

## CHAPTER 1



# WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE MEXICAN MIGRATION PROJECT

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A SALIENT characteristic of the current debate on U.S. immigration policy is the high ratio of hot air to data. With respect to Mexico–U.S. migration, in particular, political entrepreneurs, ideologues of all stripes, special interests, and many a rank opportunist employ the border as a stage on which to project their hopes, fears, and fantasies about the nation (Andreas 2000; Chavez 2001). With the border as a dramatic prop, immigrants become symbols in a battle of images. For some they symbolize the American Dream; for others, the loss of control in a global economy. Some see them as desperate people fleeing abject poverty and destitution in the third world, and still others as spirited entrepreneurs seeking opportunity and freedom in the United States. Whereas one special interest may portray immigrants as undeserving consumers of public services and an unwanted burden on U.S. taxpayers, another will argue that they are productive workers who are essential to the nation’s prosperity.

However presented, narratives about immigrants and their effects are likely to be constructed with few facts and little empirical research. One of the reasons that various parties to the immigration debate can get away with repeated exaggerations and sometimes outright confabulations is the absence of objective data to gainsay any assertion they might make, however wild. In the absence of valid, reliable, and relevant data, one can make almost any claim about the causes, characteristics, and consequences of immigration, find anecdotal evidence of seeming verisimilitude to support it, and then proceed as if the claim were true without fear of falsification.

As is well known to demographers, however, migration data are among the weakest and least reliable statistics routinely collected and published by the federal government, and they were among the last to receive systematic methodological attention in the profession. Unlike events such as birth and death, which are clearly defined and biologically expressed, a “move” is socially constructed and has no obvious biological referent. All demographic events involve crossing a line of one sort or another. For births, the line is tangible, in that it separates the womb from the realm of those who live and breathe. For deaths, the line is equally real, separating a living being in this world from a soul in the great hereafter. Before birth there is no breathing; aging is accompanied by successive breaths and heartbeats; and at death breathing and heartbeats cease. The lines are fairly clear and not amenable to manipulation for political purposes.

When it comes to migration, however, the event—the move—requires the crossing of an intangible line that exists mainly on a map and is often invisible in space. Where, by whom, and for what purpose that line is placed matter a great deal in determining who gets counted as a migrant. In the final analysis, drawing a line and specifying under what circumstances crossing it is meaningful are arbitrary exercises and are therefore subject to a host of purposeful manipulations. As a result, migration statistics in general and immigration statistics in particular are inherently more political than data on fertility or mortality. Although trends in fertility and mortality may have political implications, only with respect to migration is the definition of the event itself subject to serious political manipulation.

Because a geographic move is a social rather than a biological construct, those who study human mobility scientifically have their work cut out for them. Scientists seeking to generate data, construct theories, and test hypotheses about international migration face especially difficult obstacles. Demographers lack good information on legal immigrants to the United States and are especially bereft when it comes to counting those who enter without authorization and reside in the country illegally. All the data sources normally employed by social scientists to study demographic events—the decennial census, intercensal surveys, registration systems, and specialized surveys—are compromised when it comes to studying immigration, usually fatally so (see Massey and Capoferro, forthcoming).

To overcome the serious deficiencies associated with standard data sources and to generate solid, reliable information on Mexico-U.S. migration, we developed a data-gathering method known as the ethnosurvey (described in detail in chapter 16). The method was first used in a pilot project conducted in 1982 and 1983; but since 1987 ethnosurveys have been carried out annually in Mexico under the aegis of the Mexican

Migration Project (MMP). The MMP selects communities in different regions, of varying size, and of diverse patterns of social and economic organization. Respondents are selected using simple random sampling methods, and the data gathered include complete histories of migration, work, and border crossing for all household heads and spouses; basic information on the first and most recent U.S. trips of all household members with migratory experience; and detailed information about experiences on the most recent international trip made by the household head.

In the course of the Mexican survey, we quickly learn where in the United States migrants from a particular community go. Once fieldwork in Mexico ends, we send interviewers to those destinations to compile a proportionate sample of settled out-migrants originating in that community and administer to them the same survey instrument that was applied in Mexico, yielding a comparable set of data on long-term U.S. residents or settlers. Investigators for the MMP have developed a set of sampling weights using the principles of multiplicity sampling to combine the Mexican and U.S. samples into a pooled binational data set that accurately represents the aggregate population of transnational communities created over the years through recurrent processes of migration, settlement, and return (Massey and Parrado 1994).

