

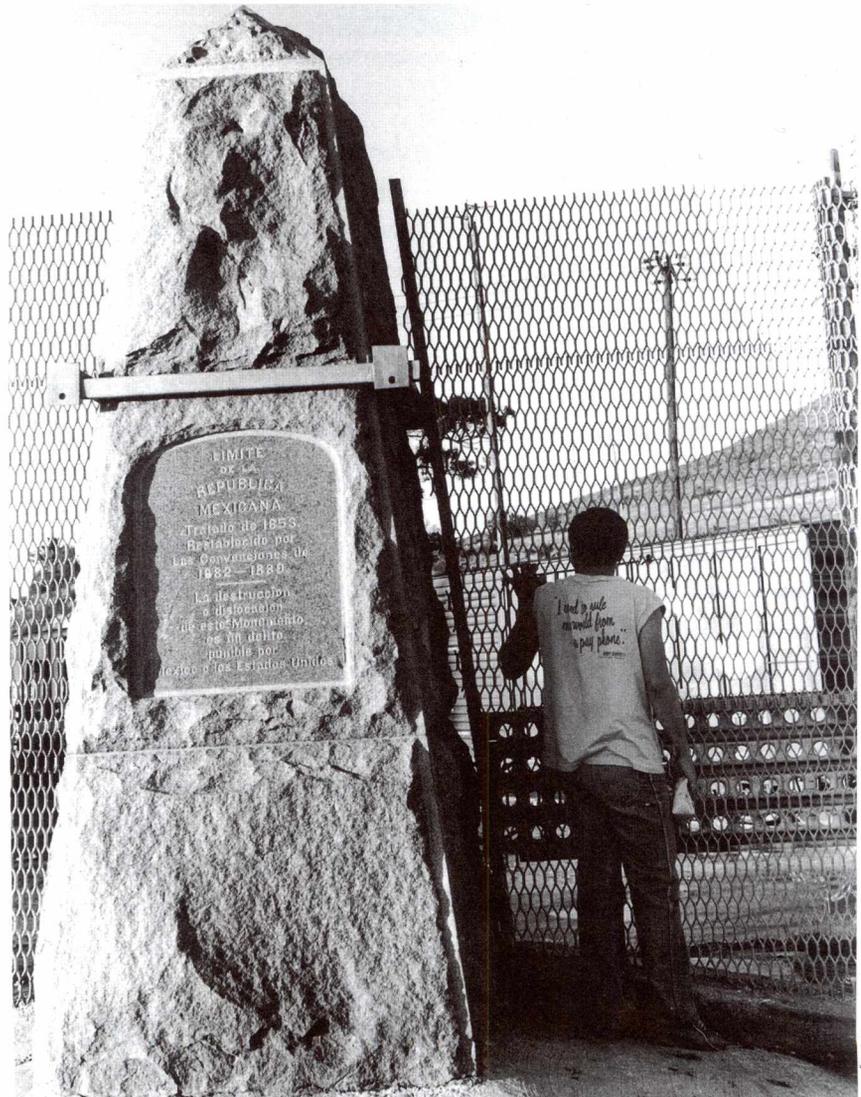
# U.S.-Mexican Relations

## From Understanding to Collaboration on Migration?

*Remedios Gómez Arnau\**

Last October 21, the Working Group on Migration and Consular Affairs, a body of the Mexico-U.S. Binational Commission, released the first U.S.-Mexico Binational Study on Migration. In March 1994, Mexico proposed this unique study to the United States so that respected, independent academics from both countries could review Mexican labor migration to the U.S. and attempt to build a data base and a common perspective on the question. Mexico made the proposal on the basis of the understanding that government positions on the question on both sides of the border would be unlikely to coincide if they were not situated in a more objective, serene framework. Therefore, the participation of scientists from both countries was not only indispensable, but also opportune, given civil society's growing input on international topics, previously the exclusive province of government representatives.

The study was done from 1995 to 1997. Its Mexican coordinators were the Foreign Relations Ministry and the



Photos by Marco Antonio Cruz / Imagenlatina

Mexican migration to the U.S. is deeply rooted in history, going back to the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico border in 1848.

\* CISAN Secretary of Academic Affairs.



Emigration has been a systematic drain on the population in Mexico since 1960.

