

Mexico: From Country of Mass Emigration to Transit State

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Mexico: From Country of Mass Emigration to Transit State¹

Wayne A. Cornelius

This paper analyzes Mexico's evolution as a historical country of emigration, exporting large numbers of workers to the United States for more than a century, to a transit state for Northern Triangle migrants seeking to enter the United States. The influx of transit migrants into Mexico, most headed for the United States, now exceeds the flow of undocumented Mexican nationals seeking entry into the United States. Return migration to traditional high-emigration communities in Mexico has dwindled to a trickle, as U.S. immigration control policies incentivized unauthorized migrants to settle permanently in that country and reunify their families on the U.S. side of the border. Mexico has never viewed itself as a country of immigration, but it has tolerated a steady flow of mostly temporary Guatemalan migrants to fill low-skilled agricultural and service jobs in the southern border region. Mexico's growing role as a transit state has been highly contested by anti-immigration groups in the United States and by the U.S. government under President Donald Trump, who have been critical of lax enforcement of Mexico's southern border, but also by human rights advocates concerned about violence and other abuses perpetrated against transit migrants by government agents, police, and criminal gangs.

This paper documents how changes in national economies, demographic profiles, government policies, and rule-of-law problems have shaped all of these flows as well as ongoing debates over immigration policy. I conclude that Mexico's role as a large-scale supplier of migrant labor to the United States has ended, regardless of future U.S. policy choices, due in part to depletion of the pool of potential migrants. Going forward, given Mexico's own changing demographic profile, its challenge will be to assure a labor supply sufficient for robust domestic economic growth.

As Northern Triangle migrants seeking asylum in the United States have become bottled up within Mexico, due to new U.S. restrictions on allowable grounds for asylum claims, Mexico's own asylum and deportation policies have gained heightened importance. Transit migrants who face life-threatening conditions in their home countries may now have no better option than staying put in Mexico for as long as possible.

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MEXICAN MIGRATION TRENDS

Modern Mexican migration to the United States is rooted in direct labor recruitment by private U.S. corporations and the U.S. government. Beginning in the 1880s, major U.S. railroad, mining, and agribusiness companies sent labor recruiters deep into the interior of Mexico to sign up workers. Then came two U.S. government-initiated programs, operating from 1917-1921 and 1942-1964, which were created to meet wartime labor shortages and were managed in collaboration with the Mexican government. Altogether, these two contract labor programs brought approximately two million Mexicans to work in agriculture and on railroads on short-term (usually three- to six-month) labor contracts, many returning year after year. Most of these Bracero migrants were recruited in west-central Mexico, but residents of rural communities as distant from the United States as the Yucatán Peninsula joined the flow.

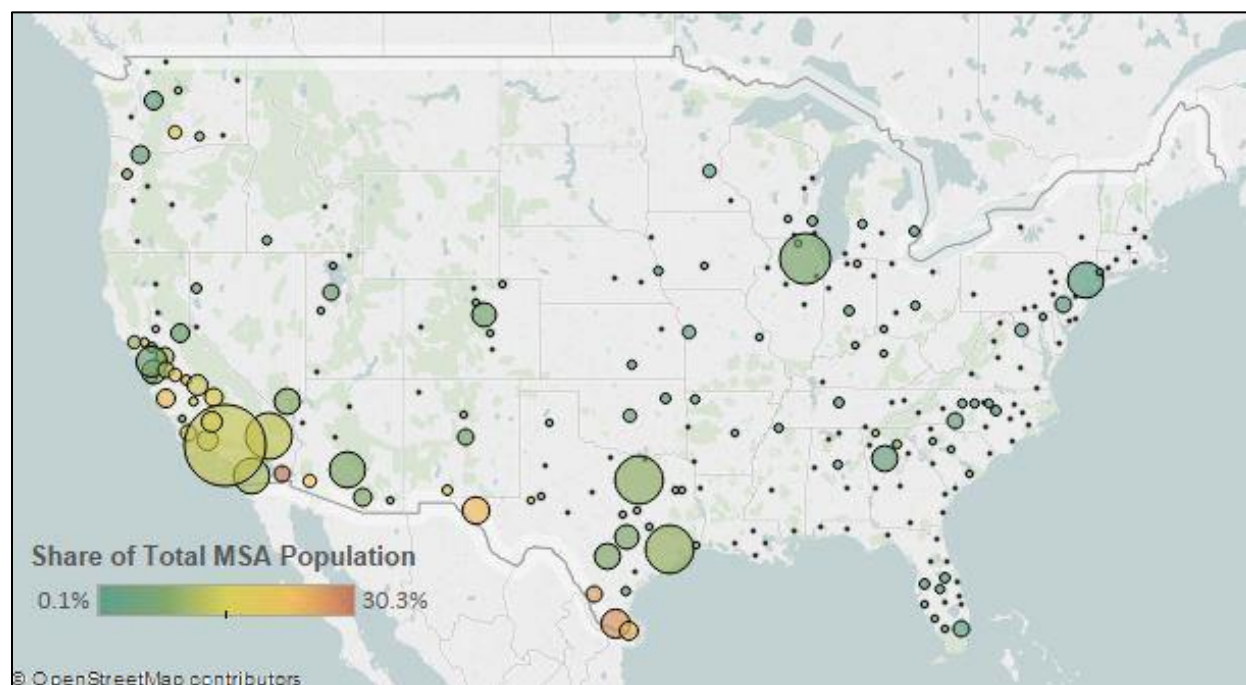
At its peak, in 1956, the World War II-era Bracero Program brought 445,000 Mexican temporary workers – all men – to the United States. As the number of *braceros* increased, especially in the 1950s, the number of unauthorized migrants apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol declined, but parallel flows of *braceros* and undocumented migrants continued throughout the period of the Bracero Program, in part because U.S. farmers and ranchers resisted the program's requirements that they provide adequate housing, sanitation, and disability insurance to Braceros but also because large sectors of the U.S. economy (manufacturing, service industries) as well as women were categorically excluded from the program. A rebellion by farmers in Texas against Border Patrol operations affecting their businesses provoked a highly aggressive enforcement campaign, known as Operation Wetback (Lytle-Hernández 2010: 151-90). The campaign was intended to force employers to meet their labor needs through the Bracero Program. More than one million apprehensions were made under Operation Wetback in Fiscal Year 1954. The Bracero Program itself became the object of rising complaints by U.S. labor unions and religious groups, who argued that growers were violating minimum wage and living conditions guarantees stipulated by the bilateral agreement. After multiple extensions, the program was not reauthorized by the U.S. Congress in 1964.

The end of the Bracero Program, combined with the 1965 Johnson-Reed Act which imposed a quota on Western Hemisphere immigration, set the stage for a massive increase in undocumented flows in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, a trend intensified by the U.S. job booms of the late 1980s and late 1990s. Ex-*braceros* (and their offspring) did not stop migrating to the United States after 1964; many kept coming, as unauthorized migrants, often returning to the same places and businesses where they had worked as *braceros*. In addition, hundreds of thousands of new migrants were pushed into the Mexico-to-U.S. flow by economic crises that afflicted Mexico from 1982-1988 and again in the mid-1990s. During both of these sharp economic contractions, unemployment and inflation rates spiked in Mexico. This was also a period when the financial cost (mainly fees charged by *coyotes*, or people-smugglers) and the physical risks of clandestine entry were relatively low. The U.S.-Mexico border remained porous well into the 1990s, with serious, sustained border enforcement efforts beginning only in 1993. Operation Hold-the-Line (launched in the El Paso, Texas, area in 1993) and Operation Gatekeeper (implemented in California starting in 1994) became the first of four “concentrated enforcement operations” implemented by the Border Patrol along heavily transited segments of the U.S.-Mexico border. The stepped-up border

enforcement effort was a politically motivated response by the Clinton administration to rising anti-immigration sentiment, especially in California (Cornelius 2005).

The maturation of trans-border social networks, many of them initiated during the second Bracero Program and further consolidated by the legalization of over 2.3 million undocumented Mexicans through the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, strengthened incentives for family reunification migration well into the 1990s and beyond. One consequence of socially-networked migration was that, throughout the 1990s, the geographic dispersion of Mexican migrants within the United States increased, as newly arrived migrants sought jobs and better pay in cities well beyond the traditional Mexican enclaves in California, Texas, and Illinois, whose labor markets had become saturated (Zúñiga & Hernández-León 2005, Smith & Furuseth 2006, Massey 2008). By 2014 there were substantial concentrations of Mexican migrants in the Southeast, mid-Atlantic, Rocky Mountain, and Pacific Northwest states (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Top destination metropolitan areas for Mexican immigrants in the United States



Note: Circles represent estimates derived from pooled 2010-2014 American Community Survey data.
Source: Zong & Batalova (2016).

The Mexico-born population of the United States peaked in 2007, at 12.8 million. Undocumented Mexicans peaked in the same year, at 6.9 million, or 57 percent of the total (Passel & Cohn 2017). Since then there has been a sharp decline in new emigration from Mexico. Departures for the United States dropped to levels not seen since the early 1970s, as measured by apprehensions of undocumented migrants by the U.S. Border Patrol along the southwestern border (Figure 2). As of 2016, approximately 11.7 million Mexican immigrants were living in the United States, of whom, 5.6 million were estimated to be undocumented. They represented 52 percent of all undocumented immigrants in the United States (Passel & Cohn 2017). Independently calculated

estimates of the Mexico-origin undocumented population, made by the Center for Migration Studies, show a decline from 6.6 million in 2010 to 5.66 million in 2016 (Warren 2018).

This trend is mirrored in micro-surveys of potential migrants in Mexican rural communities that had previously had high rates of international migration. In one Yucatecan community surveyed four times between 2006 and 2015, the proportion of high-propensity migrants to the United States dropped from 16.8 percent in a 2006 survey of the town to 7.4 percent in 2009, 4.6 percent in 2012, and just 2.5 percent the most recent (2015) survey (Figure 3; Noriega et al. 2016). The steepest decline in intention to migrate occurred between 2006 and 2009, precisely when the Great Recession was taking hold in the United States. Some analysts suggested that migrants – in effect, economic refugees – were returning to Mexico in large numbers as the U.S. recession deepened. For example, the Pew Research Center, using an indirect (residual) estimation methodology, found that, from 2005 to 2010, net migration between Mexico and the United States dropped to essentially zero (Passel, Cohn, & González-Barrera, 2012; Passel 2015).

Nevertheless, “zero net migration” does not mean that Mexico-to-U.S. migration had ceased entirely. According to estimates by the Migration Policy Institute, between 2008 and 2009, 6.4 migrants per 1,000 residents of Mexico departed that country (Papademetriou & Terrazas 2009). The emigration rate declined to 3.4 per thousand between 2011 and 2012 and remained at 3.3 migrants per 1,000 Mexicans from 2012 to 2014. Field studies conducted during the 2007-2015 period in Mexican communities of emigration and U.S. destination cities found that new migrants continued to go north, although in much smaller numbers than previously (Cornelius et al. 2009, 2012, 2013, 2016; FitzGerald et al., 2011, 2013).