Chapter 16 presents a detailed description of the content and organization of the MMP database. Since its inception, the MMP has surveyed eighty-one binational communities, yielding reliable data on nearly eighteen thousand current and former U.S. migrants, some 60 percent of whom were undocumented at the time of the survey. The data set contains life histories of around fifty-five hundred migrant households, yielding nearly 260,000 person-years of information on immigration stretching back to the 1920s.

The MMP database offers the largest, most comprehensive, and most reliable source of statistical data on documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants currently available. It has been employed by many investigators in numerous studies that have produced sound scientific research about Mexico-U.S. migration, yielding dozens of publications in peer-reviewed journals of anthropology, demography, sociology, economics, and science generally. A collection of such studies forms the core of this volume, which we believe yield several important lessons about Mexico-U.S. migration.

## **METHODOLOGICAL LESSONS**

Perhaps the first and most fundamental lesson of the Mexican Migration Project is that it is indeed possible to generate accurate and reliable data

on immigration, even when much of the movement is transitory, circular, and clandestine and thus outside the purview of normal statistical systems. Moreover, the MMP data have been generated at relatively modest cost, with annual budgets beginning at less than \$100,000 in 1982 and rising to a current \$225,000 as the project has grown in size and scope. Although by no means trivial, these budgets are small by the standards of survey research, especially considering the size of the sample, the quality of data, and the marginal status of the target population. We offer the MMP as a model for other scholars studying movements between other origins and destinations.

The success of the MMP has been achieved by demarcating specific communities of manageable size and then studying them intensively, using an approach that blends ethnographic and survey methods. The vagaries inherent in migratory decision making are minimized by asking respondents to report behavior rather than intentions or motivations. The project deliberately avoids trying to define who is or is not a migrant and eschews the creation of migrant typologies. We simply ask whether each household member has ever left his or her community of origin to work or to look for work. We then gather basic information about the first and last such trips made both inside and outside of the country. For household heads and spouses, we compile a labor history that lists every activity undertaken for remuneration or support lasting a month or more, noting what that activity was, where it took place, and, if in the United States, whether the respondent held documents that permitted him or her to work legally. We leave it to the data user to decide whether a visit to work in a neighboring Mexican community constitutes a "move" or whether a visit to the United States for one, three, or six months constitutes a "trip."

Despite their reliability and validity relative to other potential sources of information on Mexican migration, however, the MMP data are not perfect. The most serious problem is their limited generalizability. Strictly speaking, the MMP data are representative only of the combined population of eighty-one nonrandomly selected Mexican communities. Though the diversity of community traits has steadily expanded, the data are not representative of Mexico or Mexican immigrants in general. Nonetheless, systematic comparisons between the MMP and nationally representative surveys have generally found a close correspondence between migrant characteristics in the two sources (Massey and Capoferro, forthcoming; Massey and Zenteno 2000; Zenteno and Massey 1999). Data users seeking to represent conditions within Mexico or among Mexican immigrants generally, however, should proceed with caution.

On the U.S. side of the border, the sample of settled out-migrants interviewed in destination areas is representative neither of settled Mexican immigrants nor of settlers from specific sending communities. Samples gathered in the United States are compiled using snowball sampling (also known as the chain-referral method), a serviceable technique imposed by practical constraints but one that ultimately yields data of unknowable representativeness. Although MMP investigators have conducted experiments testing whether representative sampling methods can be applied to select U.S. respondents, their efforts have proved unsuccessful in terms of cost, time, and practicality. Thus, although the MMP's U.S. interviews provide a snapshot of the characteristics of long-term settlers based on a relatively large number of cases, our data cannot be assumed to be representative and certainly cannot be used to estimate the size of the undocumented Mexican population of the United States.

