

THE REGIONAL MIGRATION STUDY GROUP

US IMMIGRATION POLICY AND MEXICAN/ CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION FLOWS: THEN AND NOW

By Marc R. Rosenblum and Kate Brick



Woodrow Wilson
International
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Table of Contents

- Executive Summary** 1
- I. Introduction: Understanding International Migration Flows**2
- II. History of Regional Migration Flows and US Immigration Policy** ...3
 - A. Pre-World War II: Limited Migration and Early Migration Controls3
 - B. The Bracero Program: Wartime and Post-War Migration4
 - C. 1965-1986: The Construction of an Illegal Regime.....5
- III. US Immigration Policy since 1986**6
 - A. Increased Admissions6
 - B. Border Enforcement8
 - C. Worksite Enforcement9
 - D. Other Interior Enforcement.....11
 - E. Analysis: The Limits of US Immigration Policy13
- IV. A Portrait of Mexican and Central American Immigrants in the United States**.....14
 - A. Recent Immigration from Mexico and Central America14
 - B. Geographic Distribution15
 - C. Immigration Status.....17
 - D. Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics18
 - E. Employment and Income.....19
- V. Conclusions**.....22
- Works Cited**23
- About the Authors**27



Executive Summary

Migration rates to the United States from Mexico and Central America's "Northern Triangle" (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) have accelerated in the last four decades, spurred by strong migration push-and-pull factors and massive opportunity differentials throughout the region. About 14 million immigrants from these four countries live in the United States today, up from fewer than 1 million in 1970s, and these countries account for 36 percent of all US immigrants. This significant increase has been driven by economic opportunities, and facilitated by social networks of friends and family already in the United States.

The history of US immigration policy within the region corresponds with three major migration periods: mostly *laissez faire* policies prior to the 1930s with limited migration before World War II; a large-scale temporary worker program (the Bracero Program) during and after the war that increased migration flows; and the emergence of a mostly illegal system following the elimination of the Bracero Program and passage of major immigration legislation in 1965. Despite increasingly robust immigration enforcement beginning in the 1980s, illegal flows of immigrants from Mexico and Central America have persisted.

Since 1965, and particularly since the 1990s, immigration from the region has changed in significant ways. While migration flows historically were dominated by migrants from central Mexico who performed agricultural jobs in the US Southwest, during the last two decades the regional migration system has diversified to encompass new communities of origin in Mexico and Central America, new destinations throughout the United States, and a broader occupational profile including jobs in construction, maintenance, food service, and manufacturing. Despite these changes, however, immigrants from Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America continue to have less education and lower incomes than natives and other immigrants, and with few legal visas available, most immigrants from the region are unauthorized.

This significant increase [in Mexican and Central American migrants] has been driven by economic opportunities, and facilitated by social networks of friends and family already in the United States.

These recent dynamics play a critical role in shaping the politics of immigration policy within the United States. Young, low-skilled immigrants perform essential work, but the rapid growth of low-wage, limited English proficient (LEP), unauthorized populations in states with limited migration experience has contributed to increased anti-immigrant sentiment. Forty years into the current wave of regional migration, and after 25 years of increasingly serious enforcement efforts, this history also defines and limits the policy alternatives available, and highlights the challenges of managing regional flows.



I. Introduction: Understanding International Migration Flows

International migration is no easy matter, and people do not make the decision lightly to uproot their lives and leave home and family behind. Explaining migration — why people move, who and how many people migrate, and how they choose where to go — depends on a combination of structural factors that are difficult for governments to control and on the policy environment in which migration decisionmaking occurs.

Structural factors are the primary drivers of international migration and fall into three categories:¹

- **Push factors** in countries of origin that encourage outflows. These include a wide range of factors that limit economic opportunities in much of the developing world, including low wages and insufficient formal-sector employment, poor investment opportunities, and inadequate access to credit, finance, and insurance systems. Push factors are not strictly a function of underdevelopment, however, as economic development often creates its own conditions for emigration by disrupting traditional markets, and household and community relations while generating the capital necessary to finance migration.² Noneconomic push factors such as authoritarian or corrupt governments, wars, and natural disasters can be equally important reasons that people emigrate, and have played a significant role in the first waves of Central American migration to the United States.³
- **Pull factors** in destination states that encourage inflows. The primary pull factors that attract immigration are the availability of jobs and associated economic opportunities for immigrants and their families, including safety, limited government, and equality before the law. And even though job opportunities for low-skilled immigrants are concentrated in so-called 3-D jobs — jobs that are dirty, difficult, and dangerous, as well as poorly paid — these pull factors create an enormous “opportunity differential” relative to countries of origin, which makes the decision to emigrate almost a default option in many cases.
- **Social networks** that connect migrants to host-state jobs and communities of co-nationals, typically from the same village and area. Family and social networks facilitate migration by providing funds and information to would-be migrants, and by assisting with their integration into host-state economies. These networks also help immigrants understand and negotiate the new environment, including how to relate to public authorities. With 10 percent to 20 percent of Mexicans and Central Americans now living in the United States, social networks are a particularly important factor within this region.

How these structural forces translate into migration outcomes depends in part on *immigration policy*, mainly defined by destination states. Immigration policy shapes migration outcomes by setting rules

- 1 The classic source on push-and-pull factors, and social networks is Douglas S. Massey, Joaquin Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adela Pellegrino, and J. Edward Taylor, *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1998); also see Elizabeth Fussel, “Space, Time, and Volition: Dimensions of Migration Theory” in *Oxford Handbook on International Migration*, eds. Marc R. Rosenblum and Daniel J. Tichenor (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- 2 In Mexico, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has contributed to relatively robust economic growth since the 1990s but poor employment opportunities, encouraging increased migration outflows; see John J. Audley, Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Sandra Polaski, and Scott Vaughan, *NAFTA’s Promise and Reality: Lessons from Mexico for the Hemisphere* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), www.carnegieendowment.org/files/nafta1.pdf.
- 3 For the purposes of this report, “Central Americans” will particularly refer to immigrants from the “Northern Triangle” countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras — the three Central American states with the greatest representation in the United States.



for how many migrants are admitted and under what terms, and through the enforcement of migration restrictions — though enforcing the rules becomes more challenging if admissions policies are a poor match with structural and market forces. Over time, policy choices and structural factors reinforce each other: where economic needs are strong, employers demand — and often obtain — generous admissions policies or weak enforcement of restrictions; and generous admissions policies or unsuccessful enforcement of restrictions lead to stronger migration pulls.

This report gives an overview of the factors driving migration within the region, and how the evolution of US immigration policy has shaped migration from Mexico and Central America. It then describes immigrant demographics, providing a snapshot of Mexican and Central American immigrants' social, economic, and geographic characteristics in the United States.

II. History of Regional Migration Flows and US Immigration Policy

Migration patterns to the United States from Mexico and Central America have gone through three main phases since the beginning of the 20th century: limited flows before World War II, primarily Mexican government-sponsored guest worker flows during and after the war, and mainly illegal flows beginning in 1965 and accelerating over the next four decades.

A. Pre-World War II: Limited Migration and Early Migration Controls

Prior to World War II, migration within North America consisted primarily of short-term, seasonal flows between central Mexico and the US Southwest. Responding to longstanding market forces, Mexicans were employed mainly in agriculture and railroad construction. About 60,000 Mexicans per year entered the United States at the turn of the 20th century, with the majority returning to Mexico in the winter.⁴ New agricultural and transportation technology (especially refrigerated rail cars for shipping produce) and the Mexican Revolution created additional pushes and pulls in this period, and migration rates more than doubled during the 1910s and again during the 1920s (see Figure 1).

With strong support from US business interests in the Southwest, Mexican immigrants were largely exempted from tough restrictions against Asian and European immigrants passed between the 1880s and the 1920s.⁵ But by the late 1920s, the broad anti-immigration backlash caught up to Mexican migrants, and US consular officers responded with tougher screening of Mexican visa applicants, producing a 75 percent reduction in Mexican inflows between 1928 and 1929. High unemployment during the Great Depression reduced the migration jobs magnet; and hundreds of thousands of Mexicans — along with perhaps an equal number of US citizens of Mexican descent — were deported to Mexico.⁶ With reduced

4 Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976). Official records of Mexican immigration were only collected beginning in 1908, but Reisler and others estimate that between one-quarter and one-third of Mexicans immigrants during this period remained in the United States each year.