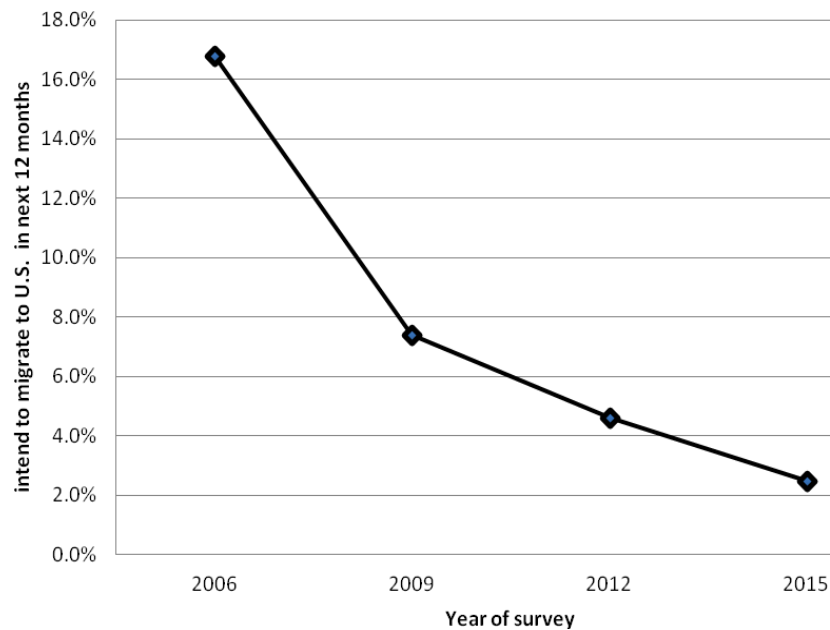
The Mexico-born component of undocumented immigration to the United States has been shrinking steadily in the current decade. In 2015, new migration flows from Mexico fell behind those from China and India (Chishti & Hipsman 2015). In Fiscal Year 2016, more *non*-Mexicans (222,847) were apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol than Mexicans (192,969), due largely to increased migration from Central America and Asia. This trend has persisted. In Fiscal Year 2017, only about one-third of apprehended migrants were from Mexico (most of the remaining two-thirds were from Northern Triangle countries). The reduced flow of new migrants from Mexico and heavier return migration to Mexico are reflected in a decline of 1.3 million in the stock of unauthorized Mexicans living in the United States, from a peak of 6.9 million in 2007 to 5.6 million in 2016. By that year Mexicans were no longer the majority of unauthorized immigrants in the United States (Passel & Cohn, 2017).

Figure 2: U.S. Border Patrol apprehensions, Southwest border, 1970-2016.



Source: U.S. Border Patrol.

Figure 3: Residents of a Mexican migrant-sending community (Tunkás, Yucatán) who intend to migrate to the U.S. in next 12 months, by year of survey (percentages)



Source: Field surveys conducted by the Mexican Migration Field Research Program (MMFRP), University of California-San Diego, 2006-2015.

Numerous journalists and research analysts have blamed the Great Recession in the United States that erupted in December 2007 for the sharp contraction in the migration flow from Mexico, but the reality is more complex. Technically, the Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009 -- a 19-month period.² From 1990 to 2006, Mexican migration to the United States (measured by Border Patrol apprehensions) closely tracked trends in U.S. job growth, but in the aftermath of the Great Recession that correlation appears to have broken down. Mexico-to-U.S. migration has failed to rebound as expected once the Great Recession ended, despite steady improvement in the U.S. labor market.³ Border Patrol apprehensions have rebounded slightly from the low point of 2011 but remain near early-1970s levels. Moreover, a large share of recent “apprehensions” have involved unaccompanied children and families – mostly from Northern Triangle countries -- who turn themselves in to agents upon arriving at the border, seeking to claim asylum (Office of Immigration Statistics 2017: 17). The Pew Research Center’s most recent estimates suggest that the migration rate and stock of undocumented Mexican migrants have stabilized (González-Barrera & Krogstad 2017).

Evidence from survey and qualitative interviews conducted in Mexican migrant-sending communities reveals no single-factor explanation for the decline in U.S.-bound migration since 2007. Instead, there appears to be a new calculus of staying home in Mexico, influenced both by macro-level variables (e.g., improving labor market conditions in Mexico, perceived weak U.S. employer demand, an upsurge in organized crime activities in the Mexican borderlands that pose greater risk to migrants), the recently expanded availability of government benefits for low-income Mexicans (cash income transfers, basic health care), and individual-level factors like the locus of social network ties (Noriega et al. 2016).

Specifically, potential migrants are being discouraged by a perception that jobs are still hard to come by in the United States. This negative view of the U.S. job market is a surprisingly persistent residue of the Great Recession, which administered a high-voltage shock to the Mexico-to-U.S. migration system. Not since the Great Depression of the 1930s had U.S. employer demand for Mexican labor collapsed so quickly and broadly. Post-recession improvement in the U.S. job market has been steady but slow. While the U.S. unemployment rate stood at just 4.1 percent in December 2017 – a level considered by most economists as full employment – the rate of job creation has not equaled what occurred in the late 1990s – a boom that pulled many Mexicans with no previous history of migration to the United States into the north-bound flow. The gradual character of the U.S. jobs recovery over nearly a decade helps to explain the persistence of negative perceptions of the U.S. labor market among potential migrants.

The growing attractiveness of migration to nearby cities within Mexico, as an alternative to going to the United States, also discourages U.S.-bound migration. Previously, for some Mexicans, internal migration was a springboard or “school” for international migration. Field

² The drop in Mexican migration probably started before the Great Recession technically began, since certain sectors of the U.S. economy in which many Mexican immigrants have been heavily employed, like home construction, began shedding jobs before the rest of the U.S. economy.

³ Expectations of a quick rebound were well-grounded in history. After all previous economic contractions in the United States in recent decades there was a relatively quick restoration of pre-recession levels of undocumented migration from Mexico (Papademetriou & Terrazas 2009).

research in 2006 showed that having prior migratory experience within Mexico increased the probability of U.S.-bound migration by 28 percent, net of basic demographic and social network factors (Rodríguez et al., 2007). Since the Great Recession, internal migration is viewed more positively. It is less costly (no need to pay people-smugglers), less hazardous than international migration without papers (Cornelius 2001), and less disruptive to family life (internal migrants can go home more frequently). In the case of a small town in central Yucatán, migration to the state capital of Mérida and to tourist cities of the Mayan Riviera has increased as departures for U.S. destinations have declined (Noriega et al. 2016).

Other discouragement factors include the high cost of migrating to the United States without papers (mainly the \$3,000-\$6,000 that must be paid to hire a people-smuggler, depending on services provided⁴), and the fear of being preyed upon by organized crime gangs that rob, assault, and kidnap migrants on their way to the border (although drug cartel-related violence pushes some Mexicans out of their home communities; see Ríos Contreras 2014). Clearly, stronger U.S. border enforcement in the post-1993 period has pushed up the fees that people-smugglers can charge, but not enough to price them out of the market. As smugglers' fees have risen, so has the capacity of U.S.-based relatives of would-be undocumented migrants to loan them the funds needed for border-crossing assistance. If a potential migrant has no social network ties to the United States, his or her ability to finance migration is greatly reduced. At the low end of the income and education scale, some people still living in Mexican communities of emigration are staying home because they cannot afford to go north -- or they may try to cross the border without assistance.

Finally, field studies have found a depleted pool of potential migrants, resulting from the great wave of migration to the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s and Mexico's ongoing demographic transition. People who left migrant-sending communities during that period were those having the highest propensity to migrate, based on migration history and number of relatives living in the United States, and they were more likely to settle permanently in the United States than previous generations of Mexican migrants. Moreover, the sharp decline in Mexico's fertility rate since the mid-1970s has translated into slower labor force growth (National Research Council 2011: 36-38; Chisti & Hipsman 2015). The combination of previous heavy out-migration, a higher incidence of permanent settlement in the U.S., and weaker push factors related to Mexico's changing demography has significantly reduced the number of people of prime working age who are available to migrate to the United States. The increased use of internal migration as a substitute for international migration is another factor reducing the pool of potential U.S.-bound migrants.

There is no national-level data set that would enable us to quantify and rank-order these various factors, but it is reasonable to assume that all of them are contributing to the downturn in the Mexico-to-U.S. migration flow in some measure. Going forward, Mexico's own

⁴ People-smugglers today can charge eight to ten times what they charged in the early 1990s, at the outset of the U.S. border enforcement build-up (Spener 2009). The highest fees are charged for crossings made through legal ports-of-entry, with smugglers providing false documents or concealing their clients in vehicles. Field interviews conducted by the Mexican Migration Field Research Program from 2011 to 2015 revealed that between 16.5 and 47.9 percent of recent unauthorized crossings had been made in this way (Fischbein, et al., 2013: 21; Noriega, et al. 2017: 17).

demographic transition is likely to be the fundamental factor shaping emigration. Mexico's total fertility rate declined by more than 70 percent over the last half century, from an average of 6.8 children per woman in the late 1970s to 2.2 children in 2010. The labor force growth rate has declined in tandem. Average increases in the number of 10- to 14-year-old males in the population shrank from 150,000 per year in the 1970s and 1980s to about 20,000 in the last twelve years (National Research Council 2011: 36-37). Mexico's trajectory as a country of emigration may eventually resemble those of southern European countries like Spain and Italy, where a fertility implosion combined with rising living standards to reduce the export of labor to northern Europe to a trickle in the 1980s.

Who are the people now opting to stay home in Mexico? Field interviews with people who remain in communities of emigration reveal certain key attributes. Most importantly, they are people with the weakest social network ties to the United States. Indeed, the number of U.S.-based relatives is the strongest predictor of propensity to migrate to the United States. Those with the lowest probability of migrating internationally have the most relatives living in Mexico. In a 2015 field study in Yucatán, among interviewees who reported that they were not planning to migrate to the United States in 2015, a plurality (33.7 percent) said that they were staying in Mexico because most of their family members reside there (Noriega et al. 2016: 29). Stay-at-homes are the least likely to have a spouse or partner living in the United States. Thus, family ties pull Mexicans in both directions. For some potential migrants, family ties anchor them more firmly in the home community; for others they provide an incentive to migrate to the United States to reunify with family members already living there.

Stay-at-homes are also more likely to be above 60 years of age and to have chronic health problems. Women predominate among non-migrants. Although Mexican women began to migrate to the United States in larger numbers in the 1980s (Cornelius 1992: 172-75), it is still common practice in rural communities for the husband to migrate first, leaving their spouse and children in Mexico. On the other hand, a woman with a spouse living in the United States is more likely to migrate there, thus reunifying the family on that side of the border. Committed stay-at-homes tend to prefer the lifestyle of Mexico and often have negative perceptions of life in the United States, including its educational system. They are more critical of changes they observe in migrants returning from the United States (especially changes in language, dress, and family life). Finally, they tend to have no perceived economic need to migrate; they believe they are doing reasonably well in Mexico (Castillo et al. 2007; Noriega et al. 2016).

Multivariate analysis of individual-level survey data reveals that most U.S. immigration policy-related variables have no statistically significant effect on the decision to migrate or stay in Mexico (Cornelius & Salehyan 2007; Hicken et al., 2010). The variables included in these models include the perception that border enforcement is strong, having personal experience with interior enforcement (worksite raids, traffic stops, etc.), being aware of a post-2012 U.S. Border Patrol policy of increasing the penalties for illegal entry (incarcerating apprehended migrants for longer periods, prosecuting them in federal criminal courts rather than allowing "voluntary departure"), and the expectation that a legalization program for undocumented immigrants may be enacted. Most migrants and high-propensity-potential-migrant interviewees knew about these U.S. policies, but that knowledge did not significantly affect decisions to migrate. The only statistically significant U.S.-policy-related determinant of decisions to migrate or stay home was the belief/perception that deportations from the United States had risen sharply in the last five years.