Although MMP data by themselves cannot produce valid estimates of aggregate quantities such as the total number of undocumented migrants in the United States, the volume of undocumented entries in a given year, or the quantity of "migradollars" transmitted to Mexico, they have proved to be extremely useful for characterizing and understanding the social and economic processes that underlie and ultimately produce these aggregate counts (see Massey and Zenteno 1999). Data from the MMP can be used to find the value of many important parameters that determine aggregate trends, and they have been used to calculate otherwise unknowable quantities such as the likelihood of undocumented departure from Mexico, the probability of apprehension at the border, the likelihood of return migration, the odds of remigration, the probability of remitting, and the average size of remittances. Such parameter estimates can be combined with published statistics to generate defensible estimates of larger quantities, such as the annual volume of undocumented migration (Massey and Singer 1995), the annual flow of migradollars back to Mexico (Massey and Parrado 1994), the aggregate effect of remittances on the Mexican economy (Durand, Massey, and Parrado 1996), and the likely size of the future immigrant population (Massey and Zenteno 1999).

In sum, the MMP data, like all other data, have their strengths and weaknesses and appropriate and inappropriate uses. The point is not that other approaches to data collection should be abandoned in favor of the ethnosurvey or that the MMP should be used to the exclusion of information from the Bureau of the Census or the Immigration and Naturalization Service but that the data compiled by the MMP using ethnosurvey methods provide an important and often crucial complement to standard

statistical sources, enabling a clearer interpretation of trends and the more effective use of published statistics.

## **MIGRANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

A common perception in the United States is that Mexican immigrants are fleeing dire, impoverished circumstances at home and that once across the border they will naturally seek to stay permanently to enjoy the obvious benefits of living in the United States. It logically follows, of course, that if the United States does not vigorously defend its border, a huge fraction of the Mexican population will end up living north of the boundary—hence the imagery of a border under siege, subject to a silent invasion by a flood of immigrants, yielding names for enforcement operations such as blockade, gatekeeper, and hold-the-line (Andreas 2000).

This common perception, however, is fundamentally incorrect. Mexican immigrants are generally not poor and desperate—they would survive without migration to the United States. For the most part, households turn to migration quite rationally and use it instrumentally as an adaptive strategy to compensate for missing and failed markets in Mexico, conditions that are common in a country undergoing transition to a developed, market society. In reality, Mexico is not a poor country. With a per capita gross domestic product in excess of \$9,000, it is one of the richest countries in the developing world, and international migration is a consequence of its dynamic growth and development, not its poverty. This figure is nearly three times the average of \$3,200 for developing nations as a whole (United Nations 2002).

Because they are migrating to overcome specific market failures at home, the overwhelming majority of Mexican migrants plan to return, seeking to work in the United States for short periods to generate an alternative source of household income (thus overcoming failures in insurance markets) or to accumulate savings for a specific purpose (thus overcoming failures in capital and credit markets). Left to their own devices, most Mexican immigrants would work in the United States only sporadically and for limited periods of time. According to estimates by Douglas Massey and Audrey Singer (1995), for example, between 1965 and 1985 (when the border was relatively open) 85 percent of undocumented entries were offset by departures, yielding a relatively modest net increment to the U.S. population.

A concrete indication that migrants are motivated to return is the leaving behind of families. Historically, undocumented migration from Mexico has been led by young males who leave wives and children behind, arranging for the entry of dependents only once their own migration has

become chronic or the duration of their stays abroad too long. In their analysis of long-term trends, however, Marcela Cerrutti and Douglas S. Massey (chapter 2 of this volume) find that the demographic composition of Mexican immigrants is changing, characterized by the rising participation of women, a growing number of nonworking dependents, a shift out of agriculture, and a redirection of flows to new destination states. These changes have been accompanied by a declining probability of return migration among undocumented men and a falling probability of apprehension at the border.

Margarita Mooney (chapter 3 of this volume) finds that the kind of social ties that migrants have north of the border influence the nature and form of the investments they make in Mexico. Those who travel alone and live with kin or friends in the United States tend to make short trips and return with savings, which they invest in housing or production. They appear to be moving to overcome limitations in Mexico's lending markets. In the absence of viable mortgage markets, Mexicans move to self-finance the construction or acquisition of a home; and in the absence of an effective banking system, they move to accumulate capital for business formation.