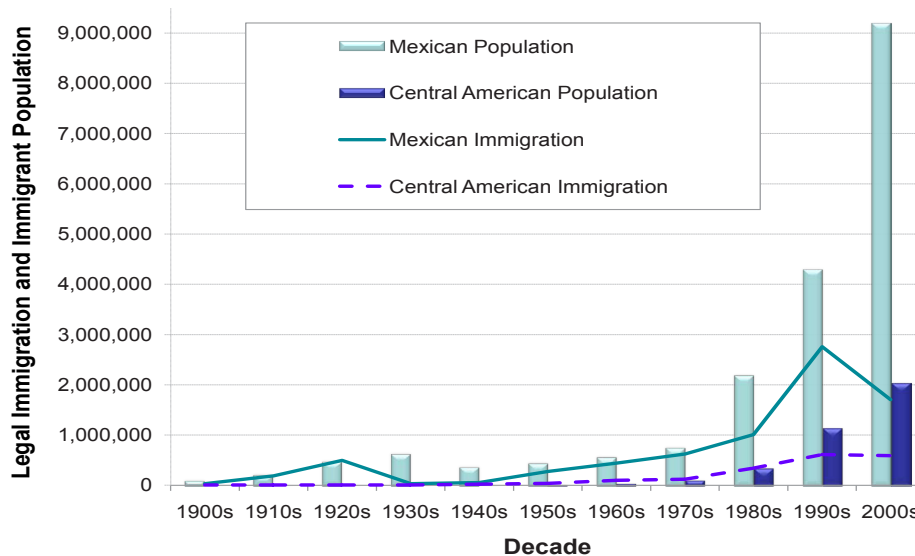
5 Fewer than 60 federal agents were assigned to police the US-Mexican border prior to 1924; Mexican workers were exempted from literacy tests and head taxes during World War I; and numerical limits beginning in 1921 produced a 90 percent drop in European immigration but did not apply to immigrants from the Western Hemisphere. The exemption of Mexican workers from migration controls during World War I is considered the United States' first "guest worker" program. About 73,000 Mexicans were admitted through the program, with about half recording a return to Mexico; see Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*.

6 Estimates of the total number of deportations range from 400,000 to 1 million; see Robert Divine, *American Immigration Policy, 1924-1952* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); Kevin R. Johnson, "The Forgotten 'Repatriation' of Persons of Mexican Ancestry and Lessons for the 'War on Terror'" *Pace Law Review* 26, 1 (2005): 1-26,



inflows and increased removals, the Mexican population in the United States fell by 40 percent during the 1930s (see Figure 1), making it the only decade in which net migration flows in the region were north to south.

Figure 1. Legal Permanent Immigration Flows and Total Population of Mexican and Central American Immigrants in the United States, 1900s-2000s



Note: As this figure shows, there was not significant immigration from Central America to the United States until the 1970s, when civil wars and natural disasters throughout the region began to create a strong push factor. Fewer than 40,000 Central Americans gained legal permanent residence in the United States per year prior to the 1970s, and including legal and unauthorized immigrants; fewer than 1 million Mexicans and Central Americans lived in the United States at the time of the 1970 census.

Source: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, various years (Washington, DC: DHS), www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm; US Census Bureau, US Census, various years.

B. The Bracero Program: Wartime and Post-War Migration

Low Mexican immigration — in a time of labor shortages — became a cause for concern in the United States as the country went to war in 1941 and again in 1950. The military draft and a growing demand for factory workers exacerbated agricultural labor shortages; and with social networks degraded during the 1930s, market mechanisms alone were insufficient to guarantee resumed labor recruitment.⁷

As a result, the United States and Mexico signed a formal agreement in 1942 to establish a migrant guest worker program, which became known as the Bracero Program. The initial agreement established exceptionally favorable terms for Mexican immigrants: a guaranteed minimum wage (unlike American farm workers), as well as transportation, housing, and health benefits. Bracero contracts were cosigned by US and Mexican government officials, and Mexican consuls in the United States helped oversee their enforcement. Following the end of the Korean War and the return of American soldiers in 1953, however,

<http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1147&context=plr>. Johnson reports that as many as 60 percent of the people deported to Mexico in the 1930s may have been native-born or naturalized US citizens.

⁷ Federal agencies reported a loss of 2.8 million farm workers between 1939 and 1943, and a shortage of about 8 million agricultural workers in 1951. Americans also worried about bilateral tension over migration issues in light of Mexico's trade ties with Germany prior to World War II and the strength of the Mexican Communist Party in the 1950s. See Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); Marc R. Rosenblum, "The Intersecting Politics of Immigration Policy: Lessons from the Bracero Program," *Political Power and Social Theory* 16 (2003): 139-82.



the Eisenhower administration eliminated consular oversight and imposed more grower-friendly contracts, while also deporting almost 2 million unauthorized Mexicans in the so-called “Operation Wetback” campaign.⁸

While originally conceptualized as a wartime measure to address short-term labor shortages, the Bracero Program remained in place until 1964, when a coalition of worker advocates persuaded the Kennedy administration and congressional Democrats to eliminate the program. By that time 4.8 million Bracero contracts had been signed (a number that includes many returning workers). Whereas Mexico-US migration was limited to a handful of Mexican and US states before the war, by the 1960s the program helped expand demand for low-wage foreign workers throughout the US agricultural sector. As a result, entire communities in Mexico came to rely on emigration as their primary source of employment, and an industry of labor contractors emerged on both sides of the border to match willing workers with employers. Migration was now structurally embedded in the social and economic systems of a growing group of migrant-sending and migrant-receiving communities.⁹

C. 1965-1986: The Construction of an Illegal Regime

The expiration of the Bracero Program in 1964 was followed by the passage of major reforms to the US *Immigration and Nationality Act* (INA) in 1965, establishing the basic outline of US immigration law that remains in place today. The main goal of the 1965 reforms was to modernize US immigration law by eliminating the 1924 race-based national origins system and replacing variable per-country caps with a nondiscriminatory equal allocation of up to 20,000 visas per country. The law also created a seven-tier preference system for rationing visas within countries, a system that strongly favored family-based migration and limited the number of employment-based visas to 29,000 per year, including workers and their families.¹⁰

Yet the new policy was a bad match for the structural forces that were already taking hold of the US migration system. By weighting the preference system so heavily toward family members, the INA did not provide adequate mechanisms for employers seeking foreign workers. Moreover, legislation passed in 1952 made it illegal to aid or harbor unauthorized immigrants, but explicitly exempted businesses from being liable under the law for hiring or employing them (the so-called Texas Proviso), creating a strong incentive for unauthorized employment. Problems were exacerbated by inflexible per-country limits and the inability of the preference system to respond to evolving employer needs and the interests of families to be reunited within reasonable time frames. Thus, as many US citizens and recent immigrants took advantage of generous family preference rules to petition for their relatives, long waiting lists developed for visas in certain preference categories and for immigrants from certain countries.

The law also failed to anticipate massive economic, political, and social changes in Mexico and Central America, along with changes in transportation and communications technology that reduced the costs of international migration. Thus, even as economic shocks in Mexico and civil wars in Central America created important new push factors in the 1970s and '80s, the extension of per-country caps and the preference system to Western Hemisphere states after 1976 created particularly acute supply-and-demand mismatches for Mexico and the rest of the region.

For all of these reasons, the “illegal alien problem” became the defining issue for US policymakers within years of the 1965 reforms.¹¹ Congress held 25 days of hearings on illegal immigration between 1971 and

8 Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

9 Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Free Trade* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002); Wayne A. Cornelius, *The Role of Immigrant Labor in the U.S. and Japanese Economies* (La Jolla, CA: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1998).

10 The law permitted a total of 290,000 visas, not counting the immediate families of US citizens, and set aside 10 percent for skilled or unskilled workers in shortage occupations plus their families. Preferences and per-country limits only applied to Western Hemisphere countries after 1976.