Ministry of the Interior, as well as the National Autonomous University of Mexico, represented by the author of this article. For the U.S., the coordinator was the Commission for Immigration Reform, created in 1990 by the U.S. Congress, with a mandate until the end of 1997. The 20 researchers (10 from each country) who did the study work in different disciplines and academic institutions all over Mexico and the United States. A plural representation of points of view and thorough familiarity with the topic was consciously sought when picking the researchers to ensure that migration would be broadly and profoundly examined without any one focus dominating.

The study has five chapters: "Quantification of Migration," "The Characteristics of Migrants," "Causes of Migration," "Economic and Social Effects in Both Countries" and "Responses to Migration." It also includes a conclusion dealing with policy implications. The

researchers reviewed the existing literature, developed new analyses, visited the migrants' different places of origin and destinations and talked to them and their families and neighbors. They also commissioned other experts from both countries to do research projects on specific aspects of migration. Therefore, a good deal of the information in the study was already familiar to specialists in the topic. Its main contribution is bringing together scattered information about Mexican migration to the United States and integrating a bilateral view of the whole phenomenon.

The development of this binational perspective is, therefore, one of the main merits of this study, which allows for more reliable estimates since they are based on both Mexican and U.S. sources, which both contrast with and complement each other. The study also facilitated a greater understanding of the problem as a whole because it incorporated the points of view of both countries about the kinds of migrants

to take into consideration, the reasons behind their move, the costs and benefits implied for both countries and the motives behind the responses both governments and societies have made to migration. In addition, the study incorporates new contributions in interpretation culled from the bilateral information and elements of analysis; these contributions should not only enrich the academic debate, but, mainly, facilitate political dialogue between both countries.

The study's main conclusions are the following:

1. Mexican migration to the United States is a complex, dynamic phenomenon, with deep roots in history that go back to the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico border in 1848, and particularly the 1870s, when the first considerable flows of Mexican workers were attracted by work in U.S. agriculture and railroads.

2. Today, a considerable part of migration continues to be economically motivated due to wage differentials that affect the supply and demand of labor; it is also sustained by family and social networks that link the two nations.

3. There are three basic kinds of Mexican migrants: temporary (authorized or unauthorized), whose main place of residence is in Mexico; permanent (authorized or unauthorized), who habitually reside in the United States; and naturalized citizens of the United States, who have legally resided there for five years or more and fulfilled other prerequisites.

4. In 1996, the total estimated number of U.S. residents who were born in Mexico was the following:

- Total population born in Mexico: 7.0 to 7.3 million;
- Authorized residents: 4.7 to 4.9 million;
- Unauthorized residents: 2.3 to 2.4 million.

This represents approximately 3 percent of the total U.S. population and about 40 percent of the U.S. population of Mexican descent; it is equivalent to 8 percent of the population of Mexico. These figures include 500,000 people who have become naturalized U.S. citizens. In addition, in 1996 there were about 11 million native born U.S. citizens of Mexican descent, or Mexican-Americans.

5. The 1980s brought a massive increase in authorized Mexican migration, to a great degree due to the legalization program approved in 1986. In the 1990s, authorized migration from Mexico continues to be considerable given that the relatives of Mexicans with legal status could become permanent residents. It is estimated that at least a million relatives of persons who achieved legal status will comply with the prerequisites to be able to request authorized entry into the United States.

6. Data from Mexican censuses and indirect means of measurement show that emigration has been a systematic drain on the population in Mexico since 1960. The net emigration from Mexico from 1990 to 1996 was approximately 1.9 million people, or about 315,000 per year. Of these, approximately 510,000 are authorized migrants; 210,000 are relatives of migrants given legal status by the 1986 law; 550,000 are migrants given legal status by the Special Agricultural Workers Program; and 630,000 are unauthorized migrants.



The violation of unauthorized migrants' human rights is a constant source of bilateral tension.

7. The exact number of unauthorized entries of Mexicans to the United States is unknown, but in the fiscal year of 1995, more than 1.3 million people were detained attempting to enter the United States without going through the regular border inspection. However, that figure registers the number of thwarted entries, not of individuals who made the attempts.

8. Studies on the Mexican border about temporary migrants show that the number of persons going back and forth between 1993 and 1995 declined (the flow going south to north dropped from 790,000 to 540,000, and north to south, from 624,000 to 433,000). This drop in the rate of circulation could have different explanations, the most plausible of which is that many people are deciding either to establish residency in the United States or prolong their stays. This, in turn, may be due to the fact that crossing the border is being made more difficult by greater controls, that whole families

are migrating and that migrants increasingly work in less seasonal, urban jobs.

