

IMMIGRATION TO THE U.S.A.: THE CASE OF MEXICANS

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Immigrants, policies and migration systems:

An ethnographic comparative approach

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**Immigrants, Policies and Migration Systems:
An Ethnographic Comparative Approach
(MIGSYS)**

MEXICAN MIGRATION TO THE USA

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Mexican migration to the USA

Mexican Migration to the United States: Federal and Nation-wide Foci

Introduction

For all immigrants, whether they are in the United States (U.S.) legally or without the proper documentation, this is an anxious and turbulent time. It is also a time of special concern for those who hire undocumented workers and those who provide services to them. On May 25, 2006, the U.S. Senate passed the new Immigration Bill that would provide a path to citizenship to illegal¹ immigrants and permit a guest worker program. The U.S. house opposes both the path to legalization as well as the worker program which would bring approximately 200,000 foreigners into the country annually on a temporary basis. This bill has six components, and regardless of whether a particular component is supported by either the House or the Senate, details of what each favors do differ:

	Components of Immigration Reform	House position	Senate position
1	Creation of a temporary worker program	Opposed	Passed
2	Legalization of undocumented immigrants	Opposed	Passed
3	Worksite enforcement	Passed	Passed
4	Criminal penalties for illegal immigrants already in the U.S.	Passed	Passed
5	Border security—focusing on fencing	Passed	Passed
6	Border security—addressing the need for more personnel	Passed	Passed

The House and Senate must now come to a compromise about what they will forward to President George W. Bush for his final approval. Undocumented workers currently in the country worry that they belong in the group that will be forcibly repatriated and that they will not have the opportunity to return once they have left the U.S. American employers who, either knowingly or not) hire undocumented workers are concerned about their workforces, and the implications of their deportation; those who assist immigrants who are in the country illegally wonder if they will be exempt from penalties if they can prove they are providing “humanitarian” rather than “exploitative” assistance. Finally, those who immigrated legally, or are awaiting a decision regarding their applications for immigration, may evidence distress that the path to legal entry may be smoother for those who are here without the proper documentation than it is for those who attempt to enter through established institutional channels. By the time of the first meeting in Athens, on June 30, 2006, there may be a clearer picture of the details of the bill that will be put forward, but, in all likelihood, establishment of an infrastructure, implementation, and enforcement will be slow and arduous, if not impossible, processes, and the public will continue to debate the issue heatedly.

The last year has seen major movements among the U.S. population, both in support and in opposition to this bill that embodies the greatest changes in the immigration law in the last 20

¹ The terms “illegal,” “undocumented,” and “unauthorized” are used interchangeably in referring to immigrants who do not have the requisite legal papers to be in the U.S.

years. However, mixed opinions about the presence of undocumented workers, particularly from Mexico, have historically been intrinsic to U.S. immigration policy since the late 19th Century (Bernstein, 2006). The liberalized immigration law of 1965, which was designed to eliminate discriminatory practices against Europeans and to end the “remnants” of the exclusionary practices against Asians was, in fact, “coupled with measures explicitly designed to minimize ‘brown’ immigration from Mexico and ‘black’ from the Caribbean” (Zohlberg, 2006:8). However, since at least the turn of the 20th Century, perhaps in response to pressures from the agricultural industry and its need for plentiful and cheap labor, “legislators resisted closing the country’s ‘back door’ despite their explicit commitment to preserving the ‘original American stock’ from contamination by Mexicans...” (Zohlberg, 2006:9). Clearly, a debate continues, at the very least, regarding the presence of workers who have entered, or remained in, the U.S. illegally, and a disproportionate number of them are from Mexico and from other Latin American nations.

To put recent Mexican migration to the U.S. into context, this paper presents a brief overview of immigration in general and the profile of the foreign-born population. Focus of the remainder of the paper will be on Mexican migrants in states outside California² (the state with the largest population of Mexican immigrants and second generation Mexican Americans), with a view to understanding their experience and their influence on the socio-political and economic conditions of the country. It is important to differentiate between immigration policy, (the laws that determine who is eligible to enter the country) and immigrant policy (laws and programs that reflect how immigrants are received once they are in the country). The former are federally regulated and apply across the nation, while the latter are highly dependent on state and local programs and can show a great deal of variability.

Overview of Immigration to the U.S.

Individuals and families from around the globe form a continuous stream of immigrants to the United States. The backlog of visa applications and waiting lists to enter the U.S. stretches to several years. Undocumented immigrants, both those who enter without legal papers and those who overstay their visits, abound. Refugees and asylees continue to enter in record numbers from countries in political turmoil. Disproportionately large numbers of entrants into the U.S. in recent years have been people of color from Asia, Africa, and Central and South America, and despite encountering a series of barriers, an overwhelming majority remains, making this nation its permanent residence. Reasons for this ongoing influx are readily apparent, for in spite of the problems prevalent in the U.S., it continues to be one of the most attractive nations on the earth.

There is much in the U.S. that native-born Americans take for granted and that is not available in many other countries, and there are several amenities, opportunities, possibilities, lifestyles, and freedoms in the U.S. that are not found together in any other nation. In theory, and often in reality, this is a land of freedom, of equality, of opportunity, of a superior quality of life, of easy access to education, and of relatively few human rights violations. It is a land that, in the 21st Century, is struggling toward multiculturalism and pluralism in its institutions and social outlook. It is a land that, compared to several others, offers newcomers a relatively easy path through which to become integrated into its largesse. While the debate over the value of

² California is covered by Alisa Garni and Arpi Miller of the University of California Los Angeles.

immigration persists, the fact is that it is a debate, and while immigration policies are not without discrimination and selectivity, they are more open now than they have ever been. Thus, despite both political and social perceptions of foreigners following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York, despite increased security measures and scrutiny of individuals, and despite some highly disturbing xenophobic backlash, new immigrants continue to arrive in the U.S. in record numbers. And most, if not all, of the vast numbers that entered years before, whether or not they have become naturalized citizens, value the quality of life this nation continues to allow them, for frequently for many, even when life here is difficult, it is less so than it would have been in their countries of origin.

Immigrants' adaptation in a new country reflects the interplay of the reasons for departure from the homeland, the experience of migration, their tangible and intangible resources for functioning in unfamiliar environments, and the effects of the receptiveness of the host country (both politically and socially) to their presence. Furthermore, regardless of the length of time immigrants are in the U.S., they are invariably faced with a duality of cultures and must learn to function within norms and expectations that frequently conflict.

Although several people may be interested in emigrating from their homelands, the move is highly contingent on the receptiveness of the potential host nation to immigrants in general, and immigrants from specific countries in particular. While most governments now have strict laws regarding immigration, this was not always the case, and people were relatively free to live where they chose. U.S. immigration history, since the mid-18th Century, has been significantly impacted by legislation that has substantially colored the face of immigration in the last two and a half centuries.

Legislative History and its Impact

U.S. immigration history may be divided into seven periods during which legal measures formally allowed or controlled the categories of people allowed to immigrate (Kim, 1994: 8-9).

1. *The colonial period (1609-1775)*, during which most immigrants were from the British Isles and the colonies had little effective control.
2. *The American Revolutionary period (1776-1840)*, when European immigration slowed because of war and there were general anti-foreign feelings.
3. *The "old" immigration period (1841-1882)*, during which local governments recruited people from Northern Europe. Chinese were also able to immigrate without much difficulty.
4. *The regulation period (1882-1920)*, when the Chinese were excluded from immigrating. However, large numbers of immigrants were admitted from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe.
5. *The restriction and exclusion period (1921-1952)*, when a quota system restricted immigration from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, and when all Asians were excluded from admission because of their ineligibility for U.S. citizenship.