But those who held this belief were actually *more* likely to migrate to the United States than those who were less well-informed about the large-scale deportations occurring under the Obama administration, which peaked at more than 400,000 per year. While other non-traditional determinants of decisions to stay home were influential in the expected direction (especially awareness of organized migrant-kidnapping activities in the borderlands), they were not significant predictors in multivariate models (Noriega, et al. 2016). Thus, despite frequent claims by U.S. public officials that tough immigration control measures and rhetoric have created a strong, reliable deterrent to unauthorized Mexican migration, there is no systematic, *individual-level* evidence of such a discouragement effect (National Research Council 2011: 34-35).

There is disagreement among immigration researchers on how to measure the deterrent effect of border enforcement and other U.S. immigration control measures on Mexican migration behavior. Analyses by sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, drawing on survey and ethnographic data from field studies in migrant-sending communities, U.S. destination cities, and Mexican border cities, find little or no deterrent effect, beyond an indirect effect via upward pressure on people-smugglers' fees⁵ (see, for example, Massey, Durand, & Pren 2016; Cornelius & Salehyan 2007; Slack, Martínez, & Whiteford, eds. 2018). Probability models constructed by economists using aggregate data (e.g., the number of Border Patrol line-watch hours, the number of less-educated Hispanics or of newly arrived Mexican immigrant workers captured by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and Current Population Survey) show a statistically significant deterrent effect, defined, for example, as a reduction in the estimated number of new unauthorized workers (Amuedo-Dorantes & Bansak 2012; Angelucci 2012; Orrenius 2014; Orrenius & Zavodny 2017; National Research Council 2013)

The most direct, individual-level evidence on how U.S. policies influence Mexicans' decisions to migrate has been gathered through tens of thousands of face-to-face interviews with experienced and potential unauthorized migrants, conducted on both sides of the border by three long-term field research programs. These programs, based at the University of California-San Diego, Princeton University, and the University of Texas-El Paso, conducted their fieldwork from 2005 through 2015, using differing data-collection strategies. Their findings are highly consistent. Given the considerable differences in survey designs used by these field research programs, their results are a clear case of convergent validation. The formal model studies based on aggregate data provide indirect estimates of deterrent effects, using simple proxies for the inflow of unauthorized migrants from Mexico. My conclusion is that the mixed findings on whether U.S. policies are deterring illegal immigration from Mexico are an artifact of divergent research methodologies.

Most scholars agree that the era of large-scale Mexico-to-U.S. migration has ended. Relative to the great waves of Mexican migration to the United States in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Mexico has ceased to be a country of emigration – at least of its own citizens. Mexico-to-U.S. migration remains far below pre-Great Recession levels. As discussed in the following section on return migration, the U.S. border enforcement build-up that began in 1993 continues to motivate unauthorized migrants who succeed in entering to stay longer in the United States, as they seek to amortize their large financial investment in smuggler-assisted crossings and the

⁵ As noted above, this effect has been largely offset by rising incomes among the U.S.-based relatives of unauthorized migrants, who provide most of the funds to hire a people-smuggler (Fuentes & García 2009: Fig. 3.3).

physical risk they have taken in a clandestine border crossing. The end result is a more stable, more diverse population of Mexican immigrants in the United States, in which women, children, and mixed-legal-status families are much better represented, compared with the pre-1993 era (González-Barrera & López 2013).

Mexicans still migrating to the United States without legal status continue to get in. Evidence from ten field studies of Mexican migrants' border-crossing experiences found that nine out of ten undocumented migrants succeeded in entering the United States, if not on their first try then on the second or third, on their most recent trip to the border (National Research Council, 2011: 33; Noriega et al. 2016). Statistical models constructed by a contractor to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security show a much lower rate of successful illegal entries (Office of Immigration Statistics 2017: 19-20), but the modeling relies heavily on potentially subjective data such as observations by Border Patrol supervisors and agents' counts of footprints in the dust on major border-crossing paths to estimate the probability of entry without detection. These metrics have not been validated independently. The discrepancy in findings between DHS' analysis and academic studies of undocumented migrants' eventual success rates based on individual-level migration histories is so large that fundamental differences in research methodology are likely to be responsible.

MEXICO AS A TRANSIT COUNTRY

Mexico's role as a conduit for third-country undocumented migrants seeking to enter the United States was relatively insignificant until 1981, when intensification of the civil war in Guatemala pushed refugees into Mexico, most of them intending to stay temporarily in the state of Chiapas until the violence diminished. During the remainder of the 1980s, civil conflicts in all three Northern Triangle countries combined with punishing economic conditions to touch off a considerably larger wave of emigration to Mexico. Some 200,000 migrants from Guatemala alone fled to Mexico during the 1980s. As civil conflicts in the Northern Triangle countries tapered off in the 1990s, poor economic conditions continued to push Central Americans north. The flow of economic refugees was augmented by migrants fleeing "unofficial" violence in their home countries generated by gang activity and drug trafficking. Much of the rise in gang violence has been attributed to Salvadorans deported from the United States who had been active in gangs based in cities like Los Angeles.

Using a composite measure incorporating three indicators (migrants apprehended by Mexican authorities, migrants apprehended by U.S. authorities, and a residual estimate of migrants not apprehended by authorities of either country who were able to enter the United States), Rodríguez Chávez (2017) estimated that 392,000 Northern Triangle migrants transited through Mexico in 2014, just under the record set in 2005 (Figure 4).⁶ Estimates by the Pew Research Center show that inflows of Northern Triangle migrants into the United States nearly doubled between 2011 and 2014, while inflows of Mexicans declined (Figure 5). Similarly, U.S. Border

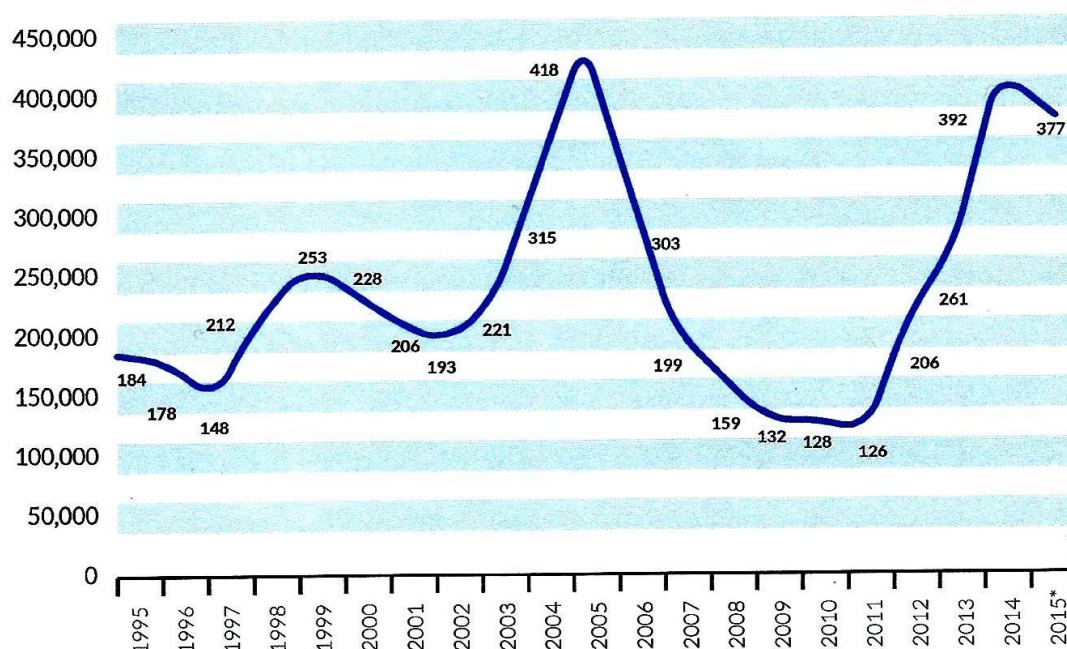
⁶ Estimates by the International Organization for Migration are considerably higher. The IOM estimates that 400,000-500,000 undocumented transit migrants now pass through Mexico each year, about 90 percent of them Central American nationals (Semple 2017a).

Patrol statistics show a nearly 300 percent increase in apprehensions of third-country nationals at the U.S.-Mexico border, from 54,098 in Fiscal Year 2012 to 148,995 in FY 2017.

According to official Mexican and U.S. statistics and data from the EMIF-Sur survey, the vast majority of transit migrants pass through Mexico quickly, with 93 percent spending less than one month in that country (Rodríguez Chávez 2017: 4). Data from EMIF-Sur surveys conducted along the U.S.-Mexico border show that the United States was the intended destination of 73 percent of deported Central Americans in 2009, falling to 60 percent in 2011. Among Northern Triangle migrants who have settled in the United States, an estimated 55 percent are unauthorized, compared with 24 percent of all U.S. immigrants (Cohn, Passel, & González-Barrera 2017).

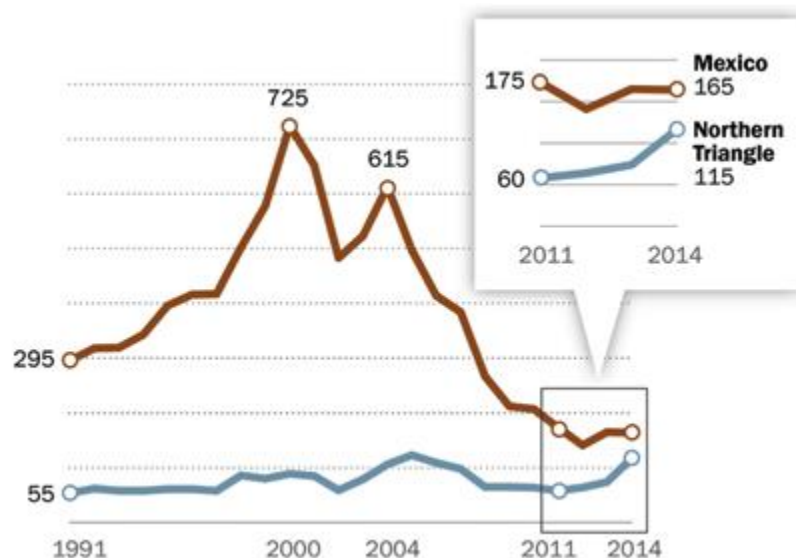
Northern Triangle migrants accounted for 92 percent of all migrants detained by Mexican authorities between 2012-15. Among migrants transiting through Mexico, Hondurans were most heavily represented until 2009, when they were overtaken by Guatemalans. But Salvadorans had the highest growth rate from 2012-15 (Rodríguez Chávez 2017: 7). Other countries and regions are also represented among Mexico's transit migrants, including South Asia, China, and various African countries, albeit in much smaller numbers. In addition, migrant shelters in Mexican border cities report that since 2016 transit migrants have included substantial numbers of Haitians, whose ability to enter the United States legally under "humanitarian parole" stemming from the 2010 Haitian earthquake was ended by the Obama administration, and Cubans, whose long-standing preferential treatment in legal immigration (the "wet foot/dry foot" policy) was eliminated in 2016.

