

Mexican Migration to the United States

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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SOCIETY

Migration from Mexico to the United States depends on demographic, economic and social factors. Outstanding among them are those linked to the supply/expulsion and demand/attraction of the Mexican labor force and migrants' ties to relatives and friends, both in their communities of origin and destination. In this article we will explore the importance of some factors on the supply side.

Our hypothesis is that the evolution of demographic and economic factors are changing the conditions that trigger the flow of migrant workers from Mexico and will contribute to its gradually decrease. Therefore, studying the direction those changes will take, as well as their specific character, may aid in formulating migratory policies both in Mexico and the

United States. Before examining those factors, it will help to have a more precise idea of the size and character of Mexican migration to the U.S. over the last few decades.

PROFILE OF MEXICAN MIGRANTS TO THE U.S.

In the 1960s, just after the Bracero Program ended, Mexican migration to the United States was predominantly circular: young people and adults from rural areas went to the U.S. as temporary agricultural laborers and six or eight months later returned to their homes. A great many of them came from a small number of rural communities in seven or eight of Mexico's states that had established migratory traditions since the beginning of the century. Today, this profile of Mexican migrants is no longer valid.

Some of the most important changes are the following:

1) *Regional diversification of migration.* The geographical origin of migrants is no longer limited to traditional states and municipalities. This does not mean that people from those areas migrate less, but rather that the overall flow has increased. Puebla, Hidalgo, the State of Mexico, Mexico City and Morelos, not originally sources of migrants, are currently the starting point for a great many.

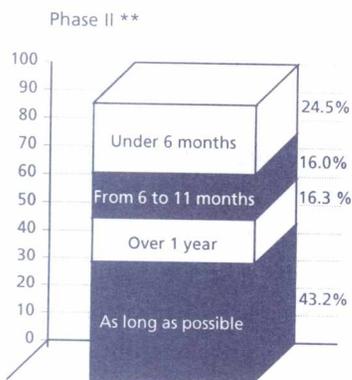
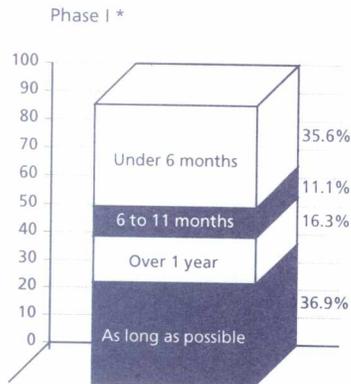
2) *A notable increase of migrants from urban areas.* Evidence suggests that the great urban centers and some intermediate cities not only absorb internal migration, but are also a jumping-off place for migrants to the United States. For example, in recent years the Mexico City metropolitan area has become an important source of emigrants to the United States.

3) *Migrants' occupational and sectoral diversification both inside Mexico and in the United States.* Agriculture is no longer the sole or main occupation of migrants, either in their place of origin or their destination.

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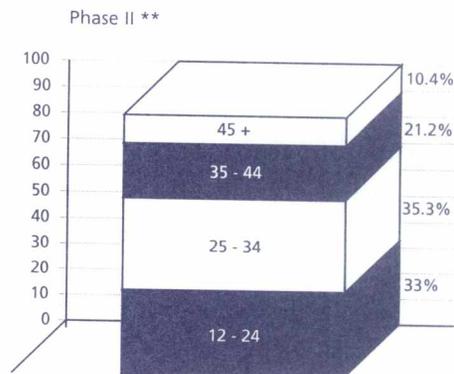
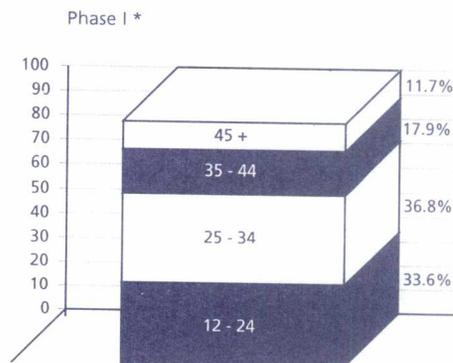
Mexican Immigrant Workers
In the United States by Expected Length of Stay



*Phase I: Mar. 28-Dec. 13, 1993.
**Phase II: Dec. 14, 1994-Dec. 13, 1995.