6. *The partial liberalization period (1952-1965)*, when Asians were assigned the same quota as those from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, and were also allowed naturalization.
7. *The liberalized policy period (1965-present)*, when the quota policy was repealed to allow entry to immigrants from Third World countries.

Below are brief sketches of immigration-related legislation or action³ that, since the beginning of the liberalization period, have affected diverse populations in a variety of ways, from entry into the U.S. itself to access to fundamental rights.

- 1965: *The Immigration and Nationality Act* finally liberalized immigration and repealed legal discrimination because of race, gender, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence. It rescinded the national origins system, replacing it with annual quotas of the Eastern (170,000) and Western (120,000) Hemispheres, with up to 20,000 individuals being permitted entry from any one nation. This quota did not include spouses and unmarried minor children of U.S. citizens.
- 1978: Separate ceilings for the two Hemispheres were abolished and a world-wide annual ceiling of 290,000 was established.
- 1980: *The Refugee Act*, removed refugees as a preference category. The president, in conjunction with Congress, and based on the political climate of the world, determines the annual ceiling and the distribution of that ceiling among identified countries for that year (ceilings have ranged from 50,000-90,000).
- 1986: *The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)* was a comprehensive reform effort that legalized undocumented immigrants who had been in the country since January 1, 1982 but made it unlawful to hire undocumented workers.
- 1990: *The Immigration Act of 1990* increased the annual ceiling for immigrants to 700,000, and established an annual limit for certain categories of immigrants to attract skilled workers. It also established the Immigrant Investor Program, offering up to 10,000 permanent resident visas to those willing to invest at least \$1 million in U.S. urban areas or \$500,000 in U.S. rural areas.
- 1996: *Welfare Reform* ended many cash and medical assistance programs for most legal immigrants (and other low income individuals),
- 1996: *The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA)* expanded enforcement operations of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, particularly at the border, and reorganized the procedures for removal of inadmissible entrants.
- 2001: *The USA Patriot Act* was passed by Congress in response to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington. It gives federal officials greater power to track and intercept national and international communications and to prevent the entry of foreign terrorists and detain and remove those who may be within the U.S.

³ These and additional laws relevant to immigration and immigrants are available through the website of the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (<http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/legishist/index.htm>) Accessed May 30, 2006.

Implications of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act had a major and permanent impact on U.S. immigration, dramatically altering the traditional origins and numbers of immigrants to the U.S. Prior to 1965 and the amendments of October 3rd to the Immigration Act of 1924 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, which resulted in the liberalization of immigration laws, the majority of entrants into the U.S. were from European countries. When the 1965 amendments (i) abolished the national origins quota system, (ii) established a preference system for relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent residents, (iii) exempt immediate relatives of citizens and some special groups (certain ministers of religion, former employees of U.S. government abroad, etc.), and (iv) expanded the limits of world coverage to a 20,000 per-country limit, the influx of new immigrants from non-European countries was unprecedented, and continues into the present.

While minor modifications are frequently made to the Immigration Act of October 1, 1965, it remains the primary directing force of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). It set the annual immigrant quota at 290,000, dividing 170,000 for the Eastern Hemisphere and 120,000 for the Western Hemisphere. INS specifications of the world wide level of immigration and the selection procedures are detailed in Title II of the Immigration Act (INA: ACT 201) as is the preference in allocation of immigrant visas (INA:ACT 203). Even more significantly, while INA: ACT 202 identifies the numerical limitation to any foreign state, it includes in it a non-discrimination clause, stating, “. . . no person shall receive any preference or priority or be discriminated against in the issuance of an immigrant visa because of the person's race, sex, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence.”

The Immigration Act specified spouses and unmarried adult children of U.S. citizens as exempt from the numerical quota and established a preferential system for the allocation of entry visas. Some modifications have occurred since the original 1965 Act, through the Immigration Act of 1990, which restructured the immigrant categories of admission, increasing the numbers for skilled workers and adding the diversity category. However, in many important ways, it has remained substantively the same, and it is clear that system allocations are not based on the prevention of entry of any particular national group. Thus, the numbers of immigrants admitted legally are (a) fixed by law, (b) limited only by demands for those considered eligible, and (c) restricted by processing constraints (Gordon, 2005). The 2006 fiscal year limits are in the categories below:⁴

Family sponsored immigrants (480,000 annual numbers)⁵

- (1) Unmarried sons and daughters of citizens (23,400 annually)
- (2) Spouses and unmarried sons and unmarried daughters of permanent resident aliens (114,200)
- (3) Married sons and married daughters of citizens (23,000)
- (4) Adult brothers and sisters of citizens (65,000)

⁴ U.S. Department of State, website: http://travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/bulletin/bulletin_2924.html (Accessed, May 31, 2006)

⁵ This number is in addition to the 290,000 annual limit (exempt from the 290,000 numerical cap).

Employment-Based Immigrants (140,000 annually)

- (1) Priority workers (40,040)
 - a. Aliens with extraordinary ability
 - b. Professors and researchers
 - c. Certain multinational executives and managers
- (2) Members of the professions holding advanced degrees (40,040)
- (3) Skilled workers, professionals, and other workers (40,040)
- (4) Special immigrants, usually refugees adjusting their status (9,940)
- (5) Employment creators, “investors” (9,940)

Diversity (55,000 annually, effective 1995)

Non-preferential immigrants ineligible under the other categories.

Census figures on immigration

The U.S. Bureau of the Census indicates that in 2004, of the approximately 288 million residents of the country, 34 million (11.9%) were foreign born and another 30 million (10.6%) were children of those who had migrated from other countries (Table 1).

Table 1: U.S. Population by Sex, Age, and Generation: 2004
(Numbers in thousands.)

GENDER AND AGE	Total		GENERATION ¹					
			FIRST		SECOND		THIRD-AND-HIGHER	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total Male and Female	288,280	100.0	34,244	100.0	30,430	100.0	223,606	100.0
Under 16 years	64,859	22.5	2,421	7.1	12,515	41.1	49,923	22.3
16 - 65 years	188,762	65.5	27,116	82.1	12,798	42.1	147,838	66.1
65 years and over	34,659	12.0	3,697	10.8	5,117	16.8	25,845	11.6
MEDIAN AGE (years)	35.9	(X)	38.4	(X)	21.4	(X)	36.6	(X)
Total Male	141,227	100.0	17,221	100.0	15,180	100.0	108,826	100.0
Under 16 years	33,173	23.5	1,210	7.0	6,521	43.0	25,442	23.4
16 - 65 years	93,257	66.0	14,480	84.1	6,377	42.0	82,399	66.5
65 years and over	14,797	10.5	1,531	8.9	2,282	15.0	10,984	10.1
MEDIAN AGE (years)	34.7	(X)	37.3	(X)	19.9	(X)	35.6	(X)
Total Female	147,053	100.0	17,023	100.0	15,250	100.0	114,780	100.0
Under 16 years	31,686	21.5	1,211	7.1	5,994	39.3	24,481	21.3
16 - 65 years	95,505	65.0	13,646	80.2	6,421	42.1	75,438	65.8
65 years and over	19,862	13.5	2,166	12.7	2,835	18.6	14,861	12.9
MEDIAN AGE (years)	37.0	(X)	39.5	(X)	23.0	(X)	37.7	(X)

(X) = Not Applicable

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2004

**Table 2: Immigrants, by Country of Birth: 1981 to 2004
(Numbers in thousands)**

Region and country of birth	1981-1990, total	1991-2000, total	2001-2003, total	2004
All countries	7,338.1	9,095.4	2,833.9	946.1
Europe	705.6	1,311.4	450.3	127.7
Asia	2,817.4	2,892.2	936.6	330.0
Africa	192.3	383.0	163.0	66.3
Oceania	(NA)	48.0	16.0	6.0
North America	3,125.0	3,917.4	1,063.1	341.2
Canada	119.2	137.6	52.9	15.6
Mexico	1,653.3	2,251.4	541.7	175.4
Caribbean	892.7	996.1	268.9	88.9
Cuba	159.2	180.9	65.3	20.5
Dominican Republic	251.8	340.9	70.1	30.5
Haiti	140.2	181.8	59.7	14.0
Jamaica	213.8	173.5	43.7	14.4
Trinidad and Tobago	39.5	63.3	16.6	5.4
Central America	458.7	531.8	199.5	61.3
South America	455.9	539.9	198.6	71.8

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2004 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics.
See also <<http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/statistics/yearbook/index.htm>>.

