

# The Insertion of Migrants in the U.S. Labor Market

Elizabeth Gutiérrez Romero\*



Jessica Rinaldi/Reuters

Throughout its history, the United States has distinguished itself as the great host for people seeking opportunities to improve their lives and those of their families. Today, the adverse conditions prevailing in many places lead thousands to try to enter this labor market, even at enormous risk, to get a job and become part of that society or send remittances to ensure their families survive in their countries of origin. As a counterpart to these needs, one incontrovertible condition exists: the U.S. economy requires immigrant labor for areas with low participation of the native-born.

The U.S. market itself points to the kind of workers required to cover the demand in specific jobs and industries, whether highly skilled or low skilled. However, migration policy has not been able to effectively keep up with these needs; despite the existence of several kinds of visas for temporarily covering market demand, they are insufficient and

do not correspond to the market's complexity. That is why today's estimates put the numbers at several million undocumented workers in the U.S. labor market —sometimes working for decades— who are trying to regularize their immigration status and are pushing to make U.S. immigration policy more flexible or to reform it altogether.

TEMPORARY AUTHORIZED  
OR DOCUMENTED MIGRATION

Available official data specify the kinds of temporary work visas in the United States. The H-1B visa is for highly qualified workers, that is, people with higher education and professional experience. U.S. companies are in charge of initiating the paperwork for these kinds of professionals to temporarily immigrate; they must show that no resident or native-born workers exist with the professional or academic competencies required for the jobs available. This kind of visa allows the immigrant to work for up to six years; after that, the person

\* CISAN researcher and academic secretary, eliza@unam.mx.

must leave the country and wait a year to apply again for an H-1B visa.

The number of available visas may fluctuate. However, in recent years, it has averaged at 65 000 a year, which restricts the arrival of engineers, physicists, or technicians that the U.S. productive sector requires.<sup>1</sup>

The H2 visas were created in 1943 to satisfy the need for workers in the sugarcane industry, supplied by laborers from the Bahamas. The program changed in the 1980s, dividing the visas into two still-valid categories: the H-2A visa for agricultural workers with jobs in sowing and harvesting crops, and the H-2B visa for non-agricultural workers for jobs related to gardening, construction, forestry, and cleaning personnel. The latter visa is limited by a quota specified by Congress, currently at 66 000 workers a year.

No quotas exist for H-2A visas, but the employer must exhaust all possibilities for hiring among residents and/or nationals. In addition, the process is only practical if there is enough time to hire a large contingent of workers to deal with a specific harvest since the employer must travel and recruit the workers from the other country or hire an international employment agency to do the recruiting.

The Department of Homeland Security publishes an annual list of countries eligible for H-2A and H-2B visas, and that determination is valid for one year after publication. The number of low-skilled workers legally admitted is considered very small since neither the H-2A nor the H-2B visa covers the demand for these kinds of workers.<sup>2</sup>

## UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION

Taking into consideration PEW Research Center information, the non-authorized immigrant population in the United States is estimated to have reached its peak in 2007 at 12.2 million. However, with the recession that began at the end of that year, this kind of immigration went down considerably, and by 2009 was estimated to have dropped by one million persons, to finally level off at 11.7 million people in early 2012.<sup>3</sup>

By 2008, 76 percent of all undocumented immigrants, or about 9 million of the 11.9 million total, were estimated to be of Latino origin, and nearly 7 million were Mexican.

Census information from 2010 confirmed the increase in the population of Latin American origin, including those of Mexican origin, in the United States. With a total of 308.7 million inhabitants, of whom 50.5 million were of Hispanic or

**The non-authorized immigrant population in the United States is estimated to have reached its peak in 2007 at 12.2 million to finally level off at 11.7 million people in early 2012.**

Latino origin, 32 million were of Mexican origin. The latter have been widely distributed throughout the U.S., although, naturally, there is a higher concentration in five or six states. This can be represented graphically as shown on the map.

But, in which sectors of the U.S. economy do unauthorized migrants work? A great majority labor in very specific areas like agriculture, construction, and certain services related to food processing and cleaning, where native-U.S.-born workers have very low participation.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of unauthorized immigrants are low-skilled workers without high levels of schooling in their countries of origin, which is why they are concentrated in low-paying occupations.

Pew Research Center reports show that these immigrants participate to a large degree in certain occupations, such as, for example, farming (25 percent); building, grounds-keeping, and maintenance (19 percent); and construction (17 percent).

A very high percentage of these immigrants participate in some specific construction jobs: 40 percent of bricklayers and 37 percent of drywall installers are undocumented workers.<sup>4</sup>