Figure 4: Estimated number of Central American transit migrants passing through Mexico to the United States, 1995-2015



Source: Rodríguez Chávez 2017.

Figure 5: New immigrant arrivals to the United States, Mexicans vs. Northern Triangle migrants, 1991-2014 (in thousands)



Source: Cohn, Passel, & González-Barrera (2017).

Most transit migrants follow one of six main routes from the Guatemalan border to cities on the U.S.-Mexico border, notably Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Piedras Negras, Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros (Figure 6). Their passage through Mexico is by no means risk-free. In recent years, more frequent acts of violence against transit migrants on the eastern Gulf Coast route have caused more to travel on secondary routes, such as the so-called “western corridor” towards Guadalajara, where they are less likely to be victimized (Basok et al. 2015). Between January 2007 and April 2014, a total of 71,419 migrants were kidnapped, and subsequently rescued by the Mexican federal police (Casillas & Córdova Alcaraz 2018, Table 6). Data from EMIF-Sur surveys conducted from 2009 to 2013 reveal that most transit migrants – especially Guatemalans (64.5 percent) and Salvadorans (49.1 percent) – try to reduce their risk by hiring a people-smuggler to assist their journey through Mexico to the U.S. border. They use various modes of transport, including buses, freight trains (which have proven to be highly dangerous), and trucks, but they often travel on foot.

Figure 6: Transit Migrants' Routes through Mexico to the United States



Source: Basok et al. (2015), based on data from Servicio Jesuitas a Migrantes en México, sjmmexico.org.

Recent interviews with transit migrants from Northern Triangle countries suggest that most are motivated by a combination of gang-related violence and lack of economic opportunities in their home countries. Some migrants fleeing gang violence have been personally threatened; others have relatives who have been harmed, and others, like small business owners, have been targets of extortion by gangs. A typical case is a 29-year-old Salvadoreña interviewed in Tapachula, Chiapas, in October 2017:

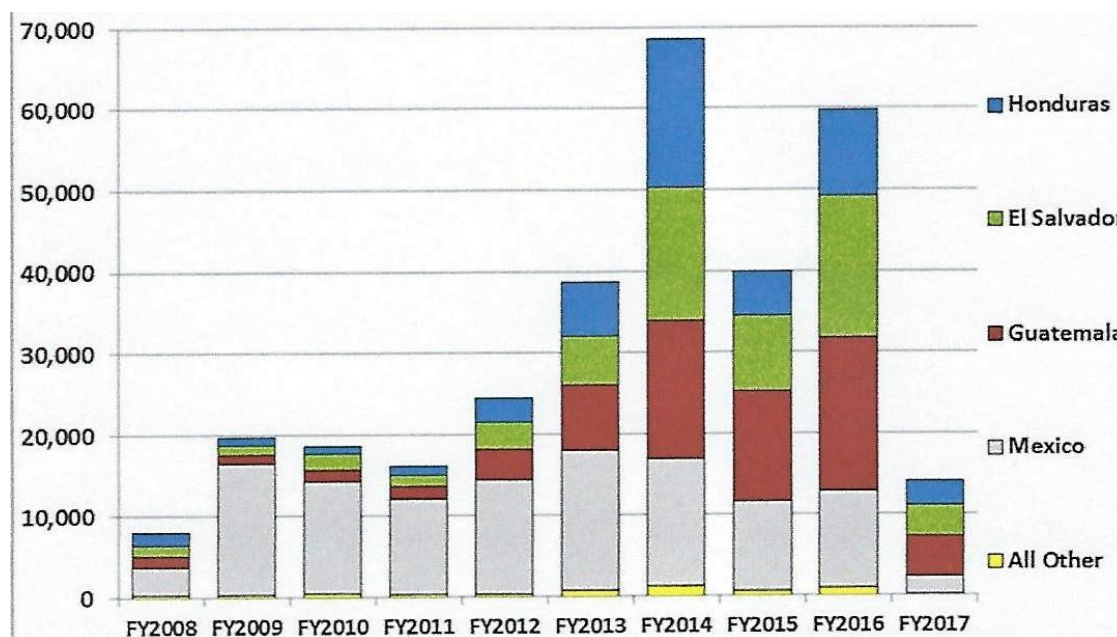
“In El Salvador they threatened my nine-year-old son. We had to hide him for several days. After all nothing happened, but you keep living in fear, and besides we had nowhere else to go because there is no work. I knew it would be better for us to go to the United States. I want to stay in Tijuana for a while to earn some money, then go to New York. There I have friends who can help us with the asylum application” (Razú Aznar 2017).

At the individual and family level, disentangling the economic and personal security-related motives for Northern Triangle migration – with the desire for family reunification thrown in as an extra complication – seems virtually impossible.

Beginning in Fiscal Year 2011, heavier flows of Northern Triangle transit migrants through Mexico have been driven largely by an increase in numbers of child migrants, either unaccompanied or traveling with family members, and women. In spring and summer 2014 the flow of such migrants spiked, provoking a “migration crisis” widely covered by the mass media and straining the resources of U.S. government and non-governmental humanitarian agencies. In Fiscal Year 2014 the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended 68,541 unaccompanied children, 77 percent of whom were from Northern Triangle countries, compared with 38,759 in the previous year. The Central American share of unaccompanied child apprehensions also increased sharply, while the

Mexican component shrank (Figure 7). Apprehensions of Northern Triangle family units (children traveling with a related adult) also rose. Apprehensions of unaccompanied children quickly fell back their “pre-crisis” level (39,970 in Fiscal Year 2015).

Figure 7: Unaccompanied child migrants apprehended at the U.S. Southwest border, by country of origin, FY 2008-2017



Source: Kandel (2017).

The 2014 surge appears to have resulted from a perception of more relaxed U.S. policies toward child migrants under the Obama administration, and people-smugglers’ aggressive recruitment of clients. The sharp decline from FY 2014 to 2015 may reflect a new policy of fast-track immigration court hearings for unaccompanied children, implemented by the Obama administration in response to the 2014 spike, which placed newly arrived children ahead of other deportation cases. The policy was intended to send a message to parents considering sending their children north. But relatively few deportations occurred. A Congressional Research Service review of outcomes of expedited immigration court hearings heard from July 2014 to June 2016 found that just 42 percent of cases resulted in removal from the United States ((Kandel 2017: 12).⁷ Moreover, the Obama administration’s message to Northern Triangle parents was mixed. As part of its response to the 2014 surge, the administration launched the Central American Minors (CAM) Program, which allowed some minors fleeing violence in Northern Triangle countries to settle in the United States, even if they had been denied asylum. Most of the 13,000 children who applied

⁷A study by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees found that 72 percent of unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, 57 percent of Hondurans, and 38 percent of Guatemalans might qualify for protection from deportation, most frequently on grounds of exposure to home-country violence and domestic abuse (FitzGerald & Palomo-Contreras 2016: 14).

for protection under the CAM Program since were from El Salvador. The program was terminated by the Trump administration in August 2017.

A new surge in Northern Triangle migration to the U.S.-Mexico border began in the spring of 2018. As in 2014, the flow was dominated by families and unaccompanied children. In April 2018 the Trump administration implemented two policies that, in combination, created a major humanitarian crisis. First, a “zero tolerance” policy, under which 100 percent of unauthorized migrants apprehended at the border were to be transferred for criminal prosecution in the federal court system; none would be given the opportunity to take “voluntary departure.” Second, a policy of separating migrant parents from their children, if a family unit was apprehended, with parents and children detained in separate facilities, often hundreds or thousands of miles apart, for as long as it took to adjudicate the parents’ cases. Both policies were explicitly intended to deter new migration.

In addition, in June 2018 U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions issued a ruling that victims of “private” violence – domestic, gang, and drug-related – were no longer eligible to claim asylum in the United States. Henceforth, only victims of “public” violence -- i.e., persecution by the home-country government -- would be able to file an asylum claim. Since the vast majority of Northern Triangle migrants reaching the U.S.-Mexico border in 2018 were asylum-seekers, this drastic restriction of the grounds for such claims disproportionately affected them, especially women fleeing domestic abuse and their children. The family separation policy was ended in June 2018, in response to a global outcry and a U.S. federal court order. The zero-tolerance policy was suspended “temporarily,” because the federal government lacked the bed space to incarcerate the thousands of migrants being referred for criminal prosecution each week while keeping families together. However, the new restrictions on asylum claims remained in place, essentially closing off the main avenue for Northern Triangle migrants seeking legal entry into the United States.

By July 2018 there was little evidence that the Trump administration’s new policies were having the intended deterrent effect. Nor was there evidence that would-be asylum-seekers already at the border were turning around and going home after being blocked by U.S. authorities from making asylum claims at legal ports-of-entry. This is hardly surprising: Most Northern Triangle migrants seeking asylum are fleeing life-or-death situations, and returnees would be targeted immediately by the violent gangs that control their home communities. Some asylum-seekers reaching the border who had been turned away at ports-of-entry hired a Mexican people-smuggler to assist them in entering the United States clandestinely. Thousands of other “turn-backs” piled up in migrant shelters operated by NGOs and in makeshift camps in Mexican border cities, waiting for U.S. authorities to grant them an initial “credible fear” screening interview -- despite the newly restricted grounds for asylum claims. Focus groups and media interviews with Northern Triangle migrants revealed a consistent pattern: The perceived risks of going to the United States were considered less than the dangers of staying home (Semple 2018b).

Scholars, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission, and numerous nongovernmental organizations have extensively documented a pattern of human rights violations associated with transit migration through Mexico (Anaya Muñoz & Díaz de León 2012; Basok et al. 2015; Díaz de León, forthcoming). Transit migrants are routinely robbed, assaulted, and kidnapped by criminal gangs, frequently operating in collusion with local police and officials. Those kidnapped are often beaten, tortured, starved, and deprived

of their possessions. A network of migrant protection organizations documented 5,298 criminal acts against transit migrants in 2016 alone (Red de Documentación 2016: 95), but such crimes are severely under-reported.

There is considerable evidence of U.S.-Mexican government policy coordination with respect to transit migration through Mexico. The notion that Mexico should serve as a buffer state between the United States and Central America began to gain currency in the 1980s. The Mexican government embarked on a strategy “to create a ‘*frontera vertical*’ that runs the length of the country, by controlling transportation routes leading north” (FitzGerald & Palomo-Contreras: 2).⁸ In 1982-1983, the Mexican government tightened temporary visa requirements for Central American nationals, compelling tourist visa applicants to prove their financial solvency and prohibiting them from traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border zone. In the 1990s and 2000s the Mexican government accepted U.S. government help in training agents to detect false documents, participated in the Biometric Data Sharing Program with several U.S. government agencies, and cooperated with U.S. counterparts in other ways to keep undocumented third-country migrants bottled up in Mexico and away from the U.S.-Mexico border.

