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A Transformation in Mexican Migration to the United States

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The early years of the twenty-first century have seen a major decline in the volume of migration from Mexico to the United States. According to one study, during the 2005–2010 period, slightly more Mexicans left the United States (1.39 million) than entered it (1.37 million), a change in the pattern of the last several decades.[1] Another study finds that fewer Mexicans than non-Mexicans were apprehended at U.S. borders in 2014, a historic first.[2]

The changing trends in Mexican migration are likely due to a variety of factors, including the relative performance of the two countries' economies—sluggishness in the United States versus growth in Mexico—coupled with a major decline in employment in the U.S. construction industry.[3] Other possible factors include a declining Mexican fertility rate, heightened enforcement of border security, and enhanced detentions and deportations of unauthorized migrants in the United States. The disparate impact of violence in Mexico may also play a role: Though the drug wars have displaced and encouraged the migration of upper- and middle-class professionals[4] and entrepreneurs,[5] violence along the border has intimidated migrants with more limited socioeconomic resources from clandestinely crossing into the United States.

This policy brief uses data from the 2008 and 2013 American Community Surveys (ACS) to compare the demographic and socioeconomic profiles of Mexican migrants who migrated in the five years prior to each survey (2003–2007 in the 2008 ACS and 2008–2012 in the 2013 ACS). The analysis reveals that the shift in migration has coincided with changes in the composition of the Mexican population coming to the United States. Mexicans migrating today tend to have higher socioeconomic status than earlier migrants; more women and older individuals are migrating; and states that sustained the greatest declines in construction employment are experiencing low levels of migration.

KEY FINDINGS

- Migration from Mexico to the United States fell from 1.9 million in 2003–2007 to 819,000 in 2008–2012, a drop of 57 percent.
- The top states for Mexican migration shifted noticeably between the 2003–2007 and 2008–2012 periods.
- Mexicans migrating to the United States today tend to have higher socioeconomic status, are older, are more likely to be women, have greater English-language fluency, and are somewhat less likely to be connected to the workforce than Mexicans who migrated in the early to middle 2000s.

Widespread Decline in Mexican Migration

The volume of migration from Mexico to the United States fell from 1.9 million in 2003–2007 to 819,000 in 2008–2012, a drop of 57 percent.[6] The decline was widespread across states. The U.S. economic collapse during this period had a particularly dampening effect on construction and other industries that rely on a Mexican immigrant workforce.[7] Indeed, during this period of economic decline Mexican migrants were among the first to be fired or displaced.[8]

Construction employment plunged 71 percent from the 2003–2007 cohort to the 2008–2012 group. Nearly one-fourth of Mexican migrants arriving in the 2003–2007 period were employed in construction, compared to only one-sixth in 2008–2012. This significant decline in construction activity certainly impacted the volume of Mexican migration across states.

Shifts in Settlement Patterns

The ranking of top states for Mexican migration shifted noticeably between the 2003–2007 and 2008–2012 periods (Table 1). Three states dropped significantly in their rankings: Arizona fell from third place to sixth, Georgia fell from fifth to eighth, and Nevada dropped from the top ten entirely, slipping from ninth to sixteenth. These three states sustained major declines in the construction sector, with Nevada losing 35 percent of its construction jobs between the 2003–2007 and 2008–2012 periods, Arizona 27 percent, and Georgia 22 percent.

In contrast, two states that experienced relatively smaller declines in the construction sector had different outcomes. Texas, with a decline of 8 percent in construction jobs, replaced California as the most popular destination for Mexican migrants in the 2008–2012 period. In addition, New York, with a 5 percent drop in construction employment, raised its rank from seventh to third place. The Mexican-origin population in the New York City metropolitan area grew more than sixfold between 1990 and 2010, from 96,662 to 607,503.[9] Demographic analysis has suggested that if the rapid growth of Mexicans in the New York metropolitan area continues, they will become the largest group of Latinos there by the early 2020s.[10]

TABLE 1. TOP TEN STATES IN NUMBER OF MEXICAN MIGRANTS ARRIVING IN 2003–2007 AND 2008–2012

2003–2007			2008–2012		
RANK	STATE	NUMBER	RANK	STATE	NUMBER
1	California	532,851	1	Texas	220,522
2	Texas	362,882	2	California	206,075
3	Arizona	108,114	3	New York	39,930
4	Illinois	91,965	4	Illinois	31,403
5	Georgia	74,418	5	North Carolina	27,067
6	North Carolina	74,304	6	Arizona	25,993
7	New York	63,212	7	Florida	25,519
8	Florida	60,733	8	Georgia	16,966
9	Nevada	48,562	9	Washington	16,641
10	Washington	37,690	10	Colorado	14,199

Source: 2008 and 2013 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates public-use samples.