Source: Survey on Border Migration (EMIF).

Mexican Immigrant Workers
In the United States by Age



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Source: Survey on Border Migration (EMIF).

In sum, the flow of migrants toward the United States has taken different forms throughout recent decades, following a more complex, heterogeneous pattern. Also, as will be seen next, the flow of migrants is large and growing.¹

¹ According to Wayne Cornelius, these changes intensified in the 1980s as a result of four main factors: a) changes in the Mexican economy; b) changes in the U.S. economy; c) the effects of modifications in U.S. immigration policy, particularly the legislation passed in 1986; d) the consolidation of social and family networks that link places of origin with destinations, thus increasing the probabilities of migration. Wayne Cornelius, "The U.S. Demand

THE SIZE OF MEXICAN MIGRATION

One of the dimensions of migration most easily prey to conjecture and speculation is its size. This is at the center of the controversy and public debate, both in Mexico and in the United States, because the impact of migration depends, to a great extent, on its size.

To establish a conceptual framework for measurement efforts, interpret results and evaluate the impact

for Mexican Labor," in Wayne Cornelius and Jorge Bustamante, *Mexican Migration to the United States*, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, San Diego, 1989.

of migration, both on communities of origin and of destination, it is important to recognize that Mexican migrants are not a single, homogeneous whole, but rather fall into relatively distinguishable groups. The main ones are the following: 1) *settlers*, or people with more or less permanent residence north of the border; 2) *sojourners*, or migrant workers without fixed U.S. residence but who regularly enter and leave the United States to work or to look for work and, 3) *commuters*, or people who reside in Mexico and for different reasons go back and forth across the border.

Today, the problem of the size of migration is expressed in different questions:

- How many Mexicans, whether documented or undocumented, are in the United States at any given moment? Of these, how many reside there?
- How many work or seek employment in the United States at some time of the year but live in Mexico?
- How many Mexicans enter the United States annually to either live or work?
- How many return to Mexico in the same period?
- What is the net flow?

Many methodological and technical problems must be overcome to obtain precise, up-to-date answers about all the different kinds of migration.² Measurement efforts have included a broad variety of methods and techniques that can be classified in two groups: 1) direct methods that imply locating and listing the migrant population,³ and 2) indirect methods based on using incomplete

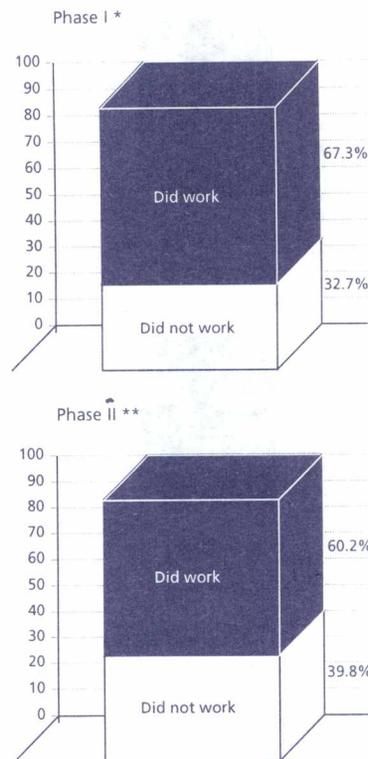
or partial information and combining different demographic variables.

SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANT LABOR

The Survey on Border Migration (EMIF),⁴ carried out jointly by Mexico's Border College, National Population Council and Ministry of Labor, has been an inestimably valuable information source for directly measuring the magnitude and characteristics of migrant labor to the United States. Some of the most outstanding findings on migrant labor derived from the survey are the following:

- Migrant workers are predominantly male.
- Migrants are mainly youth and adults of working age.
- Migrant workers usually had a job in Mexico before traveling to the United States, although recently the number of those who did not is on the rise.
- Migrant labor continues to come mainly from states that have traditionally fed Mexican migration: Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas, among others.
- Mexico's urban areas—defined as cities with more than 15,000 in-

Mexican Immigrant Workers in the U.S. By Economic Activity Before Emigrating



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Source: Survey on Border Migration (EMIF).