At times, as in the mid-1990s, Mexico’s cooperation to curb transit migration was a condition of U.S. financial and military assistance. But the *quid pro quo* most consistently pursued over the years by Mexican officials has been more generous treatment for Mexican migrants to the United States, in return for tighter enforcement of Mexico’s southern border. This *quid pro quo* was sought most explicitly during the presidency of Vicente Fox (2000-2006). The Fox administration pushed a proposal for comprehensive U.S. immigration reform legislation, including an expanded temporary worker program and a broad legalization program for unauthorized immigrants – “the whole enchilada,” as Mexico’s then-foreign minister Jorge Castañeda put it. The Mexican proposal collapsed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City, which cut off discussion of a less restrictive U.S. immigration policy. Thereafter, controlling immigration became conflated with anti-terrorism efforts.

Nominally the Mexican government seeks to apprehend and deport anyone in Mexico without legal status, but in practice its enforcement efforts have targeted Central American migrants. Immigration agents use a combination of ethnic stereotypes, physical appearance (dusty, dirty, shabby clothes), and trick questions to identify transit migrants, and migrants report that they are very effective in detecting them. For domestic consumption, the Mexican government justified its crackdown on transit migration by linking it with crime, portraying transit migrants as a threat to public safety, without evidence (Díaz de León, forthcoming). Undercover agents of the National Migration Institute began boarding freight trains to detain migrants, and the presence of the Mexican army, navy, federal police, and intelligence agencies in the country’s southern border zone was increased. Beginning in 2014 Mexican authorities intensified surveillance and enforcement operations on train routes leading to the United States, diverting transit migrants onto

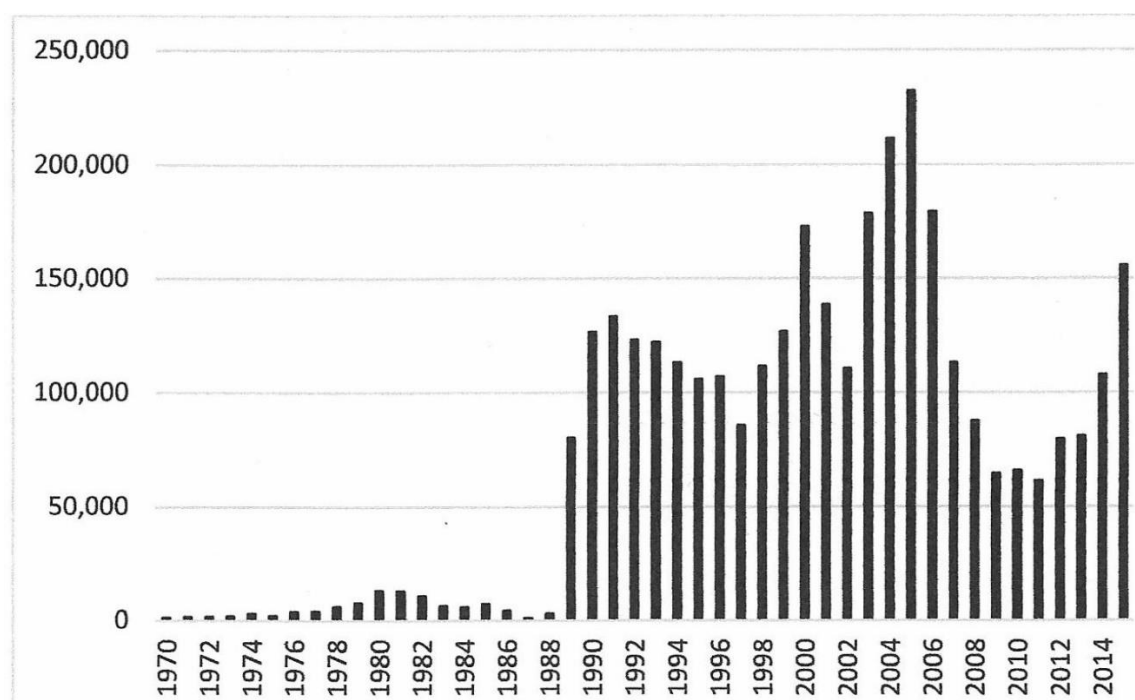
⁸ In 2012, Alan Bersin, a senior U.S. Homeland Security official, codified the binational migration control strategy, publicly declaring: “The Guatemalan border with Chiapas, Mexico, is now our southern border” (FitzGerald & Palomo-Contreras: 9).

highways and into more remote, dangerous areas. This increased the demand for people-smugglers and enabled them to charge higher fees.

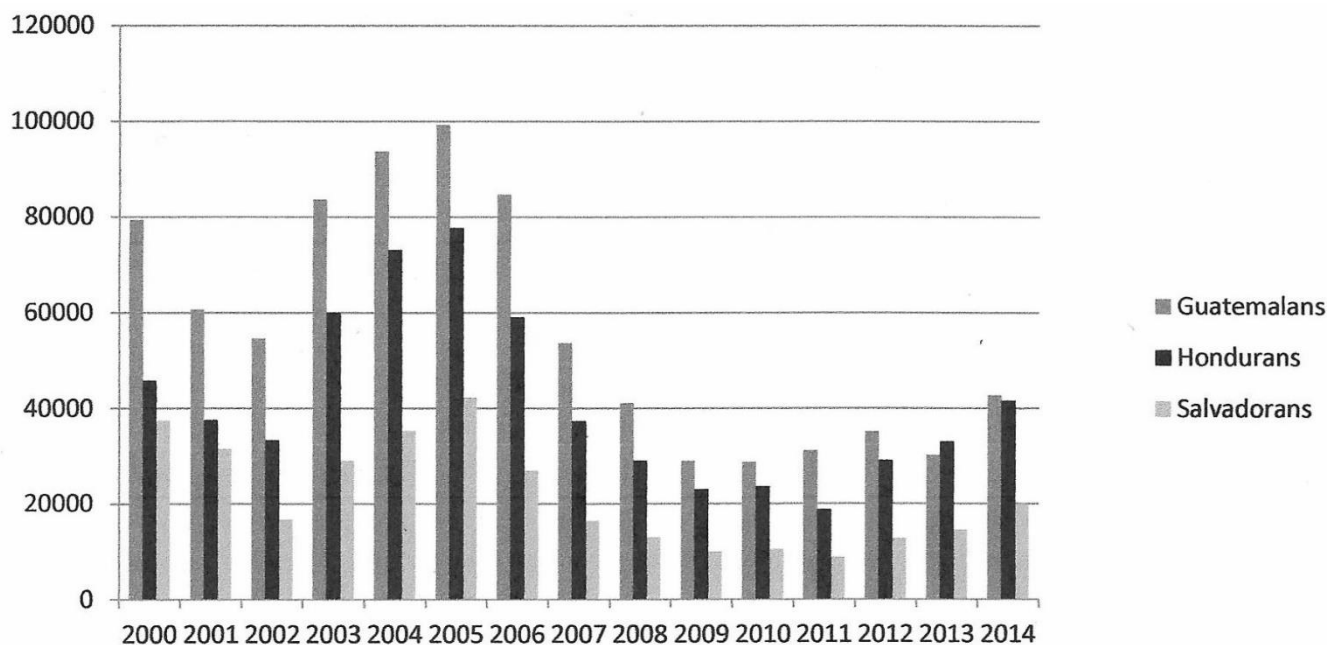
Mexico began deporting significant numbers of transit migrants in 1989 (Figure 8). This policy change was consistent with the Carlos Salinas administration's project to accelerate Mexico's integration into the North American economy, the capstone of which was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), implemented on January 1, 1994. During the presidency of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), which began with an acute financial crisis, the Mexican government cooperated with the United States on migration control, in the absence of a formal bilateral agreement, in exchange for critically needed financial aid (FitzGerald & Palomo-Contreras 2016). Under President Enrique Peña Nieto's Southern Border Program, enacted in 2014 in response to U.S. pressure, deportations from Mexico have doubled. From 1989 through 2016, Mexico deported a total of more than 3 million people.

The vast majority of Mexico's deportees are nationals of Northern Triangle countries. In all but one year (2013), Guatemalans have been a plurality among Mexico's deportees, followed by Hondurans and Salvadorans (Figure 9). By 2015 Mexico was deporting more Central American migrants than the United States. Given continued, robust flows of Northern Triangle migrants to Mexico, and constant U.S. government pressure on Mexico to achieve tighter control of its southern border, it is unlikely that deportations will diminish in the foreseeable future.

Figure 8: Deportations by Mexico, 1970-2015



Source: FitzGerald (2016), based on data from Secretaría de Gobernación, México, Boletines Estadísticos, 2001-15.

Figure 9: Deportations from Mexico, 2000-2014, by nationality

Source: FitzGerald (2016), based on data from Secretaría de Gobernación, México, Boletines Estadísticos, 2001-15.

MEXICO AS A COUNTRY OF IMMIGRATION

Mexico has never been a significant country of immigration, nor seen itself as such. The foreign-born share of the population peaked in 1930 at just 1 percent, falling to 0.83 percent in 2015 (Casillas & Córdova Alcaraz 2018). In 2015, the last year for which complete statistics are available, Mexico had just over 1 million foreign-born residents, of whom nearly three-quarters (73.5 percent) were from the United States. Other major countries of origin were Guatemala (4.5 percent) and Spain (2.3 percent). Honduras and El Salvador ranked ninth and tenth as sources of immigrants (Centro de Estudios Migratorios 2018). Only about 1.4 percent of Mexico's foreign-born population are permanent residents; most of the remainder are U.S. citizens on short-term (especially tourist) visas. In 2014, only 37,695 immigrants received legal permanent residency in Mexico, a plurality of whom were from the United States (8,637), followed by Central Americans (5,567) (Centro de Estudios Migratorios 2015). Current Mexican immigrant admissions law includes no ethnic preferences or discriminations. In practice, the Mexican government "maintains a high degree of discretion to exclude any individual" (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014: 255).

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries Mexico competed for immigrants – mostly unsuccessfully -- with countries that offered greater political stability and opportunities for economic advancement, especially the United States. An influx of about 16,000 Chinese laborers to work in agriculture during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) provoked a nativist backlash among Mexican workers and small-business owners. Popular resistance to immigration later extended to immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Careful historical analysis (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014: Chap. 6) reveals that from 1910 to 1974, the Mexican

government pursued a *de facto* immigration policy of ethnic-racial exclusion, using both laws and largely invisible bureaucratic regulations to restrict the immigration of Asians (especially Chinese), Middle Easterners, and Jews regardless of nationality -- groups deemed to be “unassimilable.” Assimilability – a thinly veiled preference for white immigrants -- was written into federal law in 1926 as a criterion of admission, and it continued to be until 1974, when a new General Law of Population was enacted (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014: 220, Table 6.1.) By that time the Mexican government, under President Luis Echeverría, as well as organizations of Mexico-origin people within the United States were beginning to pressure the United States government for better treatment of Mexican migrants. Ending Mexico’s own system of ethnic-racial discrimination against certain nationalities now served the country’s foreign (and domestic) policy interests (Cano & Delano 2007; Waldinger 2015: Chap. 7).

Since the 1940s, with government encouragement, Mexico has attracted substantial communities of U.S.-citizen retirees, who took up residence in states like Baja California, Jalisco, and the Mexico City metropolitan area. Nearly 70 percent of Mexico’s current population of permanent resident immigrants are of United States-origin, followed by Spaniards, whose immigration has been unlimited. (Spaniards also benefited from easier naturalization requirements, dating back to 1939, when refugees from the Spanish Civil War began arriving.) Among U.S.-origin immigrants, a majority (61 percent in 2009) are not permanent residents, living in Mexico on tourist visas that are renewed regularly (Rodríguez Chávez & Cobo 2012). Even permanent residents are prohibited by Mexico’s 1917 Constitution and various federal laws from owning property in sensitive areas (along the border and seacoasts). Guatemala is the only Northern Triangle country among the top-eleven countries of origin, with just 3.2 percent of total immigrants in 2009.