Table 3: Immigrants Admitted as Permanent Residents Under Refugee Acts, by Country of Birth: 1991 to 2004

Region and country of birth	1991 to 2000, total	2001 to 2002, total	2003	2004
Total	1,021,266	234,590	44,927	71,230
Europe	426,565	118,736	17,290	24,854
Asia	351,347	41,406	9,885	14,335
Africa	51,649	20,360	7,723	12,443
Oceania	291	52	18	28
North America	185,333	51,503	8,454	18,323
Cuba	144,612	47,580	7,047	16,678
Haiti	9,364	1,504	472	536
El Salvador	4,073	382	194	263
Guatemala	2,033	809	294	387
Nicaragua	22,486	631	169	137
South America	5,857	2,158	1,518	1,150

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2004 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics.
See also <<http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/statistics/yearbook/index.htm>>.

Tables 2 and 3 present immigrants (1981-2004) and refugees (1991-2003) respectively, by region of birth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). During these years, the largest number from any one country was from Mexico. However, it is clear from the distribution of sending countries, that although the largest number of immigrants to the U.S. Between 1981 and 2004 has been Mexican (4,621,800), this is still less than a quarter of the total entrants during that period (22.86%); the percentage is even less if the 1.4 million refugees are included. Hence, it is essential that, while recognizing the strong Mexican presence in this country, one remain cognizant of the diversity of immigrants to the U.S.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 reflect, respectively, the origins of legal, undocumented, and all immigrants who arrived in the U.S. between 1991 and 2000 (Massey, 2005).

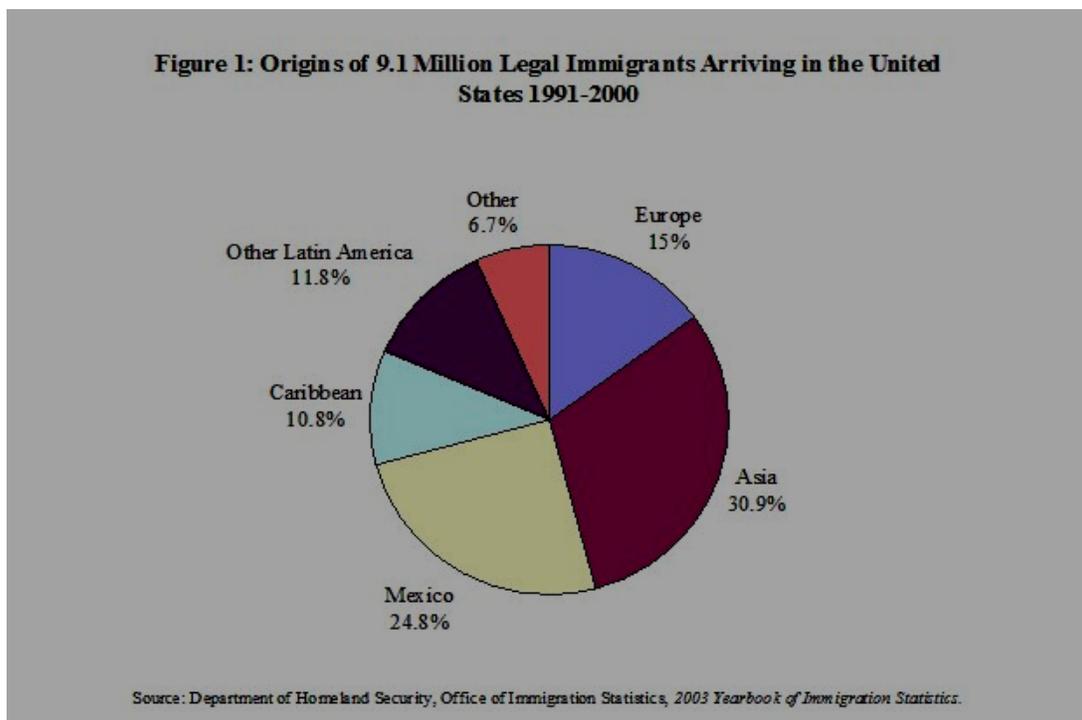
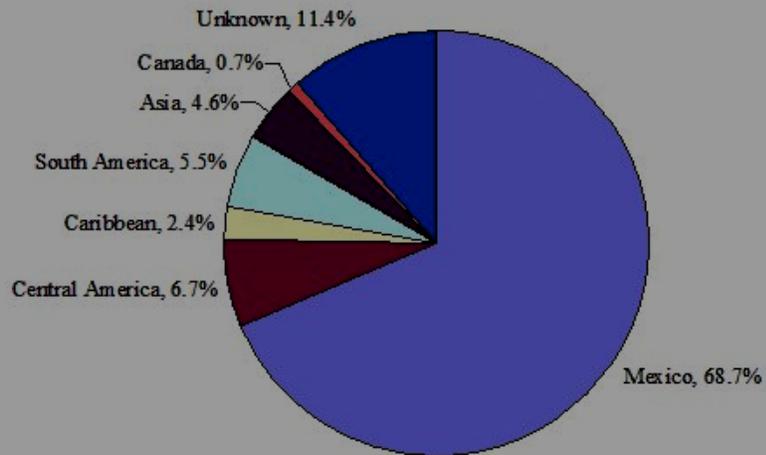
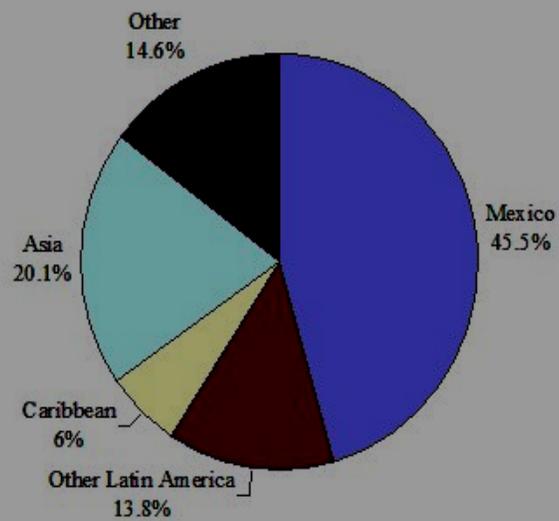


Figure 2: Origins of 7 Million Undocumented Immigrants in the United States, 2000



Source: Office of Policy and Planning, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: 1990-2000*, January 31, 2003.

Figure 3: Origins of ALL Immigrants to the United States



Mexican Immigrants to the U.S

Of all the foreign born in the U.S., the largest number is from Latin America (approximately 18 million), about 13 million are from Central America, most from Mexico (table 4), corroborating Zuniga and Hernandez-Leon (2005) statement that the oldest, largest, and most uninterrupted flow of migrants to the U.S. has come from Mexico. Traditionally, Mexicans have settled in the border states of Texas and California, however, since the late 1980s, they have migrated in increasing numbers to other states. Census 2000 numbers indicate the largest communities are in Arizona, Georgia, Florida, Colorado, North Carolina, New York, and Nevada. The increasing diversification of their destinations is reflected in Table 5, but there is less information about destinations of secondary migration. The Office of Immigration Statistics (2006) reports that in the 2004, 175,364 immigrants were legally admitted into the U.S. from Mexico. Of these, 62,463 came through family sponsored preferences, 7,225 were employment based preferences, and 99,718 were immediate relatives of U.S. Citizens (59,052 were spouses).