In contrast, migrants who join social clubs in the United States (such as a hometown association or soccer club) make longer trips, often with other family members, and send money home through monthly remittances rather than accumulated savings. Through U.S.-based social clubs they join with other migrants to make investments in community infrastructure, to maintain and improve homes, and to run businesses in order to claim status and continued membership in their communities of origin.

Perhaps the single most important motivation for Mexican migration to the United States is the need to self-finance home acquisition because of poorly functioning and inaccessible mortgage markets in Mexico. In his analysis of home ownership and quality (chapter 4 of this volume), Emilio Parrado finds that migration to the United States markedly increases the likelihood of home ownership and greatly increases the quality of housing. In general, the greater a household's prior U.S. experience, the higher the odds it will own its home, the greater the number of rooms and appliances in the dwelling, and the more likely the dwelling will be to have a tile or wood floor. U.S. migration lowers a family's reliance on inheritance as a means of home acquisition, and by providing collateral it increases access to bank loans. U.S. migration is thus responsible for much of the growth in the size and quality of Mexico's housing stock.

Given the obvious material benefits associated with migration to the United States, it is hardly surprising that it has a pronounced influence on marriage markets within migrant-sending communities. As Joshua Reichert

(1982) noted long ago, men and women who have unhindered access to the U.S. labor market make unusually attractive marriage partners, yielding what Enrique Martínez (in chapter 5) calls “the green card as a matrimonial strategy.” As he shows, one who is able to marry a U.S. citizen or resident alien is guaranteed not only a higher standard of living but also access to legal status through the family reunification provisions of U.S. immigration law. In the community Martínez studied, this reality has produced new mercenary attitudes toward marriage, characterized by a willingness to marry U.S. citizens and legal residents in the absence of love as a means of gaining access to a U.S. visa, a practice associated with rather high subsequent rates of marital dissolution.

## **WOMEN AND MIGRATION**

Although most undocumented Mexican migrants are men, women are always intimately involved in the process of international migration, either as wives and daughters who remain behind or, increasingly, as migrants themselves. Mexico has a rather patriarchal culture, and migration to the United States has created pressures for change that have played an important role in transforming Mexican gender relations. The departure of a male household head for work in the United States immediately increases a wife’s authority and autonomy, leaving her in control of daily decisions regarding family discipline, production, and spending.

When the husband returns from the United States, authority relations often do not return to the status quo ante. Women grow accustomed to their autonomy, and their children to their authority, making it difficult for men to reassert their former dominance in family relations when they return. Moreover, as María Aysa and Douglas Massey show (in chapter 7), the departure of men under appropriate circumstances also increases female autonomy by promoting the wife’s labor force participation. They find that in settings in which the control of family is weaker and job opportunities more abundant (that is, in urban areas), a wife is likely to enter the labor force following her husband’s migration.

Although males are typically the first to migrate from a Mexican household, the more trips a man takes and the longer he remains north of the border, the more likely he is to be joined by his wife and children (Massey et al. 1987). As U.S. authorities progressively militarized the border over the 1990s, men adapted to the higher costs and risks of border crossing by staying longer, and increasingly they have arranged for the entry of their wives and children (see Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Katharine Donato and Evelyn Patterson (in chapter 6) undertake the first systematic

analysis of undocumented border crossing by Mexican women. They find that compared with men, women are much less likely to cross by themselves and are more likely to retain the services of a paid crossing guide, thus lowering their risk of apprehension. Because most women are first-time migrants, and because once in the United States they tend to stay, the typical female border crosser has substantially less migratory experience than her male counterpart.

## **REGIONAL AND SECTORAL DIFFERENCES**

The traditional heartland for migration to the United States is western Mexico, notably the states of Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas, along with smaller and less populous western states such as Aguascalientes, Colima, and Nayarit. As far back as data exist, at least half of all migrants to the United States have come from one of these states (Durand, Massey, and Zenteno 2001). Accordingly, the Mexican Migration Project began by securing samples of communities in this region. Over the years, however, MMP investigators have endeavored to survey communities in other sending regions in the south and north of the country.