Apart from the late 1930s and the World War II period, when Jewish refugees from Europe were welcomed, and the 1970s, when about 12,000 “dirty wars” refugees were received from Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, the number of foreigners admitted to Mexico as refugees has been small. In 2009 fewer than 500 people with refugee visas were living in Mexico. But as discussed above, recent improvements in the system for processing asylum applications and a rise in the acceptance rate for Central American migrants making such claims may swell Mexico’s refugee population in the remainder of this decade and beyond. Should this trend persist, future growth of Mexico’s population of Northern Triangle migrants may depend more on the arrival of would-be refugees than on labor migrants, especially considering that wage differentials between the Northern Triangle and Mexico are relatively small.

Until 2008, when Mexico’s General Law of Population was again amended, undocumented immigration was a crime punishable by ten years of imprisonment, but the law was not enforced regularly. Since 2008, being present in Mexico without legal status is no longer a crime but, rather, an administrative offense subject to a fine. Providing assistance to unauthorized immigrants is no longer a criminal offense (Díaz de León, forthcoming). Nevertheless, tens of thousands of undocumented Northern Triangle migrants reaching Mexico are rounded up each year and marched off to scores of detention centers operated by the Instituto Nacional de Migración, scattered throughout southern Mexico. The number of detention centers increased from 22 to 50 from 2000-2011 (FitzGerald & Palomo-Contreras, 2016).

A constraint on more expansive immigration policies is xenophobia among Mexico's general public. There is evidence that Mexicans' tolerance for higher levels of immigration is more limited than might be expected in a country with a long history of emigration. The emphasis placed by successive Mexican administrations on the dangers of importing crime (especially gang violence) as an official justification for tighter control of the southern border helps to explain this. (Ironically, this is the same justification used by the Trump administration for its ongoing crackdown on illegal immigration.) Field interviews have revealed widespread fear of Mara Salvatrucha gang members among Mexicans living in the southern border region (Kimball 2007: 95-96). But there is also a long-standing, latent current of racism and xenophobia that is rarely acknowledged in Mexico. For example, in a comparative survey of attitudes toward immigration in nine OECD countries, Mexicans were second only to Germans in perceiving immigrants as a "bad influence" on their country (AP/Ipsos 2004). Fifty-three percent of Mexicans held that view, with many citing job competition from immigrants, crime, and threats to the country's cultural cohesion as adverse impacts.

In contrast to these national-level concerns, labor migration from Guatemala traditionally has been welcomed in Mexico's southern border region, where coffee growers and urban service employers have long depended on low-cost Guatemalan workers (Fernández de Castro & Clariond Rangel 2008: 172). Census data from the late 19th Century reveal a substantial Guatemalan presence, especially in the state of Chiapas. Most of this migration was seasonal or even daily, timed to the coffee harvest (Jonas 2013). A joint study by the Guatemalan ministry of labor and the IOM found that over 87,000 Guatemalan workers were legally employed in Mexico in 1992. But the Guatemalan government has estimated that the number of undocumented Guatemalan workers in Mexico is much higher, perhaps up to 250,000 (Smith 2006). These migrants often endure highly exploitative labor conditions. In the 1990s the state government of Chiapas, with support from the International Labor Organization, established an identity card system to encourage more Guatemalans to migrate through official channels.

Since the 1990s some Guatemalans who were economic and/or political refugees have entered the stream of transit migrants destined for the United States. Transit migrants are more likely to be apprehended and expelled by Mexican authorities than labor migrants employed in the southern border region. This is reflected in deportation statistics. As shown in Figure 8, from 2000-2014 more Guatemalans were deported by Mexico than any other nationality. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that all Guatemalan deportees are transit migrants. Surveys have found that a substantial portion of such deportees reported that Mexico, not the United States, was their destination (Alba & Castillo 2012).

Some transit migrants already in Mexico have taken up short-term residence in Tijuana and other border cities, seeing a sojourn there as an opportunity to earn money and wait for conditions to improve in the United States (Razú Aznar 2017). Some are also using their stay in Mexico to apply for asylum in that country rather than in the United States. Indeed, in 2018 the Trump administration pressed the Mexican government to sign a bilateral "safe third country" agreement, under which U.S. officials could turn away most asylum-seeking transit migrants at the border and compel them to petition for protection in Mexico instead. The negotiations went nowhere (Semple 2018a), but the Trump administration has essentially enacted this policy unilaterally by disallowing so many asylum claims.

Mexico's asylum program, while improved in recent years (Semple 2017b), remains severely understaffed and underfunded. COMAR, the agency responsible for refugees, received just 5.3 percent of total federal government funding for migration-related activities in 2016, in a period of exponential growth in the flow of transit migrants. In 2007 COMAR received an average of one asylum petition per day; by 2016 it was receiving nearly 24 applications per day (Casillas & Córdova Alcaraz 2018, Table 5). In 2017, 14,596 migrants applied for asylum in Mexico – an eleven-fold increase from 2013. In 2018 the number of applicants could reach 25,000.

Migrants who apply for asylum in Mexico have a much greater chance of success than in the United States. In 2017, 64 percent of completed cases resulted in protection, up from 46 percent in 2015.⁹ Petitioners may have to wait up to a year to have their cases resolved, but in the United States the average asylum claim takes nearly three years to adjudicate, and six-year waits are not uncommon. By mid-2018, upwards of 715,000 cases were waiting to be heard in immigration courts, nearly half of them petitions for asylum. In 2017, only 38 percent of asylum applications were approved, and approval rates for applicants from the Northern Triangle were even lower. Moreover, Mexican authorities have been more humane to asylum applicants, releasing them from detention while their cases are processed, in contrast to the United States, where the Trump administration has been incarcerating growing numbers of asylum-seekers in federal lock-ups.

The option of seeking asylum in Mexico seems likely to grow in attractiveness, given the Trump administration's sharp restriction of the grounds for asylum claims and the huge backlog in the U.S. immigration court system. There is also room for growth because many transit migrants still don't know that they can ask for refuge in Mexico (Razú Aznar 2017).

MEXICO AS A COUNTRY OF RETURN MIGRATION

From the 1880s through the late 1990s, Mexico experienced a heavy flow of return migration from the United States. During this long period, the "traditional" pattern of Mexico-to-U.S. migration was established, with Mexican workers (overwhelmingly male) spending 6-9 months in the United States and returning to Mexico for a similar period (Cerrutti & Massey 2004). This cyclical migration corresponded to the short-term labor contracts of the Bracero Program as well as the temporary nature of most U.S. jobs available to Mexican migrants. It also reflected the gender dynamics of Mexico-to-U.S. migration, in which male family heads (or single males) went north while their dependents remained in Mexico.

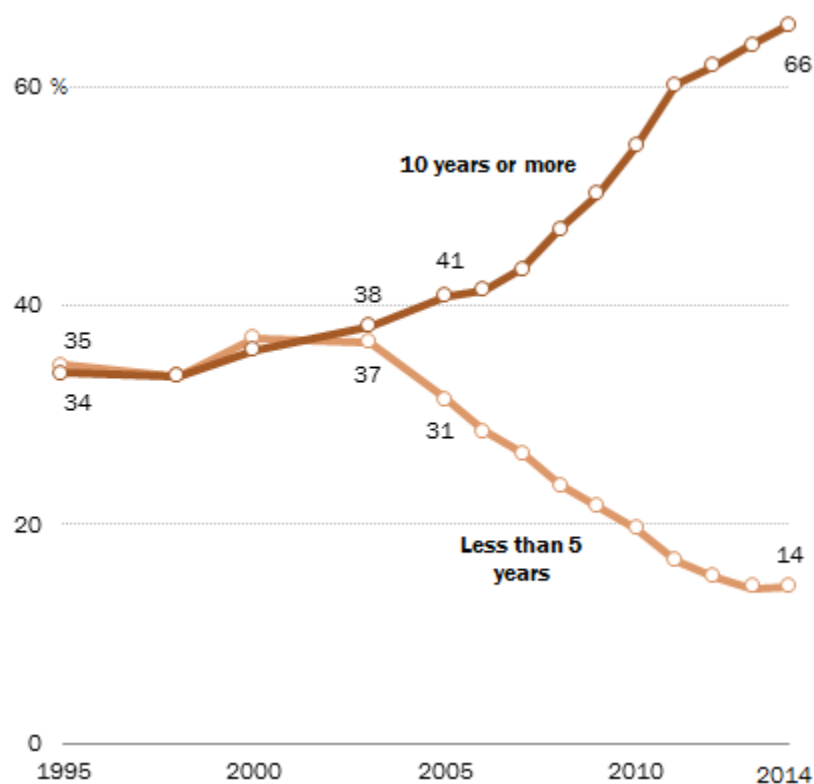
The pattern of short-stay migration began to break down in the 1980s, as more migrants found non-farm, less seasonal employment in the United States. But national-level, survey-based estimates by the Pew Hispanic Center, show a sharp increase in "long-stayers," beginning in 2004 (Figure 10). According to Pew's estimates, by 2014 two-thirds of undocumented immigrants present in the United States had been there for at least ten years (the median stay was 13.6 years).

⁹Current Mexican asylum policy contrasts sharply with the government's stance in the 1980s, when its policy was to deny asylum claims in all but a few cases, on the grounds that Northern Triangle migrants were only economic refugees. Mexico approved just 100 asylum applications from Central American nationals in the first half of the 1980s, and none from 1986-1990 (FitzGerald & Palomo-Contreras 2016).

An even higher proportion of Mexican undocumented immigrants (78 percent) had lived in the United States for over ten years (Passel & Cohn 2017).

Lower rates of return migration are also reflected in the emptying-out of rural communities that had sent three or four generations of migrants to the United States for short-term work, as whole families migrated and settled in the United States. Their abandoned houses dot such communities. A 1995 survey of one town, in the state of Jalisco, found 36 uninhabited houses; a 2005 survey of the same town counted 138 vacant houses, in a locality of fewer than 1,500 censused inhabitants (López, et al., 2007: 77). In another high-emigration community, in the state of Oaxaca, a field survey conducted in 2011 found abandoned houses in virtually every block (Keyes, Hernández Díaz, & FitzGerald 2013: 9-10). In the entire state of Oaxaca, traditionally one of Mexico's heaviest states of out-migration, one out of every four houses is uninhabited, according to 2010 census data.