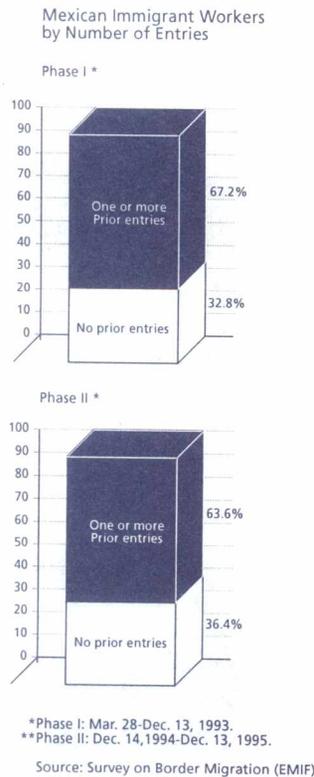
habitants—are the starting point for most migrants, although there has recently been a slight increase of migrants from rural areas.

- California is the main destination for migrant workers and this preference increased in the period under study.
- The percentage of those planning to stay for more than six months in the United States is on the upswing.
- Migrant laborers in the main have a history of migration to the United States, although recently the number of people who have never been there has risen.
- Most migrants are undocumented, authorized neither to enter the U.S.

² In addition to the difficulties in quantifying migration under any circumstances, the very nature of the movement toward the United States complicates the process: among the most important factors that cloud it is the surreptitious character of much of it, the migrant population's constant renovation, the indeterminate length of migrants' stay in the U.S. and the considerable number of people who return to Mexico, even after long residence abroad.

³ The operational difficulties in actually counting this population in the United States (among other things, because undocumented migrants are afraid of being caught by U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service officials) is the reason that these procedures have been, up to now, more the exception than the rule.

⁴ The EMIF, a continuing survey carried out for observational purposes and to generate data, is inspired in statistical biology techniques used to quantify mobile populations. It conceives of migrant workers as units in movement, observed at certain moments and at certain places on their migratory route and identifies different target populations. The first phase of the EMIF began March 28, 1993, and ended 12 months later; its second phase included all of 1995.



nor to work there. This trend has accentuated recently.

- The number of migrants who enter the U.S. without documents for both the first time and a repeat stay is increasing.

PERMANENT EMIGRATION

Along with the flow of temporary migrant laborers, others go to the United States to set up permanent residence; their numbers have been estimated both through direct and indirect methods.⁵

An important source for directly measuring permanent migration are

⁵ These moves often reunite families or imply whole families migrating at the same time, which explains the increasing number of women immigrants.

surveys done of sample households in Mexico since the late 1970s. The Survey of the Demographic Dynamic (ENADID, 1992) is the most up-to-date study of this type.⁶ Among its questions designed to measure migration is whether any member of the household went to live in the United States in a specific time period.

This procedure has some limitations which, taken all together, tend to underestimate the magnitude of permanent emigration. However, the figures are very useful. According to these sources, about 1,823,000 people left Mexico to live in the United States between January 1988 and November 1992. Of those, 973,000 continued to live there at the time of the survey (permanent emigrants), and 850,000 had come back to Mexico to live (returned migrants, or returnees).⁷ This gives us an annual average of 195,000 and 170,000 people respectively.⁸ The first number represents the net annual balance of migration to the United States.

⁶ This survey has important advantages, outstanding among which are the following: a) its national coverage; b) the considerable size of its sample (64,000 households nationwide), which allows for using and interpreting the data by state; and c) its use of different approaches, complementary to a certain extent, for quantifying some of the different forms of migration.

⁷ R. Corona and R. Tuirán, *México: medición de la migración internacional con base en la Encuesta Nacional de la Dinámica Demográfica de 1992*, a U.S.-Mexico binational study on migration, Mexico City, 1996b, mimeographed.

⁸ The distribution of permanent emigrants and returnees follows a well-known pattern: returnees tend to be young men in their early working years who are heads of families; permanent emigrants tend to be unmarried young men.

The ENADID figures bear out the idea that there is massive migration of the population and that a considerable number of Mexicans return after living a while in the United States. It has also confirmed that migrants now come from a much larger portion of the country than simply from places with migratory traditions.