11 David G. Gutiérrez, “‘Sin Fronteras’: Chicanos, Mexican Americans, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Mexican



1973, three presidents in a row convened task forces to study the problem, and spending on migration control (mostly Border Patrol personnel) increased five-fold between 1970 and 1985.¹² Nonetheless, with liberals and business groups opposed to new enforcement measures, and labor unions and social conservatives opposed to new admissions, Congress had no appetite for genuine reform efforts, and demand for low-wage workers increasingly was met by unauthorized immigrants.

III. US Immigration Policy since 1986

Public pressure to act on the issue of illegal immigration produced results in 1986 with passage of the *Immigration Reform and Control Act* (IRCA). IRCA included legalization programs for people who had entered the United States prior to 1982 and for certain unauthorized farm workers, new funding for border enforcement, and new civil and criminal penalties against employers who hire unauthorized workers. Congress then passed the *Immigration Act of 1990*, which also authorized more spending at the border and expanded the number of employment-based visas, and the *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996* (IIRIRA), which included a wide range of new enforcement measures.¹³

The policy debate appeared to reach a turning point in September 2001 as President George W. Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox reached a framework agreement for a major bilateral migration reform. But the terrorist attacks just days later interrupted bilateral migration negotiations, and the United States passed six additional laws between 2002 and 2006 focused wholly or partly on tougher immigration enforcement: the *Homeland Security Act of 2002*, the *USA PATRIOT Act of 2002*, the *Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002* (EBSVERA), the *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004*, the *REAL ID Act of 2005*, and the *Secure Fence Act of 2006*.¹⁴

These laws and several associated administrative reforms have resulted in a modest increase in legal migration, growth in border enforcement, new worksite enforcement measures, and an expansion of enforcement within the United States. But after 25 years of increasingly robust enforcement, the unauthorized population has tripled, with Mexicans accounting for about 60 percent of all unauthorized immigrants and Central Americans about 12 percent.¹⁵

A. Increased Admissions

Overall immigration to the United States roughly doubled in the two decades after the 1965 amendments, and then tripled between 1989 and 1991 as a result of IRCA's legalization programs. Many newly legal immigrants petitioned for family members, contributing to a sustained increase in family migration; and the *Immigration Act of 1990* doubled annual limits on permanent employment-based visas (i.e., green

Immigration Debate, 1968-1978." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10, 4 (1991): 5-37.

www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=jamerethnhist.

12 On migration control spending, see Timothy Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992* (Austin: CMAS Books, University of Texas, 1996).

13 In addition to the *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act* (IIRIRA), Congress also in 1996 passed, and President Clinton signed into law, the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* and the *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act*, both of which also included immigration enforcement provisions. See *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, Pub. L. 104-193, 104th Congress, 2nd sess. (August 22, 1996), and *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act*, Pub. L. 104-132, 104th Congress, 2nd sess. (April 24, 1996).

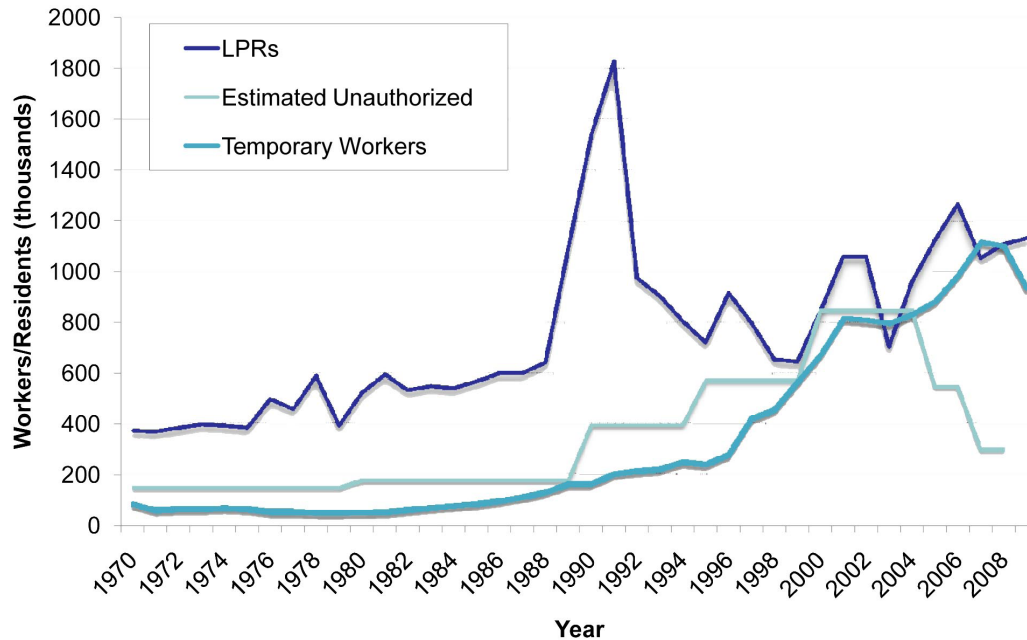
14 On the post-9/11 period, see Marc R. Rosenblum, *US Immigration Policy since 9/11: Understanding the Stalemate over Comprehensive Immigration Reform* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, forthcoming).

15 Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2010), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/126.pdf>.



cards). Thus, after averaging fewer than 300,000 green cards per year during the 1950s and '60s, the United States has issued an average of 900,000 green cards per year since 1992 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Immigration Inflows by Type, 1970–2009



Note: Temporary workers include nonimmigrant visa categories for temporary workers and their spouses, including trainees but excluding exchange visitors.

Sources: Lawful permanent residents (LPRs) and temporary worker admissions from DHS, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS, various years); estimated unauthorized inflows from Jeffrey S. Passel, "Undocumented Immigration," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487 (September 1986): 181-200; Jeffrey S. Passel, *The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.: Estimates Based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2006), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/61.pdf>; and Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2010), <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=126>.

A second trend in legal admissions has been increased guest worker admissions, which fell from 450,000 per year during the late 1950s to fewer than 50,000 in 1969 following the termination of the Bracero Program, and which averaged fewer than 100,000 per year during the 1980s. The *Immigration Act of 1990* also created several new temporary work visas for high-skilled workers, and in 2005 Congress temporarily increased low-skilled visa numbers by exempting returning guest workers from numeric limits. As a result, admission of people with temporary work visas climbed to an all-time high of 1.1 million in 2007 (see Figure 2), though only 240,000 were for low-skilled workers.¹⁶

Third, of particular importance to Central Americans during this period, the United States also passed a series of laws to provide temporary relief from deportation for specific national groups for whom

¹⁶ Low-skilled visas include H-2A visas for temporary agricultural work and H-2B and H-2R visas for temporary nonagricultural work. Total temporary work visas also include H-4 visa holders, issued to children and spouses of temporary workers, usually 10-15 percent of admissions in this category. Admissions include repeat entries and therefore overestimate the number of workers admitted per year. By comparison, about 470,000 temporary work visas were issued in 2008, but this number underestimates the number of workers admitted per year because many work visas last longer than a year; see Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Doris Meissner, Marc R. Rosenblum, and Madeleine Sumption, *Aligning Temporary Immigration Visas with US Labor Market Needs: The Case for a New System of Provisional Visas* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2010), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/Provisional_visas.pdf. About 150,000 low-skilled workers are admitted on temporary visas per year, most of whom are from Mexico and Central America. In 2009 over 300,000 Mexicans and nearly 10,000 Central Americans were admitted to the United States on temporary work visas; Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS): 76-78.



conditions in the country of origin made return migration unsafe. The *Immigration Act of 1990* offered Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Salvadorans in the United States who had been displaced by that country's civil war, and the first Bush administration granted temporary relief to an estimated 190,000 Salvadorans through 1994. An additional 80,000 Hondurans and 250,000 Salvadorans also received TPS following Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and a pair of earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001.¹⁷

B. Border Enforcement

IRCA and the *Immigration Act of 1990* each authorized the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)¹⁸ to double US spending on border enforcement, and with these and other appropriations spending at the border increased from about \$700 million in 1986 to about \$2.8 billion in 2002 and \$10.1 billion in 2010.¹⁹ Since 1994, border enforcement has been guided by a strategic plan emphasizing “enforcement through deterrence,” the idea that the deployment of large-scale and highly visible enforcement resources along the most heavily trafficked parts of the border would discourage illegal entrances. To this end, the Border Patrol increased from fewer than 3,000 agents in 1986, to 9,100 in 2001, to over 20,000 in 2010 (see Figure 3); the United States has constructed about 650 miles of border fencing, mostly since 2006; and hundreds of high-tech cameras, lights, and motion detectors have been installed in heavily trafficked border corridors.²⁰ By traditional metrics — i.e., the number of unauthorized immigrants apprehended at the border — border enforcement has begun to pay dividends, as apprehensions reached a 40-year low in 2009 (see Figure 3), though reduced apprehensions also reflect reduced labor demand during economic downturns from 2001 to 2003 and since 2007.