Little is known about the entry of unauthorized immigrants, the majority who enter through the border with Mexico. It is estimated that about 850,000 unauthorized immigrants enter the U.S. annually, and have done so since 1990, for a total of close to 12 million (Passel, 2006). The majority (78%) is believed to be from Latin America, 56% from Mexico (about 7 million), and 22% from other countries of Central and South America. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that California and Texas have the largest numbers of unauthorized migrants at 2.7 million and 1.6 million respectively, while Florida and New York also have substantial numbers. While there is a pervasive tendency to believe that all undocumented immigrants cross the border illegally, the Office of Homeland Security (previously the Immigration and Naturalization Service) revealed that approximately half the unauthorized immigrants are visa overstays (Greico, 2005). These individuals enter the U.S. with appropriate documentation, but remain in the country after their visas expire.

Mexican migration is mingled with migration from other Central American countries, and frequently literature focuses on the Latino⁶ population, failing to differentiate between countries of origin. However, three characteristics of the Mexican and Mexican American groups in the U.S. are particularly distinct: (1) Mexican communities have been a part of the Southwestern U.S. society, economic, and culture since prior to the arrival of the Europeans, (2) Mexico and the U.S. share a 2,000 mile border, that experiences both migration flows and cross-border trade and remittances, and (3) human networks have expanded socio-cultural exchanges between the two nations (Zuniga and Hernandez-Leon, 2005).

⁶The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” will be used interchangeably in this paper, although “Hispanic” refers to those from a country in which Spanish is the predominant language (including Spain), and “Latino” refers to people whose origins are in Mexico and countries of Central and South America. Increasingly, the preferred term in referring to people of Spanish descent from the Americas is “Latino.”

Table 4: Foreign-Born Population from Latin America by Gender, Age, and Sub-region of Birth: 2004
(Numbers in thousands.)

GENDER AND AGE	LATIN AMERICA		SUB-REGION OF BIRTH					
			CARIBBEAN		CENTRAL AMERICA¹		SOUTH AMERICA	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	18,314	100.0	3,323	100.0	12,924	100.0	2,066	100.0
Under 16 years	1,467	8.0	179	5.4	1,113	8.6	174	8.4
16 - 65 years	15,619	85.3	2,642	79.5	11,235	86.9	1,743	84.4
65 years and over	1,228	6.7	502	15.1	576	4.5	149	7.2
MEDIAN AGE (years)	35.3	(X)	43.6	(X)	33.3	(X)	39.0	(X)
Total Male	9,650	100.0	1,536	100.0	7,078	100.0	1,037	100.0
Under 16 years	760	7.9	93	6.0	582	8.2	85	8.2
16 - 65 years	8,366	86.7	1,224	79.4	6,242	88.2	901	86.9
65 years and over	524	5.4	219	14.3	254	3.6	51	4.9
MEDIAN AGE (years)	34.3	(X)	43.8	(X)	32.6	(X)	37.8	(X)
Total Female	8,663	100.0	1,787	100.0	5,846	100.0	1,030	100.0
Under 16 years	707	8.2	87	4.8	531	9.1	90	8.7
16 - 65 years	7,252	83.7	1,417	79.4	4,986	85.4	842	81.7
65 years and over	704	8.1	283	15.8	323	5.5	98	9.6
MEDIAN AGE (years)	36.6	(X)	43.4	(X)	34.3	(X)	40.4	(X)

(X) = Not Applicable

¹The majority of those born in 'Central America' are from Mexico

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2004,

Immigration Statistics Staff, Population Division, Internet Release Date: February 22, 2005.

Table 5. Mexican immigrants admitted by destination: 2003

State	Total	Mexico
Total	703,542	115,585
Alabama	1,689	250
Alaska	1,188	69
Arizona	10,955	5,722
Arkansas	1,903	688
California	175,579	51,269
Colorado	10,661	3,275
Connecticut	8,274	84
Delaware	1,487	101
District of Columbia	2,491	29
Florida	52,770	1,567
Georgia	10,794	1,482
Hawaii	4,899	51
Idaho	1,686	586
Illinois	32,413	6,044
Indiana	5,241	901
Iowa	3,419	693
Kansas	3,804	883
Kentucky	3,038	232
Louisiana	2,214	133
Maine	992	17
Maryland	17,770	324
Massachusetts	20,127	124
Michigan	13,515	625
Minnesota	8,406	398
Mississippi	729	77
Missouri	6,160	439
Montana	453	23
Nebraska	2,827	882
Nevada	6,336	1,730
New Hampshire	1,868	22
New Jersey	40,699	569

State	Total	Mexico
New York	2,336	1,256
North Carolina	89,538	1,198
North Dakota	9,451	1,175
Ohio	331	9
Oklahoma	9,787	274
Oregon	6,946	1,487
Pennsylvania	14,606	514
Rhode Island	2,492	30
South Carolina	1,942	186
South Dakota	487	33
Tennessee	3,367	281
Texas	53,412	25,342
Utah	3,159	755
Vermont	550	5
Virginia	19,726	474
Washington	17,935	1,965
West Virginia	483	13
Wisconsin	4,357	603
Wyoming	253	75
U.S. Possessions	5,488	77

Demographic Characteristics of Mexican Immigrants and their Children

Census figures and the Pew Hispanic Center attempt to estimate the profile of the Latino population based on a combination of Census figures and other data collection methods that allow the approximation of information on the unauthorized population. Several sources, including the U.S. Census, frequently group the Latino⁷ (and Hispanic) populations together, nevertheless, these figures will be used to provide an understanding of Mexicans in the U.S. that compose the largest proportion of these numbers. However, variability in estimating the size of the unauthorized population can confound accuracy. The U.S. Census Bureau (2006) provided data that in 2003 approximately 10 million individuals (both legal and illegal immigrants) from Mexico resided in the U.S., however, the Pew Hispanic Center released information in March 2006 that the undocumented population may be as high as 13.6 million, and of these, 56% is Mexican (approximately 7.6 million). Hence, although the foreign born population that has emigrated from Mexico to the U.S. is probably greater than the 10 million reflected in the census figures, and the total Mexican population (first and second generations combined) is greater than 26.3 million, these are the data that will generally be used as the most up-to-date. In 2003, of the 10 million foreign-born Mexicans, only 2.2 million (22%) were naturalized citizens.

With continuing increases in Latino migration to the U.S., there is a corresponding rise in the number of U.S. born children of Latino origin. The Current Population Survey of March 2004 indicated that of the approximately 40 million (14% of the overall U.S. population) Latinos, 18 million were foreign born, while 22 million were born in the U.S. (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). Of the Latino population, Zuniga (2006) estimates, 21 million are either Mexican or Mexican-Americans (11 million immigrants, 5 million 2nd generation, and 5 million 3rd+ generation), and that, in fact, one in ten Mexicans is living in the U.S. While early migration from Mexico was predominantly male, this pattern is beginning to change as more women are moving to the U.S., either independently or as wives and daughters of migrants who have established themselves in the country (Durand & Massey, 2004).