Given the difficulties in directly measuring migration, indirect procedures are frequently used. Even when they offer far from definitive or conclusive results, they contribute to considerably reducing the margin of uncertainty.

Mexican efforts produce results consistent with the demographic trends of the Mexican population and, in general, are compatible with estimates made in the United States.⁹ U.S. studies reveal that the drop in Mexican population due to international migration has accentuated since 1970 and is estimated to be in the following ranges:

- 1) between 1,200,000 and 1,550,000 in the 1970s, and
- 2) between 2,100,000 and 2,600,000 in the 1980s.

Figures indicate that estimated migration in the last two decades was considerable, and its impact on demographic growth is perceptible. In fact, in 1980, approximately 2,500,000 people living in the United States had been born in Mexico; in 1990, that number reached 4,500,000. This rep-

⁹ R. Corona and R. Tuirán, *Estimación del saldo neto de la migración internacional de residentes mexicanos en el quinquenio 1990-1995*, a binational U.S.-Mexico study on migration, Mexico City, 1996c, mimeographed.

resented 3.6 and 5.4 percent, respectively, of the population resident in Mexico in the same years.

Indirect measurement using Mexican informational sources revealed a net balance of 1,400,000 permanent migrants for the 1990-1995 period, a yearly average of about 280,000.¹⁰ With regard to the reliability of these figures, it should be pointed out that they differ very little from those derived from indirectly generated U.S. data (using the April 1990 Census and the September 1994 Current Population Survey) which estimated a net balance of 1,560,000 migrants, an annual average of 340,000, for the same period.¹¹ Estimates put the figure at slightly more than 6,100,000 people living in the United States in 1995, who had been born in Mexico, a number equal to about 6.6 percent of all residents of Mexico in the same year. Some indications suggest that about 35 percent of those U.S. residents, or about 2,150,000 people, may be undocumented.¹²

There are Mexicans residing in the vast majority of U.S. states and counties, although they tend to be concentrated in particular counties in California, Texas, Illinois and Arizona, which account for about 90 percent of all Mexicans living north of the border.

¹⁰ This figure, which is higher than those for the decade of 1980 to 1990, gives us a yearly negative international migratory rate of 0.31 percent. See R. Corona and R. Tuirán, op. cit.

¹¹ F. Bean and J. Van Hook, *Estimates of the Size and Growth of the Illegal Migrant Population of Mexican Origin in the United States*, a Mexico-U.S. binational study about migration, Texas, 1996.

¹² Ibid.

DEMOGRAPHIC TENDENCIES AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Changes expected in the size and composition of the Mexican population, particularly the inertia implicit in the division of the population in different age groups, may have an important effect on the future make-up of migrant labor. Demographically, it is of interest to ask the speed with which Mexico's working age population will grow in the future. When will the drop in Mexico's birth rate that began in the late 1960s have a noticeable downward effect on the growth in potential supply of migrants?

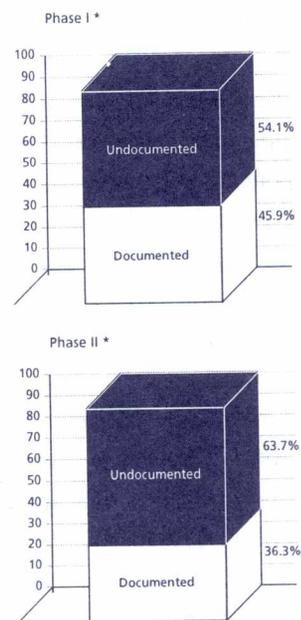
Using official national and state population projections, we have explored the implication of two possible scenarios for the 1996-2010 period. One scenario presupposes that current international migration patterns will continue as a constant; the other presupposes that migration stops altogether as of 1996. Our study concentrates on projecting the group of men and women between the ages of 15 and 44, since 70 percent of migrants are part of this group.