Most Americans probably assume that a majority of Mexican immigrants originate in border states—after all, they are closest to the United States. Historically, however, only a small fraction have come from frontier states such as Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Tamaulipas, or Nuevo León. Before World War II, this region was sparsely populated, and although it grew tremendously after 1945, border communities continue to be relatively marginal participants in the international migratory stream.

In her analysis of migration from the border metropolis of Tijuana, Elizabeth Fussell (chapter 8) argues that cross-border economic integration provides potential migrants with attractive alternatives in Mexico, yielding relatively low rates of migration to the United States. Whereas 15 percent of respondents interviewed in Tijuana had been to the United States, the figure was 24 percent in communities of Mexico's rural interior. Moreover, when people did migrate from Tijuana, they were likely to have documents. Whereas nearly 60 percent of first U.S. trips made by Tijuana residents were legal, fewer than a third of those made from the rural interior were. The odds of documented migration were greater in Tijuana because of the prevalence of cross-border family and business ties, which open up a variety of avenues to legal documents.

Patricia Arias (chapter 9) points out that new patterns of migration are evolving even in traditional migrant-sending regions. Although emigration

from the state of Guanajuato has historically been rural in origin, with migrants leaving to self-finance home construction, acquire consumer goods, purchase land, or fund agricultural production, during the 1980s and 1990s Guanajuato underwent a process of rural industrialization, with numerous locally financed factories springing up in former agrarian towns and agriculture itself being transformed into capital-intensive commercial activity. In the course of this transformation, the dynamics of migration shifted as migrants increasingly came from industrializing towns and small cities. Rather than migrating to finance home acquisition or agricultural production, the new immigrants used U.S. labor as a buffer to cover family expenses during periods of local unemployment and as a source of investment capital for business formation.

Nadia Flores, Rubén Hernández-León, and Douglas Massey (chapter 10) note that social and economic trends in Mexico have resulted in a growing number of U.S. migrants originating in urban rather than rural areas. Owing to the greater size, density, and heterogeneity of cities, the authors argue, the logic of migration from cities is very different from that of migration from rural areas. They show that household formation is associated with U.S. migration from rural but not urban areas. Whereas newly formed urban couples simply enter the local market for rental housing to establish an independent residence, in rural communities rental housing markets do not exist, and recently married husbands become migrants to self-finance the construction of a home and free themselves from their parental households. In addition, whereas the migratory behavior of urban dwellers is responsive to fluctuations in interest rates, that of rural dwellers is not. Formal credit is so lacking in the rural sector that interest rates are irrelevant. Finally, the effects of migrant networks are much stronger in rural than in urban areas because rural social networks are stronger and more dense, yielding social capital of greater value and more potential for the cumulative causation of migration.

The hypothesis of cumulative causation posits that the departure of people and the repatriation of earnings change local social and economic structures in ways that promote additional migration. Estela Rivero-Fuentes (chapter 11) extends the analysis of cumulative causation to incorporate internal as well as international migration. She finds that migration within Mexico and to the United States have similar determinants at the community level, with movement occurring largely in response to structural economic changes. Rivero-Fuentes discerns little evidence that the growth of international migration comes at the expense of internal migration. Indeed, she finds that both types of migration are perpetuated through similar mechanisms of cumulative causation linked to the accu-

mulation of social capital. Having a tie to a U.S. migrant and living in a community with many such migrants raises the odds that a person will leave for the United States but does not affect the odds of migrating within Mexico. Similarly, having a tie to an internal migrant and living in a community with many such migrants raises the odds of migration within Mexico but does not affect the odds of going to the United States.

## **LESSONS FOR POLICY MAKERS**

According to William Kandel (chapter 12), the consolidation of the food-processing industry over the past two decades has brought about a radical transformation of rural areas of the United States. Whereas Mexican farm laborers for decades have gone to fields in Texas and California, during the 1990s farming regions throughout the United States began to receive large numbers of Mexican immigrants. Mexicans constitute upwards of 85 percent of all agricultural laborers in the United States and form the backbone of the workforce engaged in the production of tobacco (North Carolina), onions (Georgia), mushrooms (Pennsylvania), cherries (Michigan), poultry (Arkansas, Delaware), meat (Iowa, Nebraska), and seafood (Maryland).