IRIRA mandated that INS develop an entry-exit tracking system to collect arrival and departure records of all aliens passing through US ports of entry, and the USA-PATRIOT and EBSVERA Acts strengthened the entry-exit mandate, including by requiring that data collection consist of 10-print biometric records. Since 2004, entry-exit tracking has been managed by the US-VISIT program within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Currently, US-VISIT collects biometric data from almost all non-US citizens entering at US airports and seaports, and from all noncitizens selected for secondary inspection at land ports (i.e., mostly citizens of countries other than Mexico and Canada). US-VISIT does not collect biometric data from people leaving the United States.

17 Ruth Ellen Wasem and Karma Ester, *Temporary Protected Status: Current Immigration Policy and Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2006), <http://pards.org/tps/tps2006.0207-CRS.pdf>.

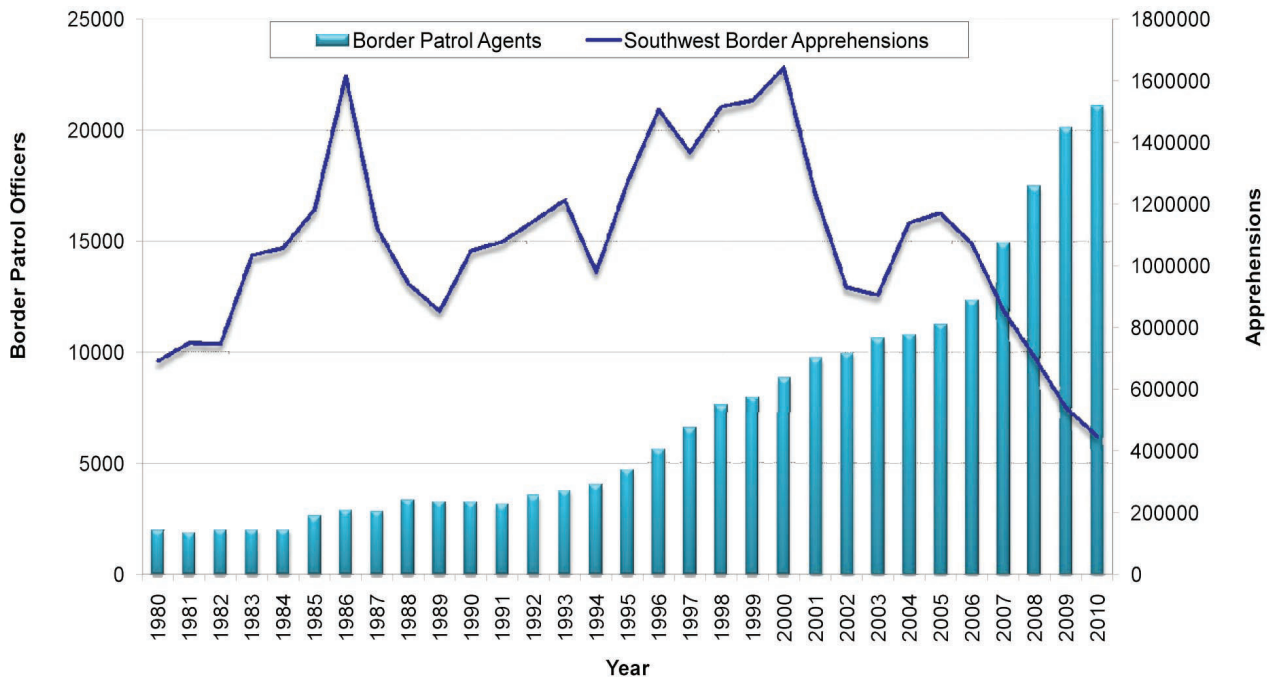
18 The US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was abolished in 2003 with creation of the Department of Homeland Security, and most of its functions divided between three new DHS agencies: US Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

19 David Dixon and Julia Gelatt, *Immigration Enforcement Spending Since IRCA* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2005), www.migrationpolicy.org/ITFIAF/FactSheet_Spending.pdf; DHS, *FY 2011 Budget in Brief* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2010), www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/budget_bib_fy2011.pdf.

20 DHS, *Budget in Brief*, various years (Washington, DC: DHS), www.dhs.gov/xabout/budget/dhs-budget.shtm; Government Printing Office (GPO), *Budget of the United States Government*, various years (Washington DC: GPO), www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/browse.html. The United States installed the first modern border fencing at the US-Mexican border in 1991 between San Diego and Tijuana. Congress mandated additional fence construction in 1996 and in 2006. As of October 2009 about 641 miles of vehicle and pedestrian fencing had been installed out of a total of 652 miles planned; see US Government Accountability Office (GAO), *U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Border Security Fencing, Infrastructure and Technology Fiscal Year 2010 Expenditure Plan* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2010), www.gao.gov/new.items/d10877r.pdf. In 2006, DHS announced the Secure Border Initiative, which included plans to construct a “virtual fence” that would allow Border Patrol agents to observe and track illegal entrants, beginning with a 53-mile stretch of the border and eventually along most of its length; but the Obama administration has suspended work on the virtual fence because of cost overruns and performance problems. See Stewart Powell, “Feds Scrapping ‘Virtual’ Fence Work,” *Houston Chronicle*, October 23, 2010, www.chron.com/dispatch/story/mpl/special/immigration/7260409.html.



Figure 3. Border Patrol Agents and Apprehensions at the US Southwest Border, 1985-2009



Sources: DHS, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2009); US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: INS, 2000), and US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "Stats and Summaries," accessed January 5, 2011, www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/about/accomplish/.

C. Worksite Enforcement

The 1986 IRCA law made it illegal to knowingly employ an unauthorized immigrant, an offense subject to civil fines and, in the case of employers convicted of a pattern of violations, criminal penalties. Yet a number of factors have undermined the effectiveness of IRCA's employer sanctions provisions:

- The law did not create a reliable system for employers to distinguish between legal and unauthorized workers, and fraudulent documents are widely available, making it difficult to hold employers accountable under the law's "knowingly employ" standard.²¹
- Worksite enforcement never received adequate funding, and episodic efforts by INS and DHS to expand worksite enforcement and to target high-risk industries have met resistance from employers and from some members of Congress.²²
- The scarcity of legal visas for low-skilled foreign workers in the face of persistent demand for low-wage/low-skilled labor and a falling supply of native workers in certain sectors and regions has resulted in steady growth in the demand for unauthorized workers.²³