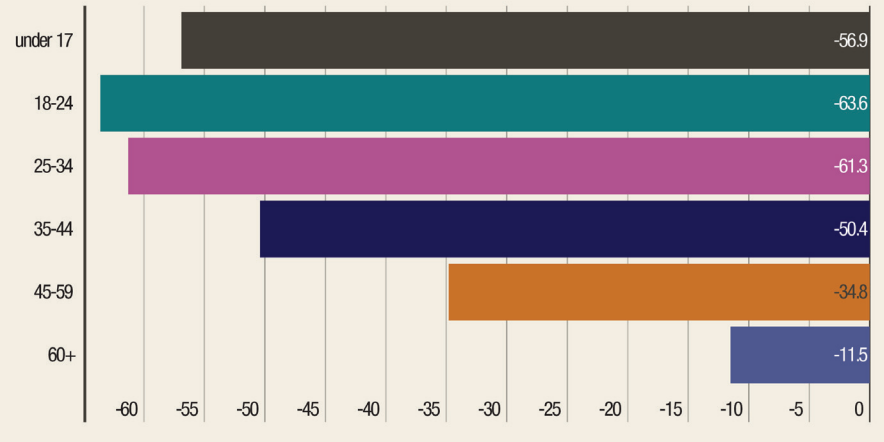
The Changing Face of Mexican Migrants

The significant drop in Mexican migration to the United States has coincided with a shift in the characteristics of migrants over the last five years. For example, Mexicans migrating in 2008–2012 tended to be older than their counterparts coming five years earlier, as the percentage declines among persons 45 and older were smaller than the declines for younger age groups (Figure 1). Across the ten states with the largest number of Mexican migrants in the 2008–2012 period, the slowest declines (less than 10 percent) occurred at the older ages: a fall of 8 percent in the 60-and-older age group in California, and falls of 5 percent in the 35–44 group and 2 percent in the 45–59 group in New York. Texas actually experienced an increase in its Mexican migrant population age 45–59 (6 percent rise) and 60 and older (41 percent); Florida saw an increase in its population age 45–59 (13 percent).

Overall, Mexican migrants coming to the United States in 2008–2012 had a median age of 27, compared to 25 among those arriving in 2003–2007 (Table 2). This pattern persists across the top ten states. Florida saw the median age of Mexican migrants climb from 25 in 2003–2007 to 31 in 2008–2012.

While males continue to predominate among Mexicans migrating to the United States, the presence of females rose in the later five-year period. The sex ratio (number of males per 100 females) of Mexican migrants dropped from 146 in 2003–2007 to 125 in 2008–2012

FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN MEXICAN MIGRANTS ARRIVING BETWEEN 2003–2007 AND 2008–2012 BY AGE GROUP



Source: 2008 and 2013 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates public-use samples.

TABLE 2. PROFILE OF MEXICAN MIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES ARRIVING IN 2003–2007 AND 2008–2012

CHARACTERISTIC	2003-2007	2008-2012
Median age	25.0	27.0
Sex ratio (males per 100 females)	146.0	125.0
Percent naturalized citizens	3.3	6.7
Percent of persons 18 and older fluent in English*	22.3	33.1
Percent of persons 25 and older who are high school graduates	38.8	47.9
Percent of persons 25 and older with a bachelor's degree	6.7	12.8
Percent of men 16 and older employed	85.3	79.8
Percent of men 16 and older not in labor force	10.0	15.2
Percent of women 16 and older employed	41.1	39.8

Note: * Fluency in English includes people who speak English at home as well as those who speak another language at home and who speak English well or very well.
Source: 2008 and 2013 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates public-use samples.

(Table 2). This pattern occurred across all the top ten states except North Carolina, where the sex ratio remained at around 170 over the two time periods. Females outnumbered males among Mexican migrants moving to Illinois (83 males per 100 females) in the 2008–2012 period.

Certain characteristics associated with social integration also changed noticeably from one period to the next. The share of Mexican migrants who are naturalized citizens doubled from 3 percent among those migrating in the 2003–2007 period to 7 percent among those arriving in 2008–2012. The greater prevalence of U.S. citizenship status is associated with the elevated social and economic attributes of recent migrants. For example, it is likely that some wealthy Mexicans can move with ease to the United States due to naturalized citizen status acquired earlier. Among Mexican immigrants 25 and older, those with a bachelor's degree were more than twice as likely as those without a high school diploma to be naturalized citizens in the 2008–2012 period.