Figure 10: Adult unauthorized immigrants, by duration of U.S. residence (percentages)



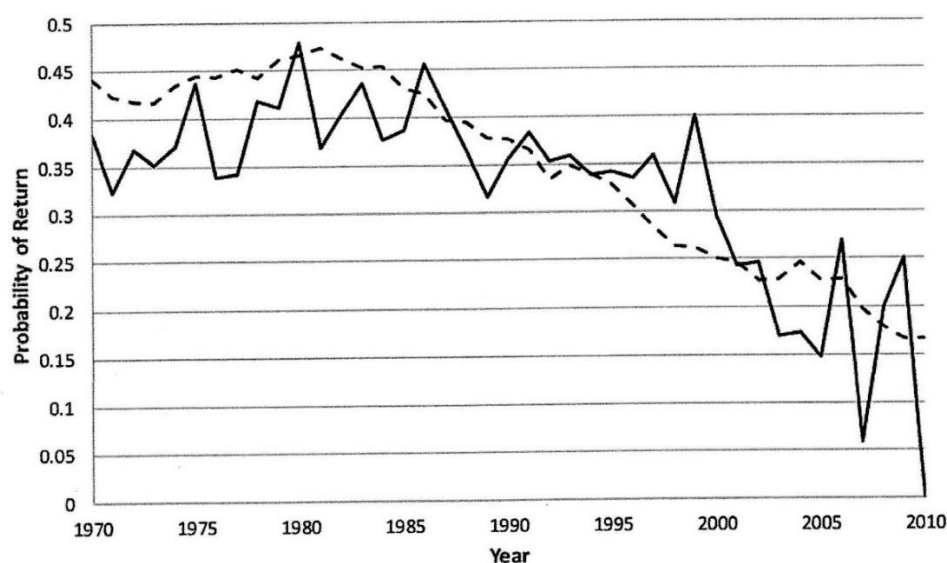
Source: Passel & Cohn 2017.

Short-term Mexico-to-U.S. migration has not ceased completely. The U.S. government continues to operate two programs that enable foreign workers to fill low-skill, temporary jobs in agriculture (the H-2A program) and non-farm service, hospitality, and construction industries (the H-2B program). Together, these programs have provided a vehicle for legal, seasonal employment for upwards of 200,000 Mexicans per year (Martin, Abella, & Kuptsch 2006: 105-109). The H-2A program has no visa cap but the participation of U.S. agricultural employers in the program has

been limited by what they perceive as excessive requirements and lengthy visa processing times. The H-2B program has an annual cap of 66,000 and competition for these visas is fierce. In 2017 Congress halted the practice of excluding workers who previously held H-2B visas from the annual quota (which resulted in 134,000 visas being issued in 2017) and replaced the traditional first-come, first-served system with a lottery. Visas issued to participants in the H-2A and H-2B programs cannot convert their temporary legal status into permanent residency. There is anecdotal evidence that government scrutiny of short-term visa applications of all types has increased under the Trump administration, thus it is unclear how many Mexicans will continue to have access to the H-2A and H-2B programs, or whether the programs will be retained at all.

Reducing circular migration between Mexico and the United States is arguably the most significant, and likely to be the most enduring, unintended consequence of the U.S. border enforcement build-up that began in 1993. A less porous border decreased the frequency of unauthorized trips to the United States, increased the average length of stay, and sharply reduced the probability of return migration. The percentage of migrants returning to Mexico after three years in the United States dropped from 55 percent in the 1987-1992 period to 46 percent between 1997 and 2002 (Lowell et al., 2008: 13) and declined even more sharply in the remainder of the decade. The likelihood of returning to Mexico declined in tandem with intensification of U.S. border enforcement in the 1990s and 2000s (National Research Council 2011: 34-3). Empirical research has demonstrated the strength of this linkage. A logistic analysis of the relationship between probability of return (derived from individual migration histories) and border enforcement intensity (measured by Border Patrol spending) found that each one-point increase in the log of the Border Patrol budget decreased the probability of return by 41 percent, suggesting that tougher border enforcement actually did discourage return migration among undocumented migrants who made it into the United States (Figure 11; Massey, Durand, & Pren 2016).

Figure 11: Observed probability of returning to Mexico within 12 months of first undocumented trip to the U.S. (*solid line*) and probability predicted from Border Patrol budget (*dashed line*), 1970-2010



Source: Massey, Durand, & Pren (2016).

As discussed below, the trend toward reduced circularity in migration probably would have occurred in the absence of the post-1993 U.S. border enforcement build-up, due to economic, demographic, and U.S. policy developments unrelated to border controls. Nevertheless, tougher border enforcement clearly accelerated the trend.¹⁰ Circular, short-stay migration depended on a porous border, which made unauthorized border crossings relatively safe and affordable, even if a people-smuggler was hired to assist the crossing.

Field studies conducted from 2009-2015 revealed that unauthorized migrants who had found work in the United States became reluctant to return to Mexico, even for a short family-related visit, because they risked losing their foothold in the U.S. economy. Moreover, they would have to pay heavily to be smuggled back into the United States. The longer they stayed in the United States, the less likely it was that they would accept the costs and risks of return migration (Cornelius, et al. 2009, 2010, 2013, 2016; FitzGerald, et al. 2011, 2013). This “caging effect” accounts for a significant share of the growth in the stock of undocumented Mexicans living in the United States from the late 1990s to 2007 (Waldinger 2010; National Research Council 2011: 36). Moreover, longer stays by family heads have strengthened the incentives to bring wives and children to live in the United States, while increasing the likelihood of having U.S. born children whose enrollment in school further roots the family in the United States.

Even before tougher U.S. border enforcement began encouraging migrants to settle permanently in the United States, changes in the U.S. labor market were transforming Mexican migrants from sojourners into settlers. U.S. employers increasingly offered year-round, full-time employment, contrasting with the short-term, seasonal jobs that previous generations of Mexican migrants had filled. This transformation of employer demand affected all sectors of the U.S. economy, including agriculture, where changes in crop mix and technologies made it possible for many growers to engage in year-round production and increased the labor-intensity of their production. In non-agricultural businesses the shift away from temporary employment occurred even more rapidly. For example, among Mexican workers employed in a random sample of southern California non-agricultural firms who were interviewed in 1983-84, 50 percent reported that they intended to stay in the United States indefinitely. Among Mexicans working in the same firms, interviewed in 1987-88, the proportion of would-be permanent settlers was 69 percent (Cornelius 1992: 175).

Mexican migrants employed in some industries (e.g., construction, landscaping, and hospitality) remain subject to seasonal or cyclical fluctuations in demand for a product or service. Nevertheless, it is usually possible for migrants to ride out these slack periods, as most did even during the Great Recession (Cornelius, et al. 2010: Chap. 2). For example, only 8.9 percent of returned migrants interviewed in one migrant-sending community in 2015 had returned from the

¹⁰ This was the conclusion of a panel of 16 immigration experts assembled by the National Academies of Science for a two-year study of the efficacy of U.S. immigration enforcement (National Research Council 2011: 34-36). Other factors contributed to the steady decline in short-stay Mexican migration to the United States, especially changes in U.S. employer demand and social network consolidation. But most evidence suggests that stronger U.S. border enforcement played the key role, by raising the cost and physical risk of clandestine entry and reinforcing the effects of non-policy-related variables.

United States because of unemployment or under-employment in that country (Noriega, et al., 2016).

A higher incidence of permanent settlement among Mexican migrants in the United States is also related to the maturation of transnational social networks during the last three decades (Reyes 2004; Puentes, et al. 2011). Network consolidation was facilitated by the U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which granted amnesty to approximately 2.7 million undocumented immigrants, overwhelmingly Mexicans. By enabling undocumented household heads to legalize their status, IRCA encouraged them to call for close relatives to join them in the United States, anchoring families more firmly on the U.S. side of the border (Cornelius 1989; Orrenius & Zavodny 2003).

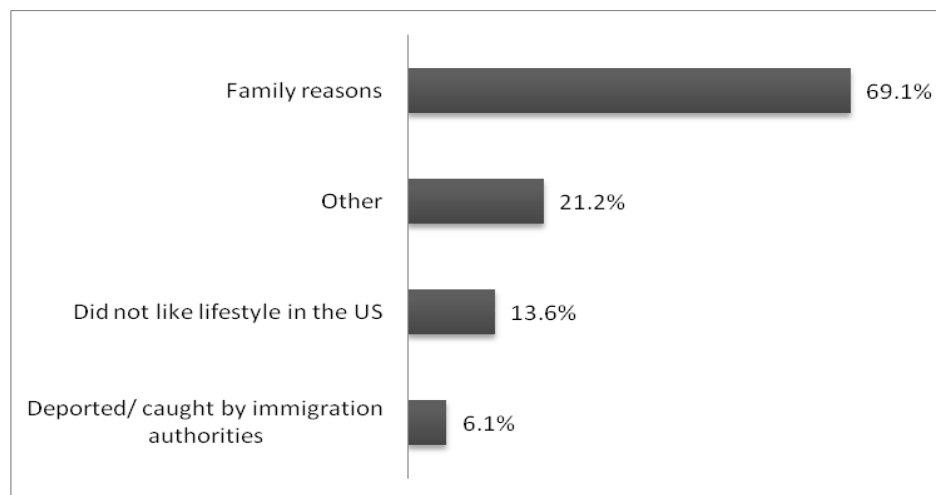
Kinship/friendship networks reduce the costs and risks of longer-term stays in the United States and facilitate integration into U.S. society. They can offer extensive support systems for dependent family members. Wives and U.S.-born children quickly become strong supporters of remaining permanently in the United States. Teenagers are attracted to the lifestyle of U.S. young people, and housewives find that domestic chores are considerably easier in the United States, with all its modern conveniences, than in Mexico. Financial obligations – debts owed to relatives and friends in the United States, home mortgages, and so forth – accumulate. All these factors decrease the likelihood of return migration, even for retirement, which for most long-staying Mexican migrants has always been more of an aspiration than a realistic choice. One field study of U.S.-based migrants found that 68 percent wanted to retire in their hometown in Jalisco rather than in the United States (Serrano et al. 2009, 164). But the 181 empty houses in that small town counted by the field team in 2007 are a vivid illustration of how retirement in Mexico has become less of an option for migrants, usually because U.S.-born children had tied them more tightly to the United States.

Extensive field research has found that those who decide to return to their place of origin tend to have been strongly influenced by family ties. Field studies have demonstrated that returnees have weaker social networks in the United States than those who have settled there. Their relative lack of social ties to the United States, coupled with a desire for family reunification, motivates their decision to return to Mexico (García & Barreno 2007; Kosnac et al., 2013: 41). Indeed, family ties are the single most important reason why some Mexican migrants return home from the United States. In a 2013 field survey in the state of Jalisco, a plurality of respondents (41.6 percent) reported homesickness or some other family-related concern as their main reason for return (Hazán 2014: Table 4). In another recent field study, in the state of Yucatán, more than two-thirds (69.1 percent) of those who had returned to their community of origin to live (not just visit briefly) did so because of family-related issues, such as family emergencies and funerals (Figure 12).

Such was the case with one interviewee, Toña, who explained that she returned to Mexico because her mother and father were ill, her mother with advanced diabetes. She felt it was her responsibility to take care of them. She also confessed that she missed her family a lot, even though some of her cousins were also living in the United States. Other types of family obligations also factor into decisions to return. Another interviewee, Daniel, reported: “My dad was working here alone and he needed me to help him out, so I came back.” But many returnees simply missed their family in Mexico. That was the case in Valeria’s family: “[My husband] spent three years in the

United States. Once he got back he said, ‘I’m not going back,’ because in three years he didn’t see his son” (Noriega, et al. 2016: 29-30).

Figure 12: Most important reason for returning from the U.S. to live in Mexico, among returned migrants in Tunkás, Yucatán, México, 2015



Source: Noriega, et al., 2016.