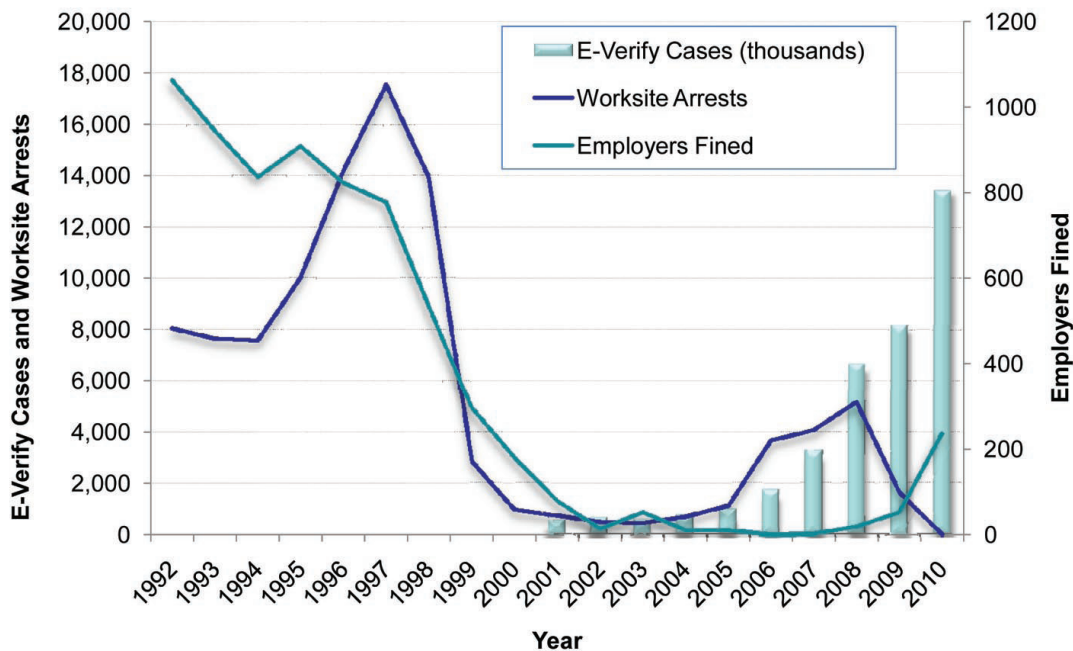
21 On the challenges of employment eligibility verification, see Doris Meissner and Marc R. Rosenblum, *The Next Generation of E-Verify* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2009), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/Verification_paper-071709.pdf; Marc R. Rosenblum, *E-Verify: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Proposals for Reform* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2011), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/E-Verify-Insight.pdf.

22 Marc R. Rosenblum, *Immigration Enforcement at the Worksite: Making it Work* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2005), www.migrationpolicy.org/ITFIAF/TF6_Rosenblum.pdf.

23 On demand for low-skilled labor in the United States, see Harry J. Holzer and Robert I. Lerman, *America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Education and Training Requirements in the Next Decade and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Workforce Alliance, 2007), www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411633_forgottenjobs.pdf; and Rebecca Blank, "Economic change and the structure of opportunity for less skilled workers," in *Changing Poverty, Changing Policies*, eds. Maria Cancian and Sheldon Danziger (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009): 63-91.

The Bush administration made worksite enforcement a high priority beginning in 2006 after facing criticism for failing to enforce employer sanctions law to that point, and the Obama administration has done so as well. Under both presidents, a primary focus of worksite enforcement has been to strengthen and expand E-Verify (formerly known as Basic Pilot), an Internet-based system to confirm whether employees are eligible to work. Use of E-Verify has increased from fewer than 6,000 employers enrolled and 980,000 verifications by the system in 2006 to 217,000 employers registered and 13.4 million verifications in 2010 (see Figure 4). Under the Bush administration, enforcement in 2006 through 2008 emphasized raids at worksites suspected of employing unauthorized workers, resulting in over 5,000 migration-related arrests at worksites in 2008 — a ten-year high, though about half the number of worksite arrests per year during most of the 1990s.²⁴ Worksite arrests have fallen under the Obama administration, but employer audits and fines have increased (see Figure 4), with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducting audits of 3,500 employers in the first two years of the Obama administration, resulting in the debarment of 225 companies and individuals, and about \$54 million in fines.²⁵

Figure 4. Worksite Arrests, Employer Fines, and Use of Basic Pilot/E-Verify, 1992-2010



Source: Andorra Bruno, *Immigration Related Worksite Enforcement: Performance Measures* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010), http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1765&context=key_workplace; US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "E-Verify History and Milestones," June 24, 2011, www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.eb1d4c2a3e5b9ac89243c6a7543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=84979589cdb76210VgnVCM100000b92ca60aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=84979589cdb76210VgnVCM100000b92ca60aRCRD.

²⁴ ICE, *Fiscal Year 2008 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: ICE, 2008): 17.

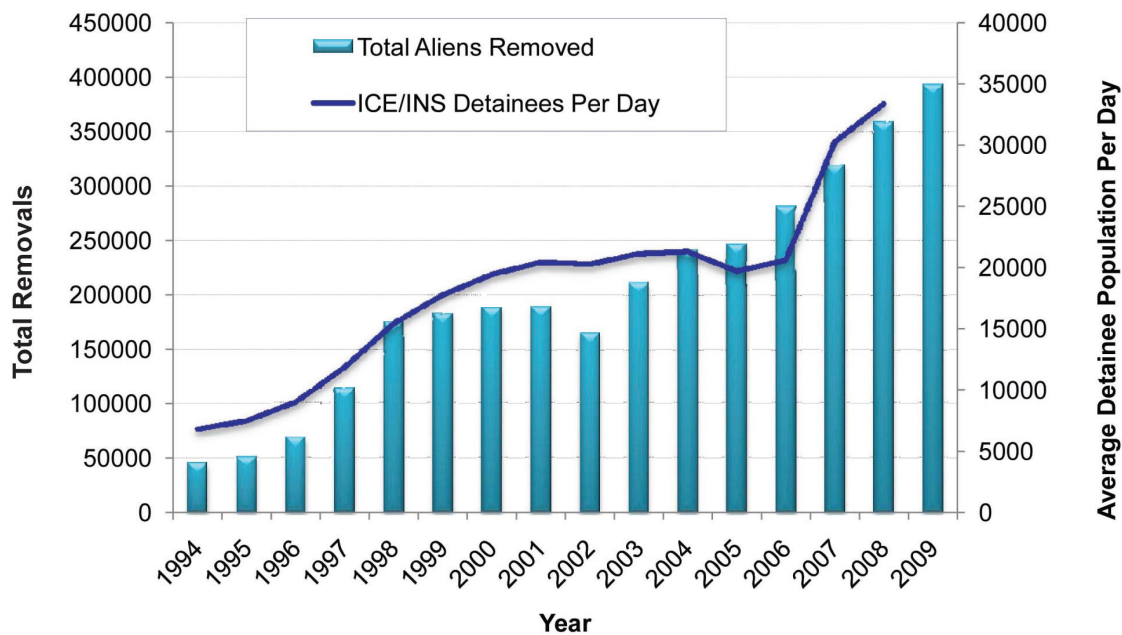
²⁵ Andorra Bruno, *Immigration-Related Worksite Enforcement: Performance Measures* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010), http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/R40002_20100624.pdf; Statement of Kumar Kibble, Deputy Director, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, before the House Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement, *Hearing on Worksite Enforcement*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., January 26, 2011, http://judiciary.house.gov/hearings/hear_01262011.html.



D. Other Interior Enforcement

In addition to growing enforcement at the border and at worksites, there has been steadily increasing effort to remove unauthorized immigrants from within the United States. IIRIRA consolidated legal proceedings governing deportation (from within the United States) and exclusion (at the US border and ports of entry) into a single “removal” process, and it raised the stakes of removal proceedings by making people who have been removed from the United States ineligible to immigrate for at least five years thereafter. IIRIRA also made several categories of immigrants subject to some form of expedited removal, meaning they do not have the right to appear before a judge or to appeal a removal order, and made several groups of unauthorized immigrants subject to mandatory detention prior to removal.²⁶ Even lawful permanent residents are subject to an expedited removal process if they are convicted of certain crimes. As a result of these new enforcement rules, while the number of “deportable aliens” *apprehended* has fallen sharply since 2000 (as previously noted), the numbers detained and formally *removed* from the United States have both climbed to record high levels (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Formal Removals within the United States, and Immigrants in Detention, 1990-2010



Sources: Donald M. Kerwin and Serena Yi-Ling Lin, *Immigration Detention: Can ICE Meet Its Legal Imperatives and Case Management Responsibilities?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2009), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/detentionreportSept1009.pdf; US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), “ICE Total Removals,” (Washington, DC: ICE, 2010), www.ice.gov/doclib/about/offices/ero/pdf/ero-removals.pdf.