9. More than half of temporary migrants work in agriculture: 13 percent of the permanent residents work in this sector, while less than 10 percent of Mexicans who have become naturalized U.S. citizens do. Thus, migrants are increasingly urban and have diversified employment, moving into manufacturing and service jobs and with different destinations from the traditional ones in the states of California, Texas and Illinois.

10. Today, the new employers and labor brokers and agents, together with the social networks of relatives and friends, match up a growing list of industries, jobs and geographical areas in the United States with a likewise growing list of Mexican communities which send migrants north.

11. There is reason to believe that today's high levels of Mexico-U.S. migrants could be at their peak. In the



Seeking a better future, regardless of the obstacles.

next decade, the changes in Mexican demographics—which will mean a lower number of individuals in the age group that tends to migrate—and other structural changes in both Mexico and the United States—like the creation of more jobs due to the growth of the Mexican economy and a greater supply of low skilled U.S. workers due to their exclusion from social assistance programs—could begin to decrease both migratory pressure and opportunities.

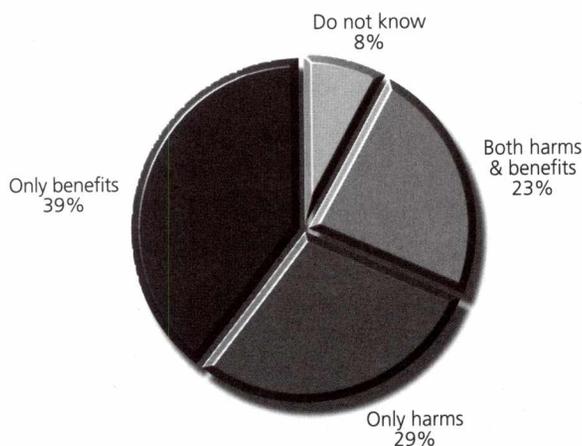
12. A balanced evaluation of the impact of migration is difficult to make because of the lack of data. However, it may be stated that migration has diverse effects and produces both benefits and costs to both countries.

Today, a considerable part of migration continues to be economically motivated due to wage differentials that affect the supply and demand of labor; it is also sustained by family and social networks that link the two nations.

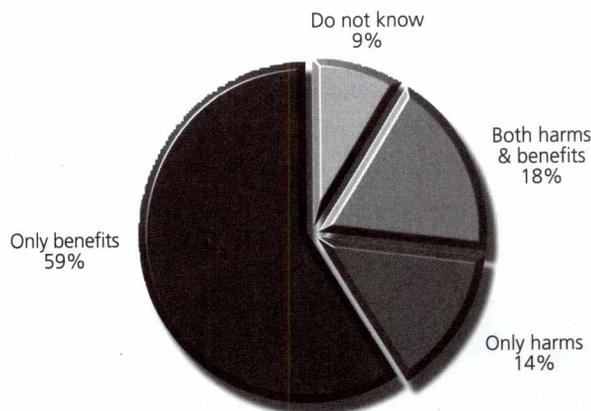
13. The money migrants send home plays an important role in many Mexican communities, but migration also creates costs because of the loss of human capital and social disintegration. Also, these transfers of funds differ greatly from one migrant to another, depending on his or her earnings in the U.S. and the costs of his/her trips back and forth. In addition, most of migrants' earnings do not accrue to the Mexican economy but are spent in the United States. All monies sent by migrants from the U.S. to Mexico in 1995 were the equivalent of 57 percent of the hard currency put into direct investment in the same year and to 5 percent of the total earnings from Mexican exports.

## Perceptions About the Effects of Migration

On the Mexican Economy



On the U.S. Economy



Source: Mori de México 1997. Sample size is 1,150.

Taken from: *Estudio Binacional México-Estados Unidos sobre Migración, 1997*. (Mexico City: Foreign Relations Ministry [SRE]-U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, 1997), p. 59.

14. Those who most benefit in the United States from Mexican migration are the migrants themselves, companies, consumers and the economy. The highest costs are incurred by state and local governments and low-skilled workers. In the labor market, the costs arising from migration are above all for the “substitutes” for that labor: that is to say, the new Mexican migrants compete mainly with other low-skilled workers, above all, earlier Mexican migrants who are now residents. From the fiscal point of view, Mexican are no more likely to use social services than are comparable U.S. citizens. Temporary migrants and recent residents depend very little on governmental services because they are young and often their very unauthorized status means that they do not fulfill the requirements to have access to them. When the research into residents shows that U.S. state and local governments pay more in services to families born in Mexico than they receive in taxes, this is to a great extent due to the

fact that their low incomes imply lower taxes. The greatest cost is linked to education, which may be seen as a drain on public funds, but it also may be seen as an investment in the future.