The Mexican Migrant Survey (Suro, 2005) by the Pew Hispanic Center was a unique study of close to 5,000 migrants who were interviewed while applying for identity cards at Mexican consulates in the U.S. They are believed to provide a fairly good representation of the population and were sampled in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, Raleigh, NC, and Fresno, CA. Fifty seven percent was male, 48% was aged 18-29 and another 29% was between 30-39 years of age; 22% had completed high school and 6% had some college education. A large number was single (39%); 46% was married. Interestingly, 12% had children who were not in the U.S., reinforcing literature that indicates that families are often left behind as individuals migrate. Another 54% had children living in the U.S., while 26% reported having no children.

The findings of the Mexican Migrant Survey seem to be reflected in the figures provided by the U.S. Census Bureau. Younger than the majority population, the actual number of births among Latinos in 2002 was second only to that of the white population; 15.9% of the births were to teenage mothers; 42.1% of the mothers were unmarried; 5.8% received no prenatal care, and

6.2% had low birth weight babies. Of the 11.2 million Hispanic households in 2004; both partners in 5.8 million were of Hispanic origin and one partner in another 2.1 million was Hispanic (U.S. Census, 2006).

Although in 2004, the percentage of Mexicans, over age 25 years, who had completed high school was higher than in any other year at 51.9%, it was substantially lower than that of other Hispanic groups (Puerto Ricans at 71.8%; Cubans at 72.1%), and also below that of Whites (85.2%), Blacks (80.6%), and Asians (86.8%). Graduation from college was even lower at 7.9% (Puerto Ricans at 14%; Cubans at 24%). Interestingly, females had a slightly higher completion rate at both high school and college levels (U.S. Census, 2006).

There were 8.7 million Latino children (at least one Latino foreign-born parent) in elementary and high school in 2004, 18.1% was foreign born, and 47.4% was native born. Of the 1.5 million in college, 23.8% was foreign born, and 38% was native born. Finally, another 170,000 were in graduate school; of these 28.8 % was foreign, and 30% was native (U.S. Census, 2006). These figures suggest that more Latino children are born in the U.S. than migrate.

Among the 12,340 million Hispanics, 64% is employed, 7.2% is unemployed, and 31.1% is not in the labor force. The distribution of occupations is in Table 6:

Table 6: Hispanics in the Labor Force (U.S. Census, 2006)

Occupation	Total in Thousands	Percentage Hispanic
Total	139,252	12.9
Management, professional, & related occupations	48,532	6.4
Service	22,720	19.1
Natural resources, construction, & maintenance	14,582	22.1
Production, transportation, & material occupations	17,954	19.2

There continues to be a strong, steady demand for migrant workers in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and hospitality (Kocchar, 2005). About 6.3 million undocumented workers are Mexican and estimated to fill 25% of all agricultural, 17% of office and house cleaning, 14% of construction, and 12% food preparation jobs. There are substantive occupational differences between documented and undocumented workers from Mexico (Table 7), and despite figures that 6.4% of the Latino population is professional, there is a tendency to assume that all migrants from Mexico are laborers. One-third of all Mexicans with Ph.D. degrees are working in the U.S. and 1.6 million Mexican professionals are living in the country.

Table 7: Occupational Distribution of Natives and Mexican Immigrants (percent)
[persons ≥18 years who worked full time for at least part of 1999]

Occupations	All Mexican Immigrants	Legal Mexican Immigrants	Undocumented Mexican Immigrants	U.S. Natives
Managerial & Professional	5.5	9.2	1.5	32.2
Technical sales, Admin., Support	10.2	15.0	4.9	29.2
Service Occupations, Private Household	1.5	1.7	1.2	0.3
Farming Managers, Forestry, Fishing	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.1
Service Occupations, Not Private Household	18.3	18.4	18.2	10.3
Farming, Except Managerial	13.4	9.7	17.5	1.0
Precision Production, Craft, and Repair	19.4	17.0	22.0	11.9
Operators, Fabricators, and Laborers	30.1	27.4	33.1	14.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Median household income for Hispanics in 2003 was \$32,997—\$21,053 for males and \$12,642 for females—and substantially lower than for any other group (U.S. Census, 2006). In the Suro (2006) sample of 1,327 Mexicans in Los Angeles, 46% earned less than \$300 per week, and 28% earned between \$300 and \$500. Of these, 628 did not have work identity cards, although they were working; 53% earned under \$300 per week. Thus, the difference between those with and those without the ID cards was relatively small. Expenditures of the Latino population, overall, in 2003 was lower than that of all consumers combined, but higher than that of the African American population as indicated in table 8 (U.S. Census, 2006).

Table 8: Expenditures in dollars

Expenditure type	All consumers	African American	Latino
Total⁸	\$40,817	\$28,708	\$34,575
Food	\$5,340	\$4,007	\$5,717
Alcohol	\$391	\$169	\$315
Housing	13,432	\$10,622	\$12,300
Apparel	\$1,640	\$1,601	\$1,756
Transportation	\$7,781	\$5,074	\$6,780
Health care	\$2,416	\$1,309	\$1,439
Entertainment	\$2,060	\$1,007	\$1,245
Cash contributions	\$1,370	\$832	\$594
Insurance & pensions	\$4,055	\$2,504	\$2,824

⁸ Total includes other expenses not entered in table. From tables of the U.S. Census (2006).

Migration Patterns

The process of migration from Mexico has been essential to the historical development of the U.S. and its integration with its bordering countries. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994, that lowered barriers to the movement of products and services across borders, did not, however, lessen restrictions in human migration from Mexico. In fact, U.S. policies between 1986 and 1996 were detrimental to both Mexico and the U.S., financially wasteful, and have not deterred the massive migration of unauthorized immigrants (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). Prior to this, Mexican migration was largely seasonal and circular in nature, with workers entering the U.S., primarily for agricultural work, and returning at the end of the harvesting season.

An alternative migration pattern is emerging through opportunities in the U.S. and increasing barriers to movements between the two nations. Mexican immigrants are strengthening networks within the U.S. and are purchasing houses, indicators of permanency. They are migrating away from border states close to their homeland, to states that are less populated, and rather than gravitating to urban or rural areas, the new destinations are medium sized metropolitan areas and small towns across the country (Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). Since 1999, 24% of all U.S. counties gained at least 1,000 Hispanics or Asians (Census, 2006), and the new pattern of migration from Mexico evidences the following steps (Zuniga, 2006):

- Leaving Mexico
- Arriving in the U.S.
- Reuniting with family members and working in the U.S.
- Reunifying families that were separated through migration
- Buying houses
- Incorporating, negotiating, and adapting in the host country
- Reinforcing ties with sending communities

The move is no longer circular; it is permanency in the U.S. Now, both genders migrate with equal frequency, and there is a rise in child migration.

Determinants of Mexican migration to the U.S. have been studied extensively in the last decade (i.e. Donato, Durand, & Massey, 1992; Lindstrom & Lauster, 2001; Martin, 1999; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002; Stark & Taylor, 1991), and factors that emerge as significant in effecting migration include economic conditions, U.S. policies, and socio-cultural influences (Rivero-Fuentes, 2004).

Despite the recent bill passed by the Senate that focuses on unauthorized immigrants in the U.S., despite concerns about illegal workers, and in spite of the fact that most specifically targeted are Mexican immigrants, it is clear that the U.S. is severely divided about their presence. The *New York Times*, in recent months, has featured numerous articles on undocumented Mexican workers and reports that, although border enforcement has been heightened since 1990, and although policy makers are aware that most migrants come to work, policing the workplace appears to

Undocumented Mexican workers, on average, work about 20 hours a week longer (at about 58 hours) than legal immigrants from Mexico, naturalized Mexicans, and U.S. born Mexicans (Wu, 2005). The former receives an average hourly wage of \$4.94 (below the current minimum wage of \$5.15), and less than documented Mexican workers who receive \$11.90. Their poverty rate in Idaho is 34% (three times the national average), yet 92% are paid by check and are “on the books” of their employers, so they do pay taxes by deductions through the payroll. Although they do pay taxes, Camarota (2001) found that because of their low levels of education, they join the labor pool of unskilled workers, and because of their undocumented status, they are unable to get credentialed in the U.S. Their access to jobs and the possibility for advancement are rather limited (Passel, 2006). They do compete with the 10 million natives who are less educated, and because of their willingness to work for low wages, they have also lowered the wages of natives without high school diplomas by 5 percent; thus, the group in the U.S. most affected by Mexican migration is the population that is already among the poorest (Camarota, 2001).