In addition to worksite enforcement, interior removals derive from two main sources. First, immediately after 9/11, the Bush administration expanded the reach of “fugitive operation teams,” INS (and then ICE) investigators who tracked down “high-value” unauthorized immigrants, including people suspected of terrorist ties and, mainly, people who had been placed in removal proceedings but failed to show up for

²⁶ Regular removal proceedings are a civil process, meaning people facing removal do not enjoy the same legal protections (right to counsel, right to a jury trial) as they would in a criminal proceeding. On immigrant detentions, see Donald M. Kerwin and Serena Yi-Ying Lin, *Immigrant Detention: Can ICE Meet Its Legal Imperatives and Case Management Responsibilities?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2009), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/detentionreportSept1009.pdf.



subsequent removal hearings — so-called “absconders.”²⁷

Second, DHS also has expanded its partnerships with local law enforcement agencies (state police officials as well as city and county agents), with a focus on identifying removable immigrants who come into contact with the criminal justice system. Traditionally, the relationship between federal immigration agents and local law enforcement officers had been ad hoc: local officers who arrested people they suspected of being unauthorized immigrants could call their local INS/ICE office to request assistance, and federal officers would respond as a function of available resources. In many cases, unauthorized immigrants who did not face serious criminal charges would be released back into the community because local law enforcement did not have authority to hold them, and federal officials did not have the resources to take custody of them. Now three programs aim to increase the proportion of criminal aliens transferred into federal custody:

- **Criminal Alien Program (CAP).** Under CAP, ICE officers are stationed in state and local jails, where they screen arrestees for immigration status, initiate removal proceedings against criminal aliens, and transfer them into ICE custody at the end of their criminal proceeding.
- **287(g) program.** Under 287(g) (named for the section of the INA authorizing the partnership), the federal government delegates immigration enforcement authority to local agents. After receiving training from ICE and working under ICE supervisors, local officers conduct immigration screening and initiate the process of charging immigrants with immigration violations and transferring them into federal custody. The program mainly operates within jails, where people are screened for immigration violations when being booked into jail, but in some cases 287(g) officers operate task forces which may arrest people on the suspicion of an immigration violation.²⁸
- **Secure Communities.** Secure Communities is an information-sharing program between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and ICE. Under the program, when arrestees’ fingerprint data are sent to the FBI for criminal background checks, the FBI also forwards the data to ICE’s Law Enforcement Support Center, which screens the prints against DHS databases. When the fingerprints identify a person as an unauthorized immigrant, the Law Enforcement Support Center (LESC) notifies the local ICE office, which may detain the person and initiate removal proceedings.

In addition to these federal-local partnerships, a number of states and localities also have passed their own immigration legislation in recent years. The most well-known of these is Arizona’s SB1070, which makes unauthorized presence in the state a criminal offense, and which requires state law enforcement personnel to conduct immigration screenings for anyone arrested whom they suspect to be unauthorized. Another Arizona law, the *Legal Arizona Workers Act*, requires employers in the state to use E-Verify for all new hires. Both Arizona laws face court challenges. Between January 2005 and June 2010, states enacted a total of 970 laws and adopted 385 resolutions related to immigration, including both migration-control measures and measures protecting or affirming immigrant rights,²⁹ and numerous cities and counties have passed immigration legislation as well. With the federal government deadlocked in its immigration debate, these state and local measures likely will remain an important component of the US immigration system, pending review by the federal courts.

27 Margot Mendelson, Shayna Strom, and Michael Wishnie, *Collateral Damage: An Examination of ICE’s Fugitive Operations Program* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2009), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/NFOP_Feb09.pdf.

28 Randy Capps, Marc R. Rosenblum, Cristina Rodriguez, and Muzaffar Chishti, *Delegation and Divergence: A Study of 287(g) State and Local Immigration Enforcement* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2011), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/287g-divergence.pdf.

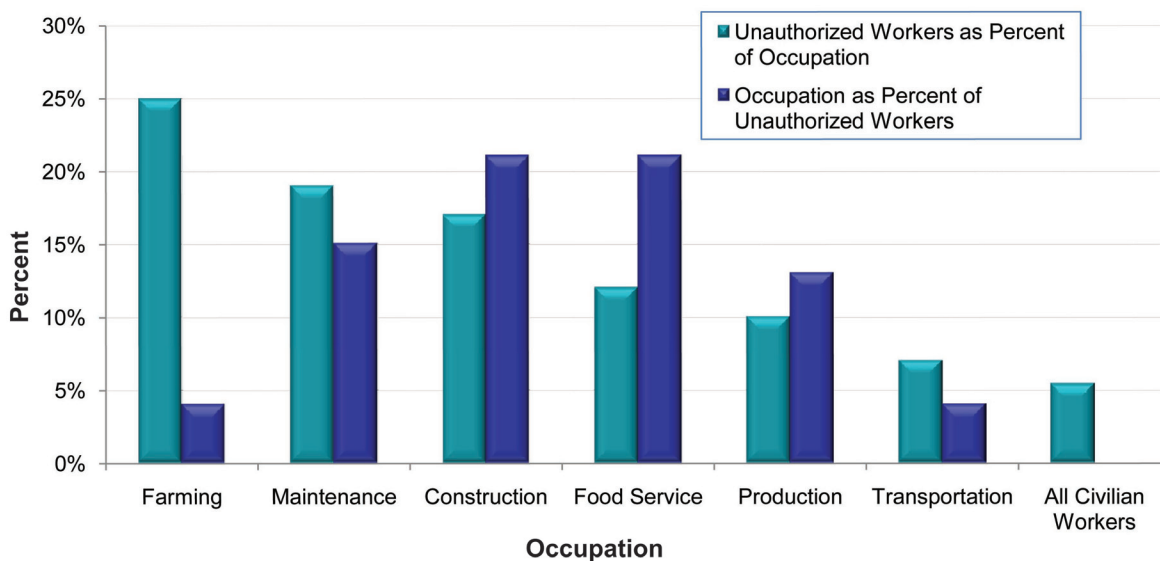
29 National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL), “Immigrant Policy Project,” July 20, 2010, www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?TabId=20881.



E. Analysis: The Limits of US Immigration Policy

Despite the overall increase in legal immigration channels since 1970, admissions of lawful permanent residents (LPRs) and temporary immigrants has not kept pace with push factors in Mexico, Central America, and other countries of origin, or with family- and employment-based pull factors within the United States. The problem is particularly acute when it comes to low-skilled sectors of the US economy like agriculture, construction, and services. With strict numerical limits for low-skilled employment-based green cards and numerical limits and other practical impediments to using low-skilled temporary visas, employers in these sectors face constraints in hiring legal foreign workers, and now rely extensively on unauthorized immigrants (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Top Six Occupations for Unauthorized Employment, 2008



Source: Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/107.pdf>.

Overall, increased enforcement efforts since the 1980s have not prevented continued growth in the US unauthorized population, which increased from about 3 million in 1980 to a peak of about 12.4 million in 2007 before falling back to about 11.1 million in 2009.³⁰ Recent declines are not a function of changes in return migration, however, as the number of unauthorized immigrants returning to Mexico and other countries of origin has been roughly constant in recent years. Rather, the falling unauthorized population reflects a drop in new inflows, in turn a result of both enforcement and falling demand for low-skilled labor since about 2007, though the relative importance of these two factors is unknown.

At the same time, tough enforcement since the 1980s also has produced a number of unintended consequences. While survey data indicate that 97 percent of people who attempt to enter the United States from Mexico illegally succeeded on a first or subsequent effort in 2002 to 2009, the cost of illegal entry has risen dramatically, as 70 percent to 90 percent of unauthorized Mexicans now rely on a smuggler to cross the border (up from 50 percent to 78 percent from 1986 to 1993), and smuggling fees have increased from about \$700 in 1986 through 1993 to \$2,800 in 2007 to 2009.³¹ These higher fees

³⁰ Passel and Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade*.