Gauging Mexico’s capacity to absorb returning migrants is difficult. If the criterion is providing temporary shelter to migrants who find themselves stuck in a Mexican border city, that capacity is already severely strained by the twin burdens of a heavier flow of deportees from the United States and the growing presence of transit migrants from Central America, Haiti, and other countries (Semple2017a). Currently this burden is being borne almost entirely by non-governmental organizations with limited resources.

Migrants who repatriate themselves to high-emigration communities in rural Mexico typically encounter a local economic opportunity structure that is extremely limited. A common description by residents: “Aquí, no hay *nada!*” (“Here, there is *nothing!*”). The economies of such places have been stagnant for decades, propped up by cash remittances that diminished in frequency and amount with migrants’ length of U.S. residence in the United States (Rodríguez de la Gala, et al., 2007; Macías, et al., 2009). Compared to their situation in the United States, most returnees experience some degree of underemployment – if they can find jobs at all. The wages they can earn are a small fraction of what they received in the United States, particularly if they return to rural areas in extremely low-wage states like Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero. It is entirely possible that returning migrants will join the ranks of the nearly one-half of Mexicans who live below the official poverty rate (46.2 percent in 2014).

More generally, Mexico’s ability to incorporate returned migrants productively is constrained by anemic macroeconomic performance. Mexico recovered from the Great Recession more rapidly than the United States, but since then economic growth has been disappointing, with annual GNP per capita increasing by an average of less than 3 percent. The International Monetary Fund forecasts annual GDP growth averaging 2.4 percent between 2017 and 2022, absent any mega-shocks, e.g., a U.S. withdrawal from NAFTA. Migrants returning to this kind of economy

will depend on the safety net of social welfare programs that has been constructed by the five most recent presidential administrations in Mexico. In 2015, more than one out of four Mexican households (27 percent) were receiving cash transfers from the federal or state government through these programs.

Mexican migrants returning from the United States have participated sporadically in home-community development projects, but such projects generally create few long-term employment opportunities, being focused on improving roads, recreational facilities, churches, and other quality-of-life enhancements (Cantú, et al. 2007; Macías, et al. 2009). Generally speaking, the permanent settlement of migrants in the United States is inversely related to job-creation in their places of origin (Erickson, et al. 2009; Gell-Redman, et al., 2010; Blanc, et al., 2011). To the extent that return migration reduces the flow of U.S.-earned income into migrant-sending communities via remittances, it is even less likely that job-creating investments will be made, either individually or collectively. To encourage the pooling of migrant remittances for investments in local development, the Mexican government has helped to finance small-scale infrastructure projects in communities of emigration through hometown associations (HTAs) promoted by its consulates and through the “Tres por Uno” program, in which migrants’ contributions are matched by municipal, state, and federal government contributions. But the employment-multiplier effects of such projects have been vanishingly small (Rodríguez de la Gala, et al., 2007: 163-64; Waldinger 2015: Chap. 8). Moreover, with a diminishing flow of remittances and a population reduced by the permanent exit of migrants to the United States, there is no local consumer market to support new businesses.

The socio-cultural reintegration of returning migrants poses additional challenges, particularly for school-age children. The proliferation of mixed-legal-status families in recent years – another consequence of the trend toward permanent settlement – makes it more likely that if an adult parent is deported, his dependents will return to Mexico as well, to prevent family separation. And it is more likely that those dependents will include U.S.-born children who have been socialized and schooled entirely in the United States. Frequently they cannot read nor write in Spanish. These children are literally “fish out of water.” Field research has found that U.S.-born children of returning migrants who have no Mexico living experience before arrival in the parents’ hometown are often ridiculed and harassed by other students in their school, impairing their academic performance and emotional well-being. They are shunned by classmates because of their limited proficiency in Spanish and/or their “gringo” accent (Serrano, et al., 2009; Román González & Zúñiga, 2014; Román González, et al. 2016).

The Mexican government has begun to develop programs to support professionals who are repatriated from the United States. Such returnees often face bureaucratic obstacles in job-seeking related to their time outside of Mexico. The Ministry of Education recently launched a pilot program to facilitate applications for more than 600 new teaching positions, to encourage deportees from the United States whose language skills equip them to teach English (Brigida 2017). These efforts are too recent to permit evaluation.

HOW MEXICO HAS MANAGED MIGRATION

For most of its history as an independent nation, Mexico has had very little control over the emigration of its citizens. The United States opened, then closed, the door to its labor market regularly, in response to recurrent spasms of nativism, economic contractions (or booms), war-related spikes in employer demand, and an international terrorist attack (9/11). Throughout this period, the domestic U.S. politics of immigration trumped U.S.-Mexico relations. Mexico's migration policy was fundamentally reactive to all these developments on the U.S. side of the border. Its sporadic efforts to control the volume, composition, and mechanisms of emigration -- most notably during the era of the second Bracero Program -- failed, in large part due to the fundamental asymmetry of Mexico's interdependence with the United States (FitzGerald 2009). In the one era when Mexico had a proactive immigration policy -- from 1910 to 1974 -- the effort to fashion an ethnically-racially selective intake of white immigrants failed, due to competition from other countries of immigration.

For much of the 20th Century, Mexican officials were hostile to mass emigration to the United States and occasionally tried to prevent it (FitzGerald & Alarcón 2013). The major exception to this critical stance was the 1942-1964 period of Bracero migration. Mexico's Constitution guaranteed freedom of exit and movement within the country, subject to some administrative restrictions. For example, emigrants were supposed to have a contract signed by an employer that guaranteed wages, hours, and transportation back to Mexico, but there were no penalties for non-compliance. Rapid population growth in the 1950s and 1960s undermined the case for emigration restriction. The Mexican government became increasingly accepting of large-scale migration to the United States, as an economic and political safety valve. Cash remittances from U.S.-based migrants became critically important to the Mexican economy and to the millions of low-income Mexican families who had come to depend upon them.¹¹

In any case, the experience of Mexican officials was that "emigration appeared practically impossible to regulate" (FitzGerald & Alarcón 2013: 125). In 1974, penalties for emigrating without a labor contract were eliminated. In the mid-1970s the Mexican government for the first time attempted to engage seriously with Mexico-origin communities in the United States, advocating greater labor protections for migrants working in the United States (Cano & Delano 2007). The migrant protection effort continues today, with mixed results.¹² There continue to be significant constraints on what Mexico can do to promote the interests of its emigrants on U.S. soil, given the ever-present risk of a political backlash in the United States that could damage other interests in the bilateral relationship.

¹¹ Migrant remittances from the United States totaled \$29.6 billion in the twelve months ending April 2018 (BBVA Research 2018). They are Mexico's second-largest source of foreign exchange, after oil exports, and have become even more important with fluctuations in global oil prices.

¹² Among other services, Mexico's 46 consulates in the United States are now quite active in educating migrants on their labor rights. They offer legal assistance to migrants who have been cheated of wages or suffered other types of workplace abuse. Consulates have also issued over 4 million *matrículas consulares* -- a form of identification that undocumented immigrants can use in lieu of a Mexican passport or ID issued by a U.S. public agency to open accounts in some U.S. financial institutions and establish identity to U.S. police.

Much like mass labor migration from Mexico to the United States in the 19th and 20th Centuries, the post-1980 phenomenon of heavy transit migration from Central America to Mexico was a response to exogenous developments. These included civil wars, drug trafficking, the escalation gang activity (sparked by El Salvador-origin gang members deported from the United States), and collapsed economies in the source countries. The Mexican government's capacity to regulate this migration flow has increased gradually. Unquestionably, Mexico today has much greater capacity to control transit migration than it had in the 1980s or 1990s. It deports upwards of 150,000 unauthorized migrants each year, and surveillance of transit migration routes in southern Mexico is intense. Mexico owes much of this enhanced border and interior control capability to financial, training, and technological assistance from the United States, as well as the political/diplomatic pressure that accompanied U.S. assistance.

But the *quid pro quo* from the United States that Mexico has always hoped for, in exchange for cooperation on southern border control, has not materialized. Mexico today is no closer to achieving its goal of a more liberal, Mexico-friendly U.S. immigration policy – including a broad legalization program for undocumented immigrants and a larger temporary worker program -- than it was decades ago, because U.S. immigration policy is driven by anti-immigrant domestic politics rather than bilateral diplomatic considerations. Indeed, Mexico's failure to get drug trafficking and cartel-related violence under better control – such violence reached a new peak in 2017 – has only diminished prospects for comprehensive immigration reform legislation benefiting Mexicans. The flow of drugs from Mexico – while driven mainly by U.S. consumer demand – is now cited as justification for new restrictive measures, including the proposed construction of a 30-foot-wall along about half of the U.S.-Mexico border. Absent a sea change in the U.S. Congressional politics of immigration, the benefits of cooperating with the United States on migration control that have been envisioned by Mexican officials since the 1990s are unlikely to materialize, regardless of which political party controls the presidency in the United States and Mexico.

Mexico's response to transit migration from the Northern Triangle countries (and others) has evolved, beyond simply responding to U.S. pressure for tougher enforcement in its southern border region. Recent efforts to streamline the process of obtaining asylum in Mexico have made it more efficient; both the application and acceptance rates have climbed. Further expansion of the asylum program would meet urgent humanitarian needs as well as strengthen Mexico's credibility in dealing with the United States government on migration control issues. A pilot program being implemented in northern city of Saltillo, sponsored by the Mexican government and the United Nations, could prove to be a model for socio-economic integration of asylum-seekers that the U.S. would do well to emulate (Semple 2017b).

There is a much higher incidence of “stay-at-homes” in Mexico today than before the onset of the Great Recession. In the post-Recession period, decisions to stay home are being made in response to a new calculus of macroeconomic factors, higher costs and risks associated with clandestine border crossings, and family dynamics that constrain mobility. Those who remain in traditional migrant-sending communities are mostly people who have the fewest social network contacts in the United States and the most family obligations in Mexico. They are likely to have a lower propensity to migrate internationally than those who left in previous years, especially in the 1990s, and they tend to be more focused on employment opportunities in their home region than in the United States. This is reflected in the recent increase in migration to secondary cities within Mexico.

Dramatic changes in Mexico's demographic profile make it more important that viable alternatives to emigration be created, throughout the country. The previously unimaginable prospect of Mexico as a country of labor scarcity is now on the near horizon. Going forward, Mexico's challenge will be to assure a labor supply adequate to meet the requirements of future economic growth. If today's low rate of new emigration to the United States persists, as most experts expect, the new calculus of staying home in Mexico will be helpful in achieving that policy goal.

On the U.S. side of the border, the main policy choices that need to be made over the next decade relate to whether immigrants and asylum-seekers from Mexico and the Northern Triangle will have legal access to the U.S. labor market, on either a temporary or permanent basis. Since 2006, comprehensive immigration reform -- including a generous legalization program for the current undocumented population and provisions for future flows that enable U.S. employers to legally hire migrant workers for jobs at all skill levels in a timely way -- has been blocked by Congressional paralysis. Meanwhile, the Trump administration continues to pursue policies ostensibly aimed at purging the U.S. labor force of foreign workers, at a time when the U.S. unemployment rate is 3.8 percent, the birth rate is at a 30-year low, and 76 million retiring Baby Boomers must be replaced. Mexico is unlikely to be the source of enough labor to right such a fundamental demographic imbalance. But economic migrants and asylum-seekers from the Northern Triangle could make a significant contribution -- assuming that they are not blocked by the United States or Mexico.

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