The commitment of immigrants to the U.S. is reflected in at least four choices they may make, to (1) learn English, (2) purchase a home, (3) apply for U.S. citizenship, and (4) marry a U.S. citizen. Census data indicate that approximately, 68% of Mexicans who had received U.S. citizenship, and 81% of Mexican workers who were born in the U.S. speak English well, however, only 35% of Mexicans who were not naturalized, including the undocumented, state they speak English very well (Wu, 2005). The Pew Hispanic Center, through its Mexican Migrant Survey of approximately 5,000 respondents, found that 54% spoke little or no English; of the 2,566 respondents who did not have a Mexican ID card to travel to the U.S. and the 854 respondents who had been in the U.S. two years or less, 61% and 76% respectively, spoke no English (Suro, 2005). Furthermore, 30% of those who had been in the U.S. over 10 years said they could only speak a little English, and 14% said they could not speak it at all. The U.S. Census revealed in 2003 that 29.7 million people in the U.S. over the age of 5 years spoke Spanish in the home.

In the Pew report sample, only 27% of the sample expected to stay in the U.S. for five years or less; the rest planned on staying as long as they could (Suro, 2005). To reflect their intent to remain in the U.S. and to engage in the economic spectrum, Mexican migrants are encouraged to purchase houses in the U.S. for in 2000, only 41% of the Hispanic population owned a home. Through a new partnership agreement between the U.S. and Mexico, eligible Mexicans in the United States would have access to U.S. rural development programs (Green, 2005). Interestingly, a Colorado mortgage lender, in 2005, sold mortgages to unauthorized tax paying immigrants on the grounds that they should have access to resources as they contributed to the nation’s tax base (Avery, 2005). In their survey research of 381 Mexican immigrant respondents, which included the undocumented, researchers at the University of South Carolina found that 40% had high school diplomas and most owned their own cars (Drake, 2006), refuting findings that most Mexican immigrants have low levels of education. The researchers do suggest, however, that the sample may not be representative. On the other hand, the migrants from Mexico to the U.S. are not those with the lowest levels of education in Mexico; on average, those who leave Mexico have a higher level of education than the majority in the country.

Naturalization and intermarriage are significant indicators of commitment to staying in the U.S. In 2004, approximately 2 million Mexicans were naturalized citizens, although another 8.4 million were not naturalized (Siskin & Mayer, 2005). If, however, a large proportion of the Mexican population in the U.S. is unauthorized, naturalization is not an option. Conversely, of the 7.7 million Hispanic couples in the U.S., in only 5.6 million are both spouses Hispanic; 2.1 million couples have interethnic marriages, reflecting the likelihood of remaining in the U.S. and establishing roots in this country (U.S. Census, 2006). In order to legalize their status, many Mexican migrants methodically establish relationships with U.S. residents, with the anticipation of marriage, as reflected in Curiel's (2004) study of 115 mixed marriage couples in which 62% was undocumented. In addition to legalizing status, it permits these married individuals to regularly return safely to Mexico for visits.

Leaving Mexico and implications

There is a tendency for host nations to view immigrants in the context of their arrival at their borders and their subsequent adjustment, however, the process of migration begins long before, when migrants are still in their home countries. It is there that they draw on their social and personal resources to undertake the greatest challenge of their lives, and contrary to common perception, it is not those with the fewest resources (human and social capital) that migrate (Segal, 2002). Contrary to the common perception of Mexican immigrants as fleeing deplorable circumstances in their homeland with an eagerness to stay permanently in the U.S., most Mexican migrants could survive in Mexico; the move to the U.S. is thoughtfully planned as a practical strategy to compensate for failed market conditions (Durand & Massey, 2004). The majority migrates to improve earnings, not because of unemployment (Kochhar, 2005). As they seek to offset effects of specific market failures, most Mexicans aim to return home after establishing alternative sources of income and accumulating savings for specific purposes (home purchase in Mexico). That the migrant pool has traditionally been male and that the family has been left behind are concrete indicators that the aim is to return to Mexico. On the other hand, increasingly, even the possibility of prosperity in the homeland is not sufficient to keep migrants away from the U.S. because often work experience allows for better pay abroad (Millman, 2006).

The Bracero Program (a program for temporary farm workers) was instituted by the U.S. and Mexican governments on August 4, 1942 allowing impoverished Mexicans entry into the U.S. as agricultural laborers to relieve wartime labor shortages. This continued until 1964, when it was ended and migration from Mexico began to be closely monitored and tightened; concurrently, undocumented migration began growing rapidly well into the 1980s. In response to high rates of unemployment, inflation, stagnation in wages, and other forms of economic distress in the U.S., Congress passed the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) that focused specifically on curbing illegal migration from Mexico. In Mexico, 1976-1982 was known as the Oil Boom, but the Arab oil cartel disintegrated, severely affecting the Mexican economy; the urban minimum wage fell by 47% and the poverty rate increased by 28% (Cerrutti & Massey, 2004). Through circular migration, large numbers of Mexican migrants (majority undocumented) moved into agriculture labor in the U.S. This migration as

predominantly male through the 1980s; since the 1990s, movements have been feminized, with almost equal distributions in gender and several dependents.

First-time undocumented migrants have frequently employed paid guides, or “coyotes,” to help them negotiate border crossings. For subsequent trips, there is less likelihood paying guides, however, individuals rarely make the trip alone. While migrants have traditionally moved to agricultural jobs and to states close to the border, in recent years, other industries and destinations have attracted migrants (Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). Continuing commitments to the homeland, furthermore, are evidenced by the remittances sent to Mexico; in one community, expatriate Mexicans in the U.S. sent 16% of their income back home (Drake, 2006) with remittances in 1999 being as high as \$6.8 billion. Such remittance not only allows Mexico to develop its social capital, it also enables Mexican expatriates to firmly establish and maintain their connections in their home communities (Mooney, 2004). Thus, migrants may send money to their family members, they may invest in business opportunities in their home communities, or they may spend savings on a range of activities when they return to Mexico for visits. Furthermore, financial and economic constraints in Mexico make the purchase of a home without some form of remittance quite difficult. Mooney (2004) reports studies that indicate that 40% of heads of households in western Mexico have been to the US, and in some communities that percentage exceeds 70%; 25% of all household in Mexico have at least one member working in the U.S. The need to accumulate funds to purchase a home may precipitate movements from rural areas more frequently than from urban areas, for in the latter, options to rent are available (Rivero-Fuentes, 2004).

An unforeseen consequence of migration, can be an upset in the gender balance of power. In a patriarchal society, such as in Mexico, the absence of the male head of household may substantially affect household behavior, although empirical evidence on wives is variable (Aysa & Massey, 2004). It appears that, at the very least, women whose husbands have migrated to the U.S. are responsible for the care, discipline, and education of their children, and several are also responsible for their support as remittances do not begin immediately. Several women must, therefore, engage in income-generating activities, especially if extended family support is unavailable. In the presence of an extended family, however, rather than entering the labor market, it is likely that a woman will move into the home of her mother-in-law, who, by receiving the remittances from her son, ensures the dependency of the wife is reinforced, and his power continues. This pattern varies with age, education, occupation, the presence of minority children, and asset ownership (Aysa & Massey, 2004).