³¹ Wayne Cornelius, "Evaluating Recent U.S. Immigration Control Policy: What Mexican Migrants Can Tell Us," in *Crossing and Controlling Borders: Immigration Policies and their Impact on Migrants' Journeys*, eds. Mechthild Baumann, Astrid Lorenz, and



have attracted organized crime syndicates, previously not a significant factor in migrant smuggling, and illegal immigration has become more closely connected to narcotics flows and other contraband. Tougher border enforcement also has pushed many immigrants to cross in more dangerous remote locations, and the number of immigrants dying from exposure and related risks while attempting to cross the border has increased from about ten per year during the 1980s to an average of at least 237 to 374 deaths per year between 1995 and 2008.³²

The rising costs of crossing the US-Mexican border and the shift of unauthorized employment from agriculture into other sectors of the economy and more permanent jobs have prompted changes in unauthorized immigrant demographics. While most unauthorized immigrants before 1986 were single men who returned home annually, about 4.2 million unauthorized women and 1.1 million unauthorized children now live in the United States (38 percent and 10 percent of the unauthorized population, respectively); and an additional 4 million children are native-born citizens born to unauthorized immigrants.³³

At the same time, new enforcement efforts since the 1980s have contributed to an overall degradation in conditions faced by unauthorized immigrants. Employer sanctions have not prevented illegal employment, but they have contributed to falling wages for unauthorized workers as employers account for the risk of enforcement by lowering wages, including for legal immigrants and US-born Hispanics.³⁴ Community enforcement through the ICE partnership programs, and state and local legislation also have had an adverse impact on some immigrant communities, as the involvement of local police in the enforcement of immigration law has given rise to concerns about racial profiling (discouraging some immigrants from driving and participating in community activities) and may prevent immigrants (even legal immigrants) from reporting crimes, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.³⁵

IV. A Portrait of Mexican and Central American Immigrants in the United States

A. Recent Immigration from Mexico and Central America

As discussed, economic, social, and circumstantial push-and-pull factors have contributed to substantial growth in the Mexican and Central American populations in the United States. In 1970 Mexicans were the seventh-largest US immigrant group, with 760,000 people. By 1980, there were 2.2 million Mexican-born immigrants in the United States — almost as many people as the next three origin groups combined.³⁶

Kerstin Rosenow (Berlin: Budrich UniPress, 2011).

32 Maria Jimenez, *Humanitarian Crisis: Migrant Deaths at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (San Diego: ACLU of San Diego and Imperial Counties, 2009), www.aclu.org/files/pdfs/immigrants/humanitariancrisisreport.pdf.

33 Passel and Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade*.

34 Julie A. Philips and Douglas S. Massey, "The New Labor Market: Immigrants and Wages after IRCA," *Demography* 36, no. 2 (May 1999): 233-46; Jorge Durand, Douglas S. Massey, and Emilio A. Parrado, "The New Era of Mexican Migration to the United States," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (September 1999); Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, "Undocumented Workers in the Labor Market: An Analysis of the Earnings of Legal and Illegal Mexican Immigrants in the United States," *Journal of Population Economics* 12, no. 1 (February 1999): 91-116. Latino wages fell because employers avoided hiring workers whom they thought *might be* unauthorized ("defensive hiring") or passed the risk of being fined along to workers in the form of lower wages; see Sherrie A. Kossoudji and Deborah A. Cobb-Clark, "Coming Out of the Shadows: Learning about Legal Status and Wages from the Legalized Population," *Journal of Labor Economics* 20, 3 (2002): 598-628.

35 Capps et al., *Delegation and Divergence: A Study of 287(g) State and Local Immigration Enforcement*.

36 Francisco Alba, "Mexico: A Crucial Crossroads," *Migration Information Source*, February 2010, www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=772.



Mexicans remain the largest immigrant nationality in the United States today, with 11.5 million people (29.8 percent of the US immigrant population) as of 2009.³⁷ As these statistics suggest, Mexicans are a relatively recent immigrant population, with about 31 percent of the foreign-born from Mexico having arrived in 2000 or later. Another 32 percent entered between 1990 and 1999, and 20 percent between 1980-89.³⁸ Thus, the Mexican immigrant population in the United States has more than quintupled since 1980 (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

Central American immigration to the United States also is an overwhelmingly recent phenomenon, with 63 percent of Central Americans from the Northern Triangle having arrived in the United States since 1990 (see Figure 1 and Table 1),³⁹ including 58 percent of Salvadorans, nearly 70 percent of Guatemalans, and 74 percent of Hondurans.⁴⁰ Together, these three nationalities make up 6 percent of US immigrants with 1.1 million Salvadorans, 798,682 Guatemalans, and 467,943 Hondurans.⁴¹

Table 1. Central American and Mexican Population in the United States, by Decade

	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Mexico
1960	6,310	5,381	6,503	575,902
1970	15,717	17,356	19,118	759,711
1980	94,447	63,073	39,154	2,199,221
1990	465,433	225,739	108,923	4,298,014
2000	817,336	480,665	282,852	9,177,487
2009	1,149,895	798,682	467,943	11,478,413

Source: US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

B. Geographic Distribution

As of 2009, about 75 percent of Mexican immigrants resided in five traditional receiving states. California had the largest number with 37.5 percent of the total, followed by Texas with 21 percent, New Mexico at 7 percent, Illinois at 6 percent, and Arizona at 5 percent (see Table 2). Mexicans made up more than half of the foreign-born population in three of these states: New Mexico (71 percent), Arizona (68 percent), and Texas (60 percent).⁴²

One of the most significant trends in the last decade has been the diffusion of Mexican migrants to new destinations beyond these traditional states, as eight additional states saw their Mexican-born populations grow by at least 50,000 people during the last decade: Georgia (83,516), Nevada (70,739), North Carolina (70,491), New York (68,923), Colorado (58,099), New Jersey (57,703), Washington (55,328), and Florida (53,060).⁴³ Mexican immigration accounted for 79 percent of the total population growth between 2000 and 2009 in Michigan, 20 percent in New Jersey, 17 percent in New Mexico, 15 percent in Illinois, and 11 percent in Nevada.⁴⁴

³⁷ US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 2009.

³⁸ Aaron Terrazas, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, February 2010, www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=767.

³⁹ US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

⁴⁰ Pew Hispanic Center, "Hispanics of Salvadoran Origin in the United States, 2008," (fact sheet, April 22, 2010), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/61.pdf>; Pew Hispanic Center, "Hispanics of Guatemalan Origin in the United States, 2008," (fact sheet, April 22, 2010), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/63.pdf>; Pew Hispanic Center, "Hispanics of Honduran Origin in the United States, 2008," (fact sheet, April 22, 2010), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/65.pdf>.

⁴¹ US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ US Census Bureau, Census 2000 and ACS 2009.

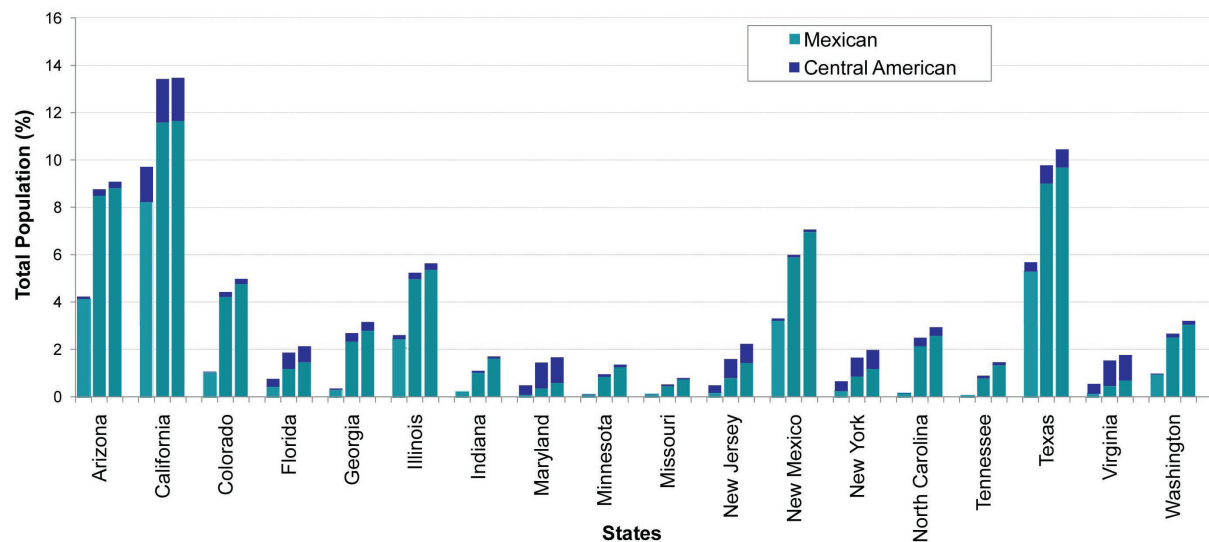
⁴⁴ Ibid.