Using the first scenario, given the premises for birth and death rates, internal migration and a constant rate of international migration set at current levels, the total population of Mexico in the 15- to 44-year-old age group:

a) would increase from 44,500,000 in 1996 to 56,100,000 in the year 2010;

b) would have an annual growth rate of 2.3 percent and 0.78 percent respectively; and

Documented or Undocumented Mexican Immigrant Workers in the United States



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Source: Survey on Border Migration (EMIF).

c) would increase by 1,100,000 and 435,000 in the same years.

In contrast, the projection that eliminates the effects of international migration gives us the following figures:

a) a population of 45,600,000 in 1996 and 59,600,000 in the year 2010;

b) growth rates of 2.74 and 1.17 percent respectively; and

c) annual increases of 1,300,000 and 659,000 in the same years.

If we compare the size of the population in both projections, the cumulative difference is 3,500,000 by the year 2010, the net cumulative number of inhabitants who would not migrate between 1996 and 2010. This represents about 25 percent of

the expected increase of the national population in that age group if there were no migration in that period.¹³

These results throw into sharp relief the importance of demographics for the supply of migrant labor. Until now, the population between the ages of 15 and 44 has been dominated by the inertia of Mexico's past high population growth rate.¹⁴ By 1991, rapid demographic change in Mexico slowed down the annual rise in the population between the ages of 15 and 44, a tendency that will accelerate between now and 2010, when that age group will grow only by 650,000 or 700,000 people a year, about half the yearly increase in the 1990s. This change is very marked and will undoubtedly contribute to lessening the pressures to emigrate from Mexico due to a drop in the supply of Mexican labor.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MIGRATORY POLICY

The evolution of the processes which cause international migration, including economic and demographic tendencies, allow us to foresee that mi-

¹³ The results for each of the four regions the country was divided into are available in the longer work from which this article is an extract.

¹⁴ Given the rapid growth rate of Mexico's working-age population (over 3.0 percent), it should not come as a surprise that emigration to the United States accelerated over the last two decades. If we also take into account the marked and persistent economic disparities between the two countries and the secular tradition of migration to the U.S., it is actually surprising that Mexicans did not migrate to the United States in even greater numbers than they did.

Migrants now come from a much larger portion of the country than simply from places with migratory traditions.

gration to the United States will continue to be significant, at least for the rest of this millennium and the first years of the next. The transition toward a new development model, recently initiated in the Mexican economy, has implied regional readjustments in economic growth patterns and in domestic labor markets, as well as in living conditions both in the cities and the countryside.

The gradual emergence of these tendencies has led some authors to say that Mexico is on the threshold of a new geography of production which, if consolidated, will bring with it a new geography of migration.¹⁵ On the one hand, regions and cities whose economies are growing based on exports or activities that are competitive on the domestic market are also rapidly able to supply more and more jobs, a magnet for immigrants. In contrast, in regions and cities more affected by the economic crisis and the trade opening, job opportunities tend to drop, unemployment and underemployment increase and living conditions deteriorate, encouraging emigration. The regional aspect of this new model of development is and will continue to be crucial for the emergence of this new

geography, as will the reinforcement of the role played by many different urban centers of various sizes as alternative destinations for internal and international migration, which currently originate more and more from urban and even metropolitan areas.¹⁶

In this framework, it is indispensable to promote a better understanding of migration between Mexico and the United States in order to envisage options for action and solutions useful to both countries. Dialogue must take into account the rapid and profound demographic change that Mexico is undergoing and its medium- and long-term implications for the factors that influence migration to the United States. ❧

¹⁶ As Roberts and Escobar point out in "Mexican Social and Economic Policy and Emigration," presented at the conference on Mexican Migration and U.S. Policy, in Washington, D.C., held from June 13 to 15, 1996, "While Mexican cities were successful during Import Substitution Industrialization at attracting and retaining migrants from the rural areas, they fail to do so after 1975-1980. This change is responsible for the growth of international migration, but also for the growing convergence in the factors driving internal and international migration and in the characteristics of internal and international migrants. This means that, rather than focusing on the rural crisis in Mexico, migration-relevant social and economic policies should pay much more attention to the viability of Mexican cities in terms of their employment structures, the living and working conditions that they offer and the prospects for migrants' families."

¹⁵ A. Aguilar and B. Graizbord, *La reestructuración regional en México 1980-1993*, Mexico City, 1993, mimeographed.