

## A Changing Paradigm: Mexican Migration to the United States

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When we discuss immigration publicly in the United States, we tend to focus almost exclusively on unauthorized immigration, especially unauthorized immigration from Mexico. In fact, the public discussion of immigration reform in the United States has centered on how to control the arrival of Mexicans coming across the U.S. southern border, and efforts at reforming the immigration system usually begin and end with a debate about this. Yet figures show that unauthorized immigration from Mexico has dropped dramatically since 2007 and remained around or below net zero. Initially many analysts expected these numbers to increase once the U.S. economy rebounded after a deep recession, but that does not appear to have happened. Instead, unauthorized flows from Central America and Asia have increased, but not from Mexico (Passel, Cohn, Krogstad, and Gonzalez-Barrero 2014).

Why has Mexican unauthorized immigration remained so low in recent years and is that likely to continue? And if it does, how should that change the conversation about immigration policy in the United States? In this chapter I argue that we should expect to see low unauthorized immigration rates from Mexico to the United States in the future owing to a series of structural changes in the relationship between the two countries. While unauthorized immigration from other countries will increase, there is unlikely to be another wave of unauthorized immigration anything like the magnitude of the most recent flow, since geography simply makes it more difficult for immigrants from other countries to come to the United States without legal documents. Some of these new unauthorized flows, especially those from Central America, will use the U.S.-Mexico border, but many more will come to the United States through other ports of entry and many more will be visa overstayers.

It will take a long time to change the framework through which the U.S. public and policymakers see immigration. Political perception almost always lags behind reality. Images of young Mexicans jumping across the border fence and trekking through the desert are potent ones, and they likely to be present in the public discussion for some time. Moreover, unauthorized immigration from Mexico is not over. The more than four to one GDP per capita gap between the two countries (World Bank Indicators 2014) means that there will be persistent, low-level unauthorized flows across the shared border, so the images will not disappear completely. However, the new normal going forward is likely to be very low flows of unauthorized immigrants, compared to the past twenty years. This calls for policymakers and the public to spend far more time thinking about what kind of legal immigration system they want for the country's future, especially

what kind of system could enhance U.S. competitiveness, and less about how to prevent unauthorized flows.

### What Has Changed

From the 1980s through 2007, Mexico and the United States experienced together a migration boom that saw millions of people moving from the one country to the other. By 2007 there were around six million Mexicans without legal documents, and they made up the majority of the over eleven million unauthorized immigrants in the United States. The overall stock of unauthorized immigrants in the United States grew from 3.5 million in 1990 to 7.9 million in 2000, according to figures of the Pew Research Center, and then up to 12.2 million in 2007, driven largely, though not exclusively, by the flow of Mexican immigrants coming across the border. Since then, however, the numbers have dropped slightly and settled around 11.3 million, at a consistent plateau since 2009 (Passel et al. 2014).

Three factors appear to have contributed to the drop in Mexicans crossing the border without documents. The first is the relative health of the two economies, with an anemic economic recovery in the United States and the consolidation of twenty years of slow but steady growth in Mexico. It is not that the Mexican economy is a miracle or the U.S. one a disaster, but rather that Mexico appears to be reaping the benefits of twenty years of painful changes, while the United States appears to be in a protracted recovery from a deep recession that is proceeding slowly (Selee 2013). Both of these changes appear to be structural, and it is likely that there will be more overall dynamism in the Mexican economy in the future.

The U.S. economic downturn, which began in the construction sector in 2007, appears to be responsible for creating the tipping point that stemmed existing unauthorized immigration flows from Mexico. However, it is the long-term improvement of the Mexican economy that appear to be preventing out-migration, and this appears likely to continue. In fact, since 2012 there is an uptick in unauthorized migration from other countries to the United States again, especially Central America and Asia, but not from Mexico (Passel et al. 2013).

Mexico's current success can be traced to changes that took place over the past 20 years. Symbolically, this period began on January 1, 1994, when two major events occurred at the same time. On this day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, a major economic decision for Mexico, that tied it to two large economies to the north and confirmed a commitment, begun a few years earlier, to shift away from an inwardly oriented economy that depended on oil and tourism for export earnings to a highly globalized economy based on manufacturing for exports. This change was particularly painful and undoubtedly helped spur some of the migration of the past twenty years, and many of the measures, especially initially, were implemented poorly. However,

twenty years later, Mexicans have almost a third greater income in real terms, and the economy continues to grow gradually with a solid base in manufacturing and increasing clusters in services and high-tech innovation.

Although foreign-owned companies dominate some areas of the manufacturing economy, including automobiles and aerospace, there are now backward linkages into domestic industries that are linked into these global industries. Additionally, there is a growing set of Mexican companies that are doing very well on the global stage. A Mexican company, Bimbo, dominates the global market for bakery products, including such well-known brands in the United States as Thomas English Muffins, SaraLee, Orowheat, Boboli, and Freihoffers. Cemex, based in Monterrey, is the third largest cement company in the world, while nearby Femsa is the largest Coca-Cola bottler outside Atlanta and the owner of the largest chain of Latin American convenience stores. About a fifth of all U.S. milk and dairy products in the U.S. are produced by a Mexican company, Lala, out of Torreon, a small town in the north of Mexico, while Mexico's Sigma Foods produces roughly a fifth of the lunchmeats and hot dogs that U.S. families consume. Tracphones, the biggest prepaid phone company in the United States, is also Mexican, owned by Carlos Slim, whose companies are among the most successful telecommunications enterprises in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. A few successful companies do not make Mexico prosperous, but it does say something about the shift in Mexican manufacturing and innovation over the past twenty years (Wilson 2012, Selee n.d.).