Table 2. Top Five States for Residency of Central American and Mexican Immigrants, 2009

El Salvador		Honduras		Guatemala		Mexico	
State	Percent	State	Percent	State	Percent	State	Percent
California	36	Texas	19	California	33	California	38
Texas	15	Florida	18	Florida	8	Texas	21
New York	8	California	13	Texas	8	New Mexico	7
Maryland	7	New York	9	New York	6	Illinois	6
Virginia	7	N. Carolina	6	New Jersey	5	Arizona	5
Top 5	73	Top 5	65	Top 5	60	Top 5	77

Source: US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

Central Americans are represented in similar states, with California, Texas, Florida, and New York hosting the largest populations (see Table 2); and the diversification from traditional immigrant-receiving states to newer destinations is reflected in the Central American population as well. States including Georgia, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington all saw their Central American populations at least double between 2000 and 2009 (see Figure 7).⁴⁵ Central Americans accounted for 9 percent the total population growth between 2000 and 2009 in Massachusetts, 10 percent in New Jersey, and 16 percent in Maryland.⁴⁶ Overall, as Figure 7 illustrates, Mexican and Central American immigrants now account for at least 1 percent of the total population in 17 different states and the population from these four countries has more than doubled since 1990 in 15 of the 17 states — all except California and Texas.

Figure 7. Mexican and Central Americans as Percentage of State Populations, 1990, 2000, and 2009


Note: Figure includes the 17 states whose Mexican and Central American population accounts for more than 1 percent of the state population in 2009. The bars for each state report Mexican and Central American immigrants as a percentage of state population at three different points in time: 1990, 2000, and 2009.

Sources: MPI analysis of microdata from a 5 percent sample of the 1990 Census, published by Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0 [Machine-readable database]* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010); US Census Bureau, 2000 Census and ACS 2009.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.



In addition to this diversification of immigration destinations, sending states within Mexico have become more varied as well. Historically, Mexican emigrants to the United States came from the central-west states of Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Zacatecas, San Luís Potosí, Aguascalientes, Colima, Nayarit, and Michoacán. Since 1980, migration from more southerly central states began to increase, followed by the southeast and border states in the 1990s. By 2006, the historical sending region only accounted for 45 percent of Mexican emigrants to the United States (down from 60 percent to 70 percent in the late 1970s) while the central region accounted for 37.4 percent, with the border and southeast sending 10.7 percent and 6.4 percent, respectively. Nevertheless, the top three origin states all remain within the historical region — 12.6 percent from Michoacán, 10.8 percent from Jalisco, and 8.8 percent from Guanajuato.⁴⁷

C. Immigration Status

Sixty percent of all unauthorized immigrants to the United States come from Mexico (a population that totaled 6.7 million people in 2009).⁴⁸ The percentage of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico was even larger in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, Nevada, Oregon, Texas, and Wisconsin, where Mexicans were more than three-quarters of the unauthorized population, and in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico, where they were at least 90 percent of the unauthorized population.⁴⁹ Mexicans are also the largest group of legal permanent immigrants, with 4.7 million LPRs in 2009. Nearly all of these had received family-based visas, as only 5 percent of Mexicans who became LPRs in fiscal year (FY) 2009 were employment-based immigrants.⁵⁰

Unauthorized immigrants make up a similar proportion of Central Americans in the United States. According to January 2009 DHS estimates, about 46 percent of Salvadorans, 60 percent of Guatemalans, and 68 percent of Hondurans were unauthorized.⁵¹ Altogether, approximately 530,000 Salvadoran, 480,000 Guatemalan, and 320,000 Honduran immigrants were unauthorized in 2009. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of unauthorized Salvadoran immigrants increased by 44 percent, Guatemalans by 79 percent, and Hondurans 106 percent.⁵²

Among these four groups, Salvadorans have naturalized at the highest rate. Twenty-nine percent of the Salvadoran population in the United States has taken US citizenship, followed by Guatemalans (24 percent), Mexicans (22 percent), and Hondurans (22 percent).⁵³ Since 1980, 2.6 million Mexican immigrants and nearly 900,000 Central Americans have naturalized.⁵⁴ These rates are much lower than for the overall foreign-born population, for which the naturalization rate is 43 percent.⁵⁵ If all eligible Mexican-origin LPRs were to naturalize, the number of Mexican-born US citizens would double to 46 percent, a proportion in line with other immigrant groups.

47 Douglas S. Massey, "The Geography of Undocumented Mexican Migration," *Mexican Studies-Estudios Mexicanos* 26 (1): Winter 2010.

48 Passel and Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade*.

49 Terrazas, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States."

50 Clare Ribando Seelke, *Mexico-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/145101.pdf>.

51 Based on 2009 ACS estimates of the total immigrant populations from these countries and DHS estimates of illegal populations for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

52 Michael Hoefer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2010* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2011), www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2010.pdf.

53 Pew Hispanic Center, "Hispanics of Salvadoran Origin in the United States, 2008;" Pew Hispanic Center, "Hispanics of Guatemalan Origin in the United States, 2008;" Pew Hispanic Center, "Hispanics of Honduran Origin in the United States, 2008."

54 US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

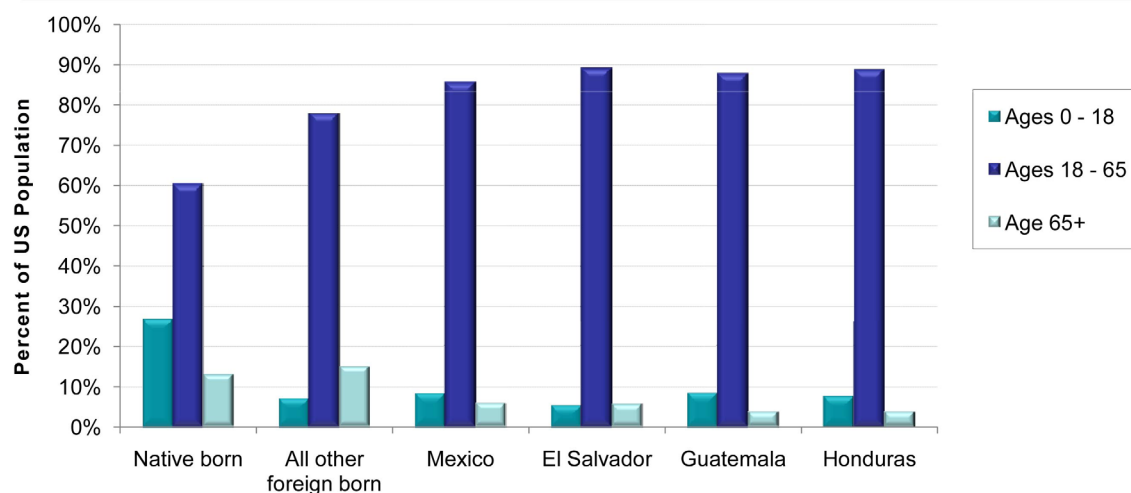
55 US Census Bureau, ACS 2008.

D. Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics

Overall, Mexican and Central American immigrants are younger, more likely to be male, and are less educated than US natives and other immigrant groups. As of 2009, men outnumbered women by 55 percent to 45 percent among Mexican immigrants, 53 percent to 47 percent among Salvadorans and Hondurans, and 58 percent to 42 percent among Guatemalans.⁵⁶

As Figure 8 illustrates, 86 percent of Mexican immigrants are between the ages of 18 and 65 (versus 60 percent of the total US population). Similarly, 89 percent of Salvadoran immigrants, 88 percent of Guatemalans, and 89 percent of Hondurans in the United States are between the ages of 18 and 65.⁵⁷

Figure 8. Mexicans, Central Americans, Native Born and All Other Foreign-Born by Age, 2009



Source: US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

Mexican immigrants account for