In addition, a select group of other wealthy Mexicans seeking to escape the violence at home have attained EB-5 visas to gain entry into the United States.[11] The EB-5 visa program is available to migrants who can invest a minimum of $500,000 for the creation of at least ten new jobs in economically distressed places or a minimum of $1 million for the creation of these jobs outside of such areas.[12] The program provides permanent resident status for the investor and his/her spouse and

children under 21 years of age, and allows for a smooth transition from permanent resident status to naturalized citizen status after five years. The number of Mexicans participating in the EB-5 program, albeit still small, has increased significantly over the last several years, with Mexico ranked seventh worldwide in EB-5 visas in 2010.[13] Mexicans with socioeconomic resources also have access to several other visa programs including E-1 and E-2 visas, designed for citizens of countries that have treaties with the United States,[14] and L1 visas, which allow companies that operate in the United States and in a foreign country to relocate certain classes of workers to the United States for a maximum of seven years.[15]

Migration from Mexico to the United States has been significant and longstanding throughout the twentieth century and early twenty-first. However, over the last several years the volume of migration has plunged to unprecedented levels.

The linguistic profile of Mexican migrants also changed significantly between the two five-year periods. Migrants who speak English increased from about one-fifth in 2003–2007 to one-third in 2008–2012 (Table 2). This pattern exists across all of the top ten states. Nearly half of Mexican migrants who moved to Colorado in 2008–2012 speak English, as do slightly more than two-fifths of Mexican migrants moving to Illinois.

The educational level of Mexican migrants has increased between the two periods. The percentage of migrants 25 and older with a high school diploma rose from 39 percent in 2003–2007 to 48 percent in 2008–2012; the percentage with a bachelor's degree nearly doubled, from 7 percent to 13 percent. This pattern is widespread across the top ten states, the exceptions being Georgia (a decline in high school and college graduates), North Carolina (a decline in high school graduates), and New York (a decline in college graduates). At least half of Mexican migrants arriving in the 2008–2012 period in seven of the top ten states were high school graduates. More than 10 percent in six of the ten states were college graduates.

Mexican migration to the United States has long been associated with work. However, Mexican migrant men 16 and older arriving in the United States in the 2008–2012 period were somewhat less connected to the workforce compared to their counterparts arriving in the 2003–2007 period (Table 2). Overall in the United States, the percentage of Mexican men who are employed dropped from 85 percent in 2003–2007 to 80 percent in 2008–2012, while the share not in the labor force rose from 10 percent to 15 percent. The share of Mexican men 16 and older who are not in the labor force was fairly consistent across states, climbing from 6 percent to 17 percent in Florida; from 6 percent to 15 percent in North Carolina; from 19 percent to 29 percent in Arizona; from 7 percent to 16 percent in Illinois; from 10 percent to 17 percent in Texas; and from 11 percent to 18 percent in California. The pattern varied in Colorado, Georgia, New York, and Washington, where the percentage of Mexican men not in the labor force either dropped slightly or increased. In general, the labor force patterns of women are fairly consistent or have risen somewhat across the two five-year periods.

Conclusion

Migration from Mexico to the United States has been significant and longstanding throughout the twentieth century and early twenty-first. However, over the last several years the volume of migration has plunged to unprecedented levels. The factors underlying this decline are numerous, but the economic crisis in the United States and the accompanying contraction in construction employment likely played a major role. Coincidentally, with the decline in migration, the characteristics of Mexican migrants moving to the United States have shifted noticeably between the five-year periods of 2003–2007 and 2008–2012. Mexican migrants arriving in the United States in the latter period were more likely to be naturalized citizens, fluent in English, more educated, and somewhat less motivated by employment factors. Migrants in the more recent cohort also include people with socioeconomic resources who are fleeing violence in Mexico, and a select group for whom exclusive visa programs have facilitated entry.

Immigration reform continues to go unaddressed in the United States. There have certainly been major changes in the social, economic, and demographic characteristics among Mexican migrants since the peak levels of migration at the turn of this century. Whether this low level of Mexican migration represents a new reality or a temporary response to current economic conditions remains an open question. Similarly, it is still not clear whether the more favorable socioeconomic standing of the most recent cohort of Mexican migrants will persist into the future and, if so, whether it will change the way Mexican migrants are commonly viewed in the United States.

Data

This brief uses data from the 2008 and 2013 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Percent Public Use Files. These data are used to identify Mexican migrants who moved to the United States in the prior five years for each period (2003–2007 in the 2008 ACS and 2008–2012 in the 2013 ACS).

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