15. Unauthorized migrants are sometimes victims of abuses and violations of their human rights, both by government officials and people who traffic in migrants on both sides of the border. This is a source of binational tension.

16. Mexico’s and the United States’ political response to migration have been episodic and, given the influence of pressure groups, migration policies have often been contradictory and have had unexpected results.

17. The policy of opening up the border to trade and investment but not to labor generates a situation in which bilateral tensions tend to continue.

18. The study points to the advantageousness of greater dialogue and more mechanisms for consultation, with an eye toward the future, to facilitate bilateral cooperation in finding mutually be-

neficial solutions to unauthorized migration between Mexico and the United States.

19. The demand, supply and networks for migration are all contributing factors to migratory flow and therefore, all solutions must take these three factors into consideration, be multifaceted and be applied in both countries.

20. The economic and social integration of Mexico and the United States implies a greater need to accommodate, and even facilitate, the mobility of individuals between the two countries. Both nations should facilitate authorized movement and reduce barriers to the authorized entry of migrants.

21. The two countries should explore ways of optimizing the benefits and minimizing the costs of migration, for example, by lowering the costs of money transfers and helping families to use them for production. They should also continue to do research and collect binational data.

22. The United States and Mexico should carefully study the idea of setting up a bilateral foreign worker program. However, it must be taken into account that a program of this type could stimulate the creation of new migratory networks which would add to the flow of new migrants and not substitute unauthorized migrant workers.

23. Attention should be given to ways of alleviating the distress and difficulties caused by migration in Mexican communities, particularly the separation and break-up of families.

Clearly, the binational study deals with Mexican migration northward from different angles, thus providing a substantially complete panorama of the phe-

nomenon. Its results are expected to be useful to promote new research into little studied topics and to propitiate more effective dialogue between the two countries, with the aim of managing migration better. However, the question remains open as to whether a more complete comprehension of the phenomenon will also lead us to mutual collaboration. **MM**

### Major Historical Periods In Mexico-to-United States Migration

1870-1890	U.S. recruitment for southwestern railroad construction and agriculture; Mexican Consular Law of 1871 provides for protection of Mexicans abroad with respect for local sovereignty;
1891-1917	U.S. laws restrict Mexican (and Canadian) land admissions; U.S. World War I recruitment (including some Canadians and Bahamians); Mexican consular report of wage abuses of Mexican workers in the U.S.
1920s	U.S. Border Patrol considers undocumented entry a misdemeanor with penalties attached and expulsion of Mexicans on "public charge provisions" are common;
1929-1933	Depression in the U.S.; repatriation of Mexicans partly funded by Mexican and private aid groups with frequent promotion by Mexican consulates;
1940s	World War II; Bracero Agricultural Workers Program begins, jointly negotiated by both governments (also a smaller railroad program from 1943-1946);
1951-1952	Upon third renewal of the bracero program, Mexico suggests U.S. measures against the employment of unauthorized workers, but U.S. adopts "Texas Proviso" making it a felony to import "illegal aliens" while exempting employers from culpability;
1954	Negotiations for a new bracero agreement break down though U.S. continues recruitment; Mexican government attempts unsuccessfully to stop emigration; massive U.S. deportations of unauthorized workers under "Operation Wetback;"
1964	End of the bracero program;
1980s	U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) imposes sanctions on employers who knowingly hire unauthorized workers and legalizes 2 million unauthorized residents; U.S. Asencio Commission recommends economic development to address unauthorized flow; Mexico reinforces and expands its consular protection of Mexicans abroad;
1990s	Bilateral dialogue on migration increases; North American Free Trade Agreement signed; U.S. strengthens border control; new U.S. laws on expeditious removal of unauthorized migrants and to restrict welfare benefits to legal immigrants; the Mexico/U.S. Binational Study on Migration is carried out.

**Taken from:** *Estudio Binacional México-Estados Unidos sobre Migración, 1997.*

(Mexico City: Foreign Relations Ministry [SRE]-U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, 1997), p. 2.