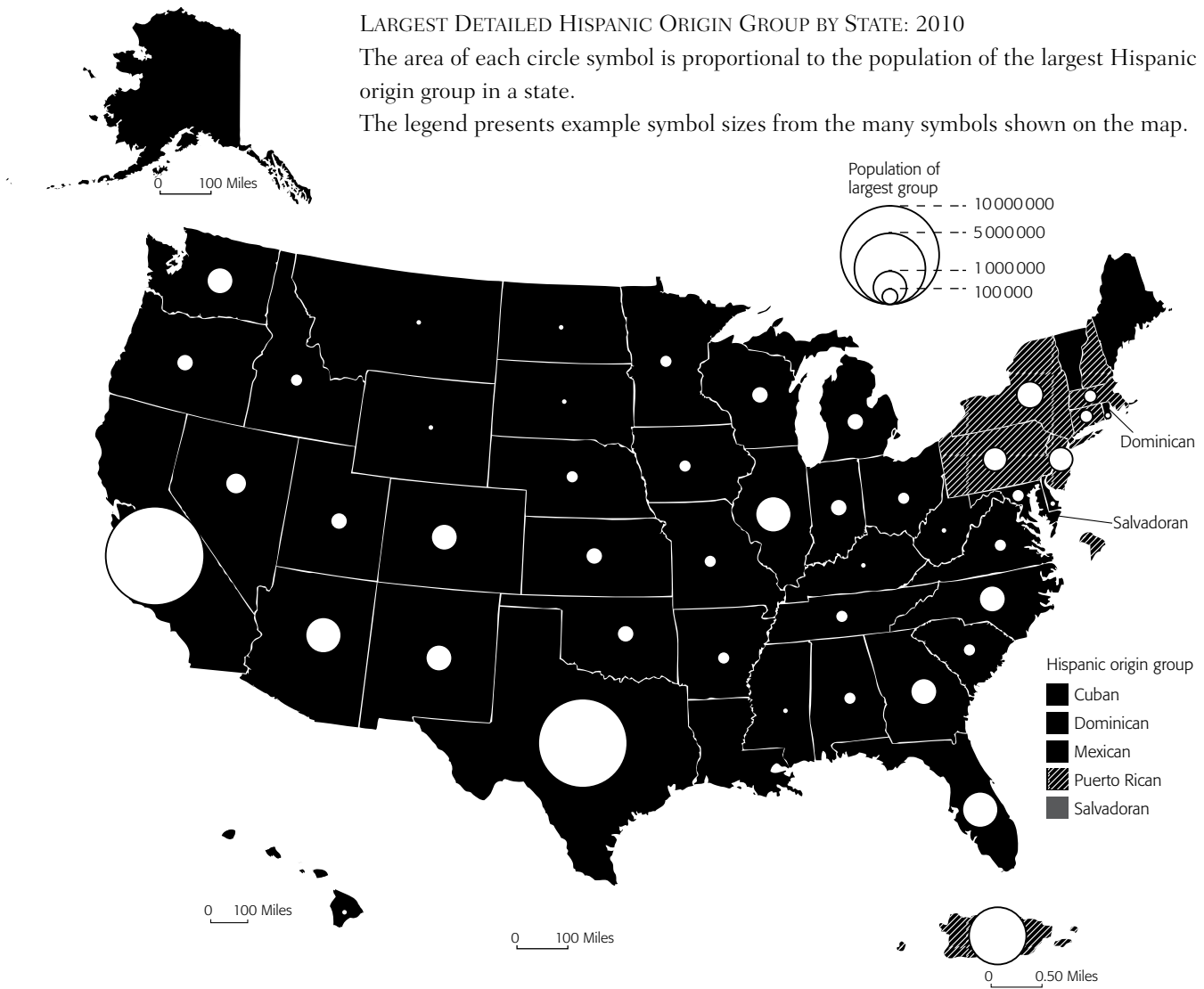
The foregoing is consistent with recent data about Mexican migrants returning to their country after the crisis that began in the United States in 2008, as reported by the Survey on Migration on Mexico's Northern Border. Some figures exist about this group of workers that jibe with the PEW Hispanic Center data. There have been changes in Mexican migrants returning from the United States and the sectors they enter into: the agricultural sector went from 26.7 percent in the 1999-2001 period to 17.8 percent in the 2010-2013 period. By contrast, the number of Mexicans returning to go into construction rose sharply in the same time period, increasing from 24.4 percent to 40.9 percent, reflecting the crisis in the U.S. real estate sector.<sup>5</sup>

Certain jobs in construction also showed very high participation in the 2010-2013 period: one of every three returning migrants had worked in the United States as a bricklayer; painter; plumber; flooring, tile, insulation, or air-conditioning installer; or an applier of waterproofing for buildings or other constructions. The second most important activity percentage-wise was agricultural work.

LARGEST DETAILED HISPANIC ORIGIN GROUP BY STATE: 2010

The area of each circle symbol is proportional to the population of the largest Hispanic origin group in a state.

The legend presents example symbol sizes from the many symbols shown on the map.



Source: The Hispanic Population: 2010 Census Briefs, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>.

NOTES

CONCLUSION

A first reflection that the analysis and estimates made with the information available lead to is that unauthorized migrant workers complement the labor by native-U.S.-born employees and contribute to solving the problem of low-skilled, low-waged workers in the U.S. market. In addition, despite some assertions of possible competition for these jobs by U.S. workers lacking professional studies, this seems practically impossible since the activities where migrants are concentrated are very low-paid. ■■■

- <sup>1</sup> See [www.inmigracionusa.com/visa-de-trabajo.html](http://www.inmigracionusa.com/visa-de-trabajo.html), accessed July 13, 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> See [http://spanish.monterrey.usconsulate.gov/h2\\_visas\\_de\\_trabajo.html](http://spanish.monterrey.usconsulate.gov/h2_visas_de_trabajo.html), accessed June 29, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel, D'Vera Cohn, and Ana González-Barrera, "Population Decline of Unauthorized Immigrants Stalls, May Have Reversed," <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/09/23/>, accessed July 3, 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States," Pew Research Center, April 14, 2009, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/04/14/a-portrait-of-unauthorized-immigrants-in-the-united-states/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Orlando García Vega and Érika Zamora Ramos, "Características laborales de los migrantes mexicanos que regresan a México desde Estados Unidos. Un análisis de 1999 a 2013," *20 años de la Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional de Población, 2014).