapidly in the period from World War II through the early 2000’s. People were attracted to the area by jobs in the military and in private industry. The gentle, warm climate has made the region an attractive place for retirees.

As San Diego grew, so did Tijuana, just to the south of the border. During Prohibition in the 1920’s, Tijuana established itself as an entertainment center, with horseracing, gambling, prostitution, and alcohol readily available. Its economy was largely based off of the United States’ vices and tourism activities. As San Diego has grown as an industry powerhouse and with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1990, Tijuana has become a major industrial center, producing goods for the U.S. and Canadian markets. It now homes approximately 1.7 million people within 296 square miles.

With all of this population growth and economic activity on both sides of the border, it is not surprising that the San Ysidro border crossing (the one closest to the City) is the busiest border crossing in the world! At least 40 million people - more than the entire population of California - cross the border into the U.S. each year; a combined average of 120,000 commuter vehicles, 6,000 trucks, and 63,000 pedestrians cross in both directions daily.

Most of the people crossing the border are commuters who live in Tijuana and work somewhere in the greater San Diego area. Real estate prices, as well as rents, are high in San Diego. Many low-wage workers have opted (or have been forced) to live in Tijuana, where housing is much more affordable. Crossing the border daily, these commuters will spend several hours each day traveling between their homes and jobs.

To combat illegal border crossings and the perceived threat of terrorists and criminals, the U.S. Government has significantly ‘hardened’ and militarized the border in the past decade. The actual border now consists of a network of multiple fences, electronic monitoring posts, and special roads patrolled by Border Patrol agents. There are now about 20,000 border patrol agents stationed along the entire U.S.-Mexico border. As a result of these changes, few illegal border crossings occur in the San Diego portion of the border, and there has been an increase in crossings in the deserts of Arizona, where several hundred people die each year.

Immigration

An immigrant is defined as someone who moves from one country to another, usually with the intent of taking up permanent or long-term residence in the new country. San Diego's strong economy and location has attracted immigrants from all over the world, particularly from Mexico and Latin America. While some immigrants are well educated and find employment in San Diego's universities or high tech industries, most find employment in low-wage service, construction, or industrial jobs. San Diego attracts both legal, or documented, and undocumented immigrants.

Refugees and Refugee Resettlement

San Diego is home to a large refugee community. What is the difference between an immigrant and a refugee? Both refer to people who have taken up residence in a new country. The difference, generally, is that a refugee is someone who has been forced, usually by war, persecution, or natural disasters, from their home. In contrast, the voluntary decision to immigrate is usually based upon the desire for better economic or educational opportunities, or to re-unite with loved ones.

This is a very important distinction. Although the plight of immigrants, particularly people immigrating illegally, is very hard, many refugees have endured war, famine, violence, and years of living in refugee camps before coming to San Diego.

Globally, there are at least 13 million people whom the United Nations classifies as refugees. (This does not include 5 million Palestinians living in UN-supervised camps or what are known as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). IDPs are people who have been forced from their homes by wars and natural disasters, but have not left their country of origin.)

What typically happens in a regional conflict, like the ones taking place currently in Iraq and Syria, is that hundreds of thousands of people flee their homes. At times, international organizations like the Red Cross set up temporary "camps," which are really small cities, and provide emergency housing, food, water, schools, and sanitation for these people. Generally, families have been forced to leave behind most of their possessions. Camps are, of course, crowded and often unhealthy places to live.

Resettlement is the process of getting people out of their camps (or homes, in some cases) into a permanent living situation in a new country. The United States government controls the resettlement of refugees into the U.S. and each year. In 2013, the US admitted 90,000 individuals as refugees. People from Iraq (about 20,000 resettled), Burma (17,000), Bhutan (9,100) and Somalia (7,600) made up over half of the total. Often, refugees are part of persecuted minority groups within the home country and, at the same time, are victims of war. This is the case with Chaldean Christians, who make up a major portion of the Iraqi refugee population. It is also the case of the Karen people from Burma, who make up most of the refugees from Burma. Some Karen have fought the Burmese government and the Karen region is occupied by the Burmese military. According to the Cultural Resource Orientation Center, "reports of human rights abuses, including forced labor, the burning of villages, arbitrary taxation, rape, and extrajudicial killings, continue to emerge from Karen State."

Others, like the Somalis, are victims of war and famine.

The San Diego region has a significant population of Iraqi, Karen, and Somali refugees, both in the City of San Diego and in El Cajon. In fact, San Diego is the top location in California for refugee resettlement and has one of the highest percentages of refugees in the nation.

Challenges. What are some of the challenges experienced by refugees? Obviously, the experience of being forced from your home, abandoning your possessions and the community you grew up in, and coming to live in a strange place, unable to speak the language, surrounded by people who don't look

or dress like you, would be incredibly hard. Because of this, there are many groups who work to help refugees get resettled and adjust to their new life in their new home. Refugees need help in many areas, including:

- Medical services to help with the effects of injury, malnutrition, and poor medical care.
- Clothes, furniture, and household supplies.
- Food.
- Language training.
- Educational assistance.
- Legal assistance.

Environment

The border region presents unique environmental challenges to overcome. Tijuana's water collection and treatment center, located up the hill and across the border from the Tijuana River Estuarine in San Diego, serve a population far greater than it was originally constructed for. As a result, it has regular, hazardous sewage spills that affect the ecosystem and local population on both sides of the border. Especially during the rainy seasons, the water quality in Imperial Beach is drastically below required standards.

Since the 1990s, California state policies have largely discouraged bi-national collaboration to find a solution. However, the current local government in Imperial Beach has been hyper-focused on this crucial problem in recent years. Mayor Serge Dedina, elected in 2014 and up for re-election this year, is also the Executive Director and co-founder WILD Coast, a bi-national non-profit entirely focused on oceanic preservation. According to the City's website, "Serge helped secure tens of millions of dollars to build a new sewage treatment plant along the U.S.-Mexico border." These efforts, however, have yet to prove on-the-ground results, as another sewage spill in February, 2018, shut down Imperial Beach water access for days.

Conclusion

Enjoy San Diego! It is a wonderful, vibrant place to visit. Your work in this city will improve the lives of those living there.