Kandel uses MMP data to construct a social, economic, and demographic portrait of Mexican migrant farmworkers. He shows that relative to skilled and unskilled manual workers, those employed in U.S. agriculture tend to make more trips of shorter duration, working fewer months per year but more hours per week and generally experiencing the lowest wages and harshest working conditions. Compared with migrant workers in other sectors, those in agriculture had very low rates of occupational mobility. Overall, the picture Kandel paints is one of an impoverished, exploited farm workforce skirting the borders of indentured servitude.

A principal reason for the dire circumstances facing farm labor in the United States is the series of repressive immigration and border policies imposed by U.S. authorities since 1986. For the first time in U.S. history, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act criminalized the hiring of undocumented workers, causing employers in agriculture and other industries to shift to labor subcontracting and thereby substantially reducing the amount of money going to workers (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Between 1985 and 2000, moreover, the Mexico-U.S. border was militarized in unprecedented ways, with spending on border enforcement rising by a factor of six, the number of Border Patrol officers doubling, and the hours spent patrolling the border tripling. At present, the Border Patrol is the largest arms-bearing branch of the U.S. government outside of the military itself, with a budget in excess of \$1.3 billion a year.

This massive deployment of enforcement resources has produced a variety of unintended negative consequences. Rather than deterring Mexicans from coming to the United States, the militarization of the border has lowered the likelihood of their returning home. In his life-table analysis of return migration, Fernando Riosmena (chapter 13) estimates that before 1992, the probability of returning from a first undocumented trip to the United States generally ranged between .60 and .70, but following the launching of successive border operations in 1993 the likelihood of return plummeted and by 1996 stood at around .45. The drop in the odds of return migration was particularly acute among nonagricultural workers.

This finding is confirmed by Belinda Reyes (chapter 15), using an entirely different methodology. She shows that the sharply falling probabilities of return have substantially increased the length of trips and greatly increased the rate of Mexican population growth in the United States. Thus the border crackdown has turned a temporary strategy adopted to overcome Mexican market limitations into the permanent resettlement of workers and their families, thereby significantly increasing the rate of Mexican population growth within the United States.

U.S. border policies have had other consequences as well. According to Pia Orrenius (chapter 14), the concentration of enforcement resources in specific sectors has prompted undocumented Mexicans to avoid formerly popular crossing sites in California in favor of new locations in Texas and Arizona. Within states, there has also been a shift away from crossing in urban areas such as Tijuana and Juárez toward new crossing points in remote and unpopulated sites located in the mountains and deserts of California and the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

## **TOWARD THE FUTURE**

The chapters of this volume suggest that the 1990s were a decade of radical change in Mexico-U.S. migration and a period in which U.S. policy responses were increasingly misplaced and inadequate. The attempt to make the border impervious with respect to the movement of Mexican labor while opening it with respect to movements of goods, capital, information, commodities, and services has proved worse than a failure; it has achieved counterproductive outcomes in virtually every instance. It has transformed Mexican immigration from a circular movement of workers affecting three states into a national population of settled dependents scattered throughout the country. It has lowered the rate of apprehension on the border but driven up the rate of death and injury during border crossing. It has not deterred Mexican immigrants from coming to the United

States, but it has kept them from going home. It has dramatically accelerated the rate of Mexican population growth in the United States while exacerbating the social and economic marginalization of the population.

These negative consequences follow from the attempt to impose restrictive immigration policies on a wealthy, developing country that is otherwise integrating rapidly with the United States. Restrictive policies rest on the misapprehension that Mexicans are desperately poor and seek to enter the United States to live permanently. But migrants do not come from the poorest regions of the country; they come from communities that are dynamic and rapidly developing, and those who migrate generally seek temporary work to overcome specific market failures at home. Left to their own devices, the vast majority would return to participate in Mexico's growth as an economy and society.

We believe that more enlightened policies could follow from a more accurate understanding of the causes of international migration and a better appreciation of the motivations of migrants. In previous work (Durand and Massey 2001; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002) we have offered specific recommendations for a more effective and humane immigration policy in North America. The contributors to this volume describe the data and present the kinds of empirical research that have guided our thinking in making these policy recommendations. We trust that the studies collected here will provide others with a more informed window on the complex and changing phenomenon of Mexico-U.S. migration.

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