Social networks across borders enhance international migration. As individuals settle in a region and establish a community, they encourage others to migrate, either by providing tangible support or the promise of community support once the individual arrives in the U.S., or by inadvertently offering encouragement by evidencing success through remittances. Massey (1990) describes the “cumulative causation of migration” (Rivero-Fuentes, 2004) as shared access to migration resources. As a community migrates, larger segments have access to the process, and each migrant becomes a network resource to others, making the process self-perpetuating. This cumulative causation is evidenced also in social and economic terms as migrant remittances affect income distribution in the homeland, making people more aware of discrepancies in assets and triggering a desire to search of enhanced opportunities through

migration. A secondary effect is the development of a culture of migration, with migration becoming a preferred option for young males (Kandel & Massey, 2002; Stark & Taylor, 1991), and communities with more experience with the U.S. are more likely to include women and children than are groups with less such experience. Migration-specific human capital is the set of abilities acquired through the migration process that makes individuals more adept at crossing the border, finding housing, and obtaining a job in the U.S. (Kandel, 2004). Essential also is social capital, which is the quality, quantity, and variety social relationships that can aid in negotiating obstacles, often providing direct financial assistance, housing, information about crossing the border, and employment assistance (Kandel, 2004). When human capital resources are limited, particularly in the absence of transferable professional skills, as it is for many unauthorized immigrants, social capital affords an important vehicle for adaptation (Gouveia, Carranza, & Cogua, 2005).

Changing U.S. Destinations for Mexican migrants

Traditionally, and prior to the 1980s, Mexican migration was to large urban areas in five states: Arizona, California, Illinois, New Mexico, and Texas. While these states (barring New Mexico) continue to have the largest Mexican and Mexican-American populations, the U.S. Census indicates that six additional, non-gateway states, have large concentrations of Mexican immigrants (in order of immigrant size): Georgia, Florida, Colorado, North Carolina, New York, and Nevada. Zuniga and Hernandez-Leon (2005:xiv), additionally, report the following increases in non-traditional states between 1990 and 2000:

- Utah – 645% increase
- Iowa, Indiana, and Nebraska – 500% - 600% increase
- Arkansas and Minnesota – over 1,000% increase
- New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin – 200% – 400% increase
- North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama – over 1,800% increase

The presence of Mexicans in these areas has not only affected the labor market but also influenced school populations, media (with the presence of Spanish newspapers and Mexican radio and television), the spread of Catholicism to many predominantly Protestant areas, and the advent of soccer leagues for both children and adults. New ethnic businesses, including stores with ethnic goods, and Mexican restaurants are becoming increasingly familiar across the nation, and, increasingly, Spanish speaking competence is an asset for U.S. born youth in the job market.

Clearly, the census reports of 1990 and 2000 indicate changes in migration destinations for Mexican immigrants, and this migration to less popular areas continues into the 21st Century with substantially greater opportunities for those moving to newer areas of settlement. Leach and Bean (2006) present preliminary findings that although the pace of gains in income indicates an increasing gap between the native born population and low skilled Mexican migrants, those who have settled in areas with low or no Mexican communities have evidenced economic gains. Minneapolis has had a large Mexican migration flow in the last decade, from 3,500 in 1990 to an estimated 200,000 in 2005, and is the site of the newest Mexican embassy in the U.S. (Porter & Malkin, 2005). Idaho's undocumented population grew from 20,000 – 35,000 in 1999 to

between 40,000 – 50,000 in 2004 – 2005, composing 5% of the labor force in that state (Wu, 2005). In Illinois, 47% of the foreign born is from Latin America (Bieneman, 2004). In Missouri, the Latino population grew by 92% between 1990 and 2000, however, in some areas such as the small towns of Jefferson City and Columbia, the numbers increased by 113% and 205% respectively (Case & Campbell, 2002).

Mexican migrants are drawn to these new areas for a number of reasons, but most ostensibly because there is a large demand for low-wage labor (especially in the agro-food industry), small pre-existing Mexican communities that ease the incorporation of newcomers (Gouveia et al, 2005), and a particular draw of the small town (Zuniga, 2006). Some employers have directly recruited and specified their preference for Hispanic workers through legal channels (Donato, Stainback, & Bankston, 2005), while undocumented workers obtain jobs through “coyotes” (4.8%), directly through contracts with employers (19%), on their own (25%), or through contacts in Mexico (51%) (Wu, 2005).

The Public’s Response

In his pithy testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee on October 18, 2005, Professor Douglas S. Massey stated dismay about the U.S. immigration system, particularly in relationship to Mexico. He stated that 60% of all unauthorized and 20% of legal recent immigrants are from Mexico. In 2004, in addition to the 175,000 legal immigrants from Mexico, another 3.8 million visitors entered the U.S. for pleasure, 433,000 for business, 118,000 temporary workers and dependents, 25,000 intra-company transferees and their dependents, 21,000 students and dependents, 8,400 exchange visitors and dependents, and 6,200 traders and investors. Furthermore, one million U.S. citizens currently live in Mexico and another 19 million travel there annually. U.S. investment in Mexico totals 62 billion each year, and cross border trade is \$286 billion. Massey correctly observes that despite these exchanges, the U.S. seeks to limit cross-border labor movements, and its attempts to enforce this has not only failed, but backfired with increasing undocumented entrants, tremendous physical risks, and more funds spent on apprehending fewer migrants.

Several small towns, particularly those losing their residents to larger cities and upward mobility, welcome the presence of Mexican workers who they believe have begun revitalizing declining communities and their economies. However, others are ambivalent about their presence, recognizing their contributions to the community but unsettled by xenophobia. Massey’s testimony indicates that the U.S. is heavily dependent on Mexican migrants, traders, and visitors, and has, in fact, been so for well over a century.

Nevertheless, xenophobia appears to be endemic in human beings. Once the earliest European settlers to the U.S., who were Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, established themselves in the land of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, they systematically annihilated large segments of the original populations—through genocide and war as well as by introducing contagious disease, displacement, and starvation. These early Anglo-Saxon, Protestant immigrants even frowned upon European immigrants who came from Ireland and Germany after the Civil War, for they were Catholic. After 1865, the cultural background of white immigration changed again, as most

came from Eastern Europe. Africans, brought forcibly to the U.S. to work on plantations and in mansions as slaves, not only merited no rights, they were frequently denied basic human dignity. Laborers were recruited from Latin America, particularly Mexico, Chile, and Peru, as long ago as in the 1860s, to work in the mines and the railroads. Early Asian immigration began from China, and despite the marginalization of this population once it arrived in the U.S., was open to all who were able to make the arduous journey from other lands. However, 1882 saw the first discriminatory and restrictive immigration Act that began the regulation of individuals entering the U.S.

Patterns of migration have changed in the 21st Century, however, regardless of changes in immigration laws, most immigrants and refugees have experienced discrimination and oppression at some time. They have been denied opportunities because of the color of their skin, the accent with which they speak, or the clothing that they wear. Stereotypes abound, and are frequently used against particular groups.

In many respects, the U.S. provides a series of dichotomies. There are many who embrace the diversity brought by immigrant peoples, but there are as many who abhor it. For example, Flora and Maldonado (2006) report either “Legalist” or “Pluralist” responses particularly to undocumented immigrants. The former set of responses are from people angered by the presence of unauthorized immigrants and associate the new arrivals with increases in substance abuse and crime in the country. Pluralists, on the other hand, stress the historical and current significant contributions of immigrants in this land of immigrants. Other studies suggest that some individuals actively embrace newcomers, others strongly oppose them, but the majority is unsure, yet concerned, about the possibility of the changes they may bring. The Pew Hispanic Center released a review of American public opinion surveys on May 17, 2006⁹ that when taken together, seem to indicate that the public is about evenly divided in its perception on immigration. Most would prefer to keep legal immigration at the current level, are concerned about the flow of the undocumented population but would support a route to legalization for those who are in the country, a majority believes that unauthorized immigrants take jobs that Americans do not want, most prefer the Democratic position on immigration, and, finally, the majority disapproves of President George W. Bush’s stance on immigration.

Regardless of the responses of U.S. natives, whether positive, negative, or ambivalent, at the very least, both immigrants and the U.S. population are faced with issues of cultural identity and its impact, language differences, variations in social and familial norms, and a host of other diverse issues. Literature on the adjustment of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. is vast. Economic, psychosocial, and cultural adjustment and the assimilation of foreigners into the cultures of indigenous people are of continuing interest as global migration increases. Individuals adapt to new circumstances in a variety of ways and adaptation is affected by their personal resources, their desire, and the receiving country’s acceptance. Literature suggests a continuum along which individuals adjust to the host country, and positions on the continuum may change over time. At one end lies total acculturation and assimilation, while at the other end lies rejection.

⁹ The Pew Hispanic Center’s release of “the State of American public opinion on immigration in Spring 2006: A review of major surveys” can be found on the website:
<http://pewhispanic.org/factsheets/factsheet.php?FactsheetID=18>.

While early assimilation theorists believed total assimilation into a “melting pot” was the ideal, with the preferred goal for all immigrants being to become similar to the dominant group in the place of destination (Rumbaut, 1997), it is now apparent that this may not be preferred by immigrants, allowed by indigenous peoples, or possible because of personal or environmental circumstances. The acculturation of individuals assumes acclimatization to a new culture and society, often converting ways of thought and behavior. The effects of acculturation on the life satisfaction of immigrants are mixed. Three aspects of acculturation—perception of acceptance by natives, change in cultural orientation, and language use—have been found to be associated with better mental health (Mehta, 1998). The traditional pattern of acculturation presented in most literature suggests assimilation into the dominant society, yet a second direction leads to permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Moreover, though generally positively associated with life in a new country, assimilation appears also to adversely affect family life and organization (Faragallah, Schumm & Webb, 1997). Increased assimilation may contradict traditional expectations among members of an immigrant group, may expose underlying ethnocentrism, and may result in discontent (Rumbaut, 1997). Hence, rather than assimilating, immigrants are more likely to fall along the continuum of adjustment, accepting certain new norms while maintaining some traditional ones, and no one pattern is applicable to Mexican immigrants.

Most troubling, however, are indicators that not only are vulnerable Mexican immigrants exploited by “coyotes” and employers, but increasingly, other groups are beginning to prey upon them. Rivlin (2006) reveals that those who identify themselves as professionals who can help undocumented workers legalize their status, find employment and housing, and generally establish themselves, often play on the fears of this population and exploit them financially, making them pay sums of \$3,000 - \$5,000 to “become legal.” Frequently, many who are targeted by these people are deported, and it is less likely that perpetrators will be apprehended.

Interestingly, when Mexican migration is discussed in the U.S., the major focus appears to be on unauthorized workers, perhaps because their presence adds such complexity to the immigration issue. However, it is important to recognize that 25% of all legal immigrants to the U.S. are from Mexico (Massey, 2005). Their contributions to the fabric of U.S. society occurs not only at the agro-food and service arenas, but also at the professional level (Zuniga, 2006); with the substantial focus on undocumented workers, this group receives relatively little research attention. There are at least 3 million college educated Mexican immigrants living in the U.S., and a consortium of international agencies is currently implementing an online survey tool to assess demographic, socio-economic, attitudes, and behaviors of this group, with an aim to present a more accurate picture of Mexicans in the U.S. (Arredondo, 2006). It is anticipated that their contributions to the spectrum of professional endeavors in the U.S. will no longer be anecdotal but empirically validated through this study.

U.S. – Mexico Relations

With the ease of international travel and transnational communications, immigrants to the U.S. are able to maintain relationships with their homelands to a much greater extent than ever before. Mexican migrants continue to maintain strong ties with their homeland and their relatives there through a variety of means, through travel, communication, and most importantly, through remittances to Mexico, which continue to rise. At \$20 billion, the money that they saved and sent to Mexico in 2005 is three times the amount sent in 2000 (Corchado, 2005, Massey, 2005). Continuing relationships with people in Mexico influence immigrants to the U.S. in at least three significant ways: (1) social networks allow the ease of transfer of tangible and intangible assets between the two countries, (2) remittances allow emigrants to maintain their membership in their home communities, and (3) the money remittances have a different effect than savings that are brought back at the end of a migration trip (Mooney, 2004). Since about 98% of the Mexicans who live abroad reside in the U.S., in 1996, Mexico granted expatriates the right to vote. However, there currently exists no law that establishes a procedure for absentee voting, and the bill currently under consideration will affect 2006 elections. However, the modification of the Mexican Constitution in 1996 provided an unequivocal right of those living abroad to maintain ties to their homeland.

In addition to the social networks between those in the U.S. and those in Mexico, and in addition to the border issues and undocumented migration that seem to distress the two nations, the important North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed on January 1, 1994, emphasizes the interdependence of the three North American nations of Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Interestingly, while NAFTA encourages the free flow of goods and capital, concurrently there is strict monitoring and control of the movement of people.

Furthermore, besides economic concerns regarding border crossings, since September 11, 2001, issues of homeland security are increasingly raised (Andreas, 2005) with the border perceived as an easy point of entry for those who may transit through Mexico to inflict terror attacks on the U.S. Nor is the U.S. the only partner wary of the other; much of the middle-class in Mexico has a general anti-American, anti-gringo attitude, and Krauze (2005) wonders if the two nations are destined to stereotype and distrust the other.

Closing Thoughts

The U.S. admits Mexican immigrants into the country in record numbers, either through legitimate channels or through ineffective border controls and poorly implemented sanctions for unauthorized residence and illegal employment. The impact of the Mexican population and culture is increasingly evident across the nation as preferred destinations now include all states. This paper has focused primarily on immigration policies, the profile of the Mexican immigrant, and implications for the U.S. economy. For every issue, there is a counter issue, and the U.S. public continues to be ambivalent about the presence of low-skilled and undocumented immigrants from Mexico. There appears to be no discussion of professional legal migrants, and literature on their adaptation is relatively sparse, although cultural variations and conflicts also impact this segment of the migrant population.

The report has not begun to touch on the impact on the U.S. of the Spanish language, of family patterns and social relationships, of the increase in the size of the Catholic community, of Mexican art, music, and dance, of the Mexican cuisine, or of other Mexican businesses, for example. It has not assessed the implications for U.S. social services, public health, law, and education. It has not surveyed the extent to which Mexican immigrants utilize, or are denied, the resources of the U.S. The potential for deporting undocumented workers and separating them from their U.S. – born children has not been discussed. Second generation Mexican-Americans, their bicultural experiences, and the hurdles in negotiating conflicting cultural expectations have not been evaluated, nor have their implications for the native population. Relationships of Mexicans to other immigrants and other U.S. minorities are important, but have not been explored.

For any immigrant community, it is a long road from its country of origin. The physical distance may be great, but the social, psychological, and emotional distance immigrants travel is always greater. Nevertheless, the human condition and its similarities bind peoples together to a much greater extent than one tends to accept, regardless of social norms, culture, religion, or language. As a land of immigrants, if the U.S. is to be truly multicultural, as it claims to be, it must also be pluralistic and recognize, accept, and laud the differences in peoples as a national asset. It does not have the corner on cultural diversity and immigration struggles, and in this increasingly interdependent world, it must allow effective policies, programs, and services from other nations to inform its own practices.

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