

Operation Streamline

By [Joanna Harader](#)

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They are brought into the Tucson, Arizona, courtroom 70 at a time. Brown-skinned people, mostly men. Dusty jeans. Faded t-shirts. Calloused hands. Muscled arms. Weary faces.

They are already seated when we enter. Quietly taking our seats in the back. It's hard to see the handcuffs and chains, because they sit with their hands in their laps, their shoulders hunched. But we hear the chains rattle each time a man stands up. Which they have to do when the clerk calls their case number and name.

"Tony Ramirez." Then the clanking chain and the voice: "*Presente.*"

"Alberto Yañez"—clink, clang: "*Presente.*"

"Fausto Palma-Guifarro"—clink, clang: "*Presente.*"

"Mauro Arboleda*"—clink, clang: a defiant, "Here."

The seven women as well. Seated separately up front. Rising when their name is called, lifting the weight of the chains that connect their handcuffs to their waist to their leg shackles.

"*Presente.*"

They are all here, of course. Where else could they be?

At this point it depends on the judge. One judge convicts and sentences all 70 prisoners in half an hour. The judge that presides on the day we visit takes longer. Maybe three hours. Just over two and a half minutes per person.

All of these people have been caught crossing the border between Mexico and the United States. They do not have the papers that would make this crossing legal. And this is not the first time they have crossed. "Illegal re-entry" is a felony. All of these people have agreed to plead guilty to the lesser charge of "illegal entry"—a misdemeanor.

The vast majority of them wear earpieces that I assume provide the Spanish translations of the judge's questions.

Is that your true name?

Do you understand the charges?

How do you plead?

"*Culpable.*" "*Culpable.*" "*Culpable.*" "*Culpable.*" "Guilty."

"Please speak Spanish," the judge instructs. "It is easier for the translator."

During the trial a federal marshal walks across the court room to wake up a prisoner who has fallen asleep, head resting on the back of the chair, mouth slightly open.

A lawyer asks that his client be sent to a prison near the one to which the judge will send her husband, who is also in court that day. This request is granted.

After the guilty pleas comes the sentencing. Sixty days minimum. Some sentences are a hundred days or more. (A private prison will receive over \$100 of tax-payer money per day per prisoner.)

Each prisoner's lawyer must remove the earpieces for their clients, whose wrists are bound together and tethered to the chains around their waists.

We have a clear view of the prisoners' faces as they leave the court room after the sentencing. Most faces are stoic, staring ahead. They have been here before. Some heads are bent, watching the slow, steady progress of their feet, shuffling against the constraints of the shackles. They have been here before. One woman wails silently, head thrown back, tears streaming down her face. She has been here before.

Seventy people. Every day.

Lord, have mercy.

*These are not the names of actual prisoners who were tried the day I witnessed the court proceedings. These are the names of individuals whose stories you can find on the "[We Are America](#)" web site.

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