However, because Mexico's economic opening did nothing to change a closed political system or to address questions of equity, the other event on that New Year's Day in 1994 was a rebellion by indigenous peasants in the southern state of Chiapas, which brought the questions of democracy and social inclusion to the fore of public debate. This event helped galvanize Mexico's nascent movement for democratic reform and brought about swift changes in political rules that opened up the country to political competition. It also helped put issues of social development squarely on the policy agenda in Mexico. Over twenty years, social spending jumped from seven to twelve percent of GDP, a significant shift (Social Spending Scott 2009). In this period average years of schooling have jumped from less than six to almost nine years (UNDP 2013), while healthcare access has gone from around fifty percent of the population to over eighty percent in the same period (Selee n.d. based on INEGI figures).

Now these figures hide quite a lot of inequalities. Access to education is not the same thing as quality education. Access to a healthcare plan is not the same thing as having access to a doctor, much less a specialist. Moreover, one recent study (Bolio et al. 2014) found that Mexico has three parallel economies, one that is modern and inserted into export markets, which is immensely productive; one, comprised of small and medium businesses, that is minimally productive; and one that is rooted in the informal economy, that actually has declining productivity. Access to credit is one of the key differentiators among

these three groups, with only the first group able to obtain loans to expand their operations. However, while the first group drives economic growth, the second and third groups make up most of the workforce, which has kept wages overall far more stagnant than they would be otherwise. Mexico has grown but not equitably or evenly.

One of the recent factors of economic change has been migrants themselves, who have invested in their home communities. There are about 22 billion dollars of remittances a year to Mexico from migrants abroad (Cohn, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Cuddington 2013). Most of this goes into consumption, but increasingly some of these remittances are going into productive projects. Migrant organizations have played a role in channelling some of these remittances into development efforts, but most of it happens through the opportunities that migrants provide to their families and neighbors to get ahead so that they do not have to migrate themselves (Selee n.d.). Again, Mexico has not solved its problems, but it is increasingly a more attractive place for people to try their luck for the future, with all its shortcomings, while the U.S. economy provides fewer comparative opportunities than in the recent past.

The second factor that has reduced migration from Mexico to the United States is border security and U.S. immigration enforcement more broadly. Security measures raise the cost of crossing the border and discourage at least some flows. The U.S. immigration enforcement system is now larger than all other federal law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, DEA, and Marshall Service put together, according to a Migration Policy Institute report (Meissner, Kerwin, Chisti, and Bergeron, 2013). Part of the qualitative change in both border security and interior enforcement has to do with technology, as much as it does with manpower. Over the past twenty years -- and especially since 2005 -- there has been a vast shift in the capacity of the U.S. government to keep people from crossing the border and to detect them if they live without documents in the United States (Roberts, Alden, and Whitney, 2013).

This does not mean that money spent on immigration enforcement is necessarily efficient. Slowing the flow of unauthorized immigrants has meant redirecting resources from other priorities, and has come at the expense of other law enforcement priorities. Even with these dramatic investments, many hundreds of thousands of people still manage to enter the United States without papers or overstay visas. However, it is very likely that this vastly expanded security apparatus is at least part of the reason why the flows have slowed. The massive investment in technology, physical infrastructure, and personnel at the U.S.-Mexico border is probably one reason why we will see fewer people crossing this border without legal documents in the future.

The third factor in the declining number of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico entering the United States is a demographic shift now underway in Mexico. Young people 15 to 29 years old, who make up a disproportionate number of those

who choose to migrate, are a declining share of the population in Mexico, the result of four decades of successful efforts to rein in population growth (Terrazas, Papademetriou, and Rosenblum, 2011). Today's Mexico's birthrate is very similar to that of the United States, around 2.2 live births per adult female versus a little over 1.9 for the United States (World Bank Indicators, 2014).

Meanwhile, Central American countries, especially Honduras and Guatemala, still have a population bubble precisely in that age range, which explains, at least in part, why there may be continued migration from those countries in the foreseeable future. According to one demographic analysis, the number of Mexicans in the 15-29 year age range has just started to decline, while Hondurans and Guatemalans in that age range will continue to climb for another fifteen to twenty years (Terrazas, Papademetriou, and Rosenblum, 2014, p. 6).

In the future, we are likely to see fewer unauthorized immigrants from Mexico, so we would be wise to begin updating our frameworks about this as we discuss immigration policy in the United States and outmigration in Mexico, which is increasingly becoming a country of transit for migration from other parts of the world. While the flows will not go away entirely, we are likely facing a new paradigm that may well persist into the future. Instead there is likely to be a greater percentage of unauthorized immigrants from Central America, Asia and elsewhere around the world in the United States, but the numbers will never be as large since these countries are located further away.

## Conclusions

There is a special relationship between the United States and Mexico. We are two large neighboring countries. The United States is still the world's greatest destination for immigration, not necessarily per capita, but overall, while Mexico is a middle income country, one that is moving up in the world, but that does have a population that would be willing to move elsewhere in hopes of getting ahead. As a result, we will always have some unauthorized immigration, and this will be an issue in the relationship for many years. But we may look back and realize that the last twenty or thirty years, when there was significant unauthorized immigration from Mexico, was actually a period of exceptionalism. What we think of as the normal state of Mexican migration flows to the United States -- that is, large unauthorized populations -- may turn out to have been an unusual period. Instead, we are now returning to a more normal relationship between our countries, with persistent but quite low levels of unauthorized immigration.

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## Brief Biography

Andrew Selee is Executive Vice President of the Woodrow Wilson Center and the former Director of the Center's Mexico Institute. He is the editor of *The United States and Mexico: The Politics of Partnership* (with Peter Smith, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013) and *Mexico's Democratic Challenges* (with Jacqueline Peschard, Stanford University Press, 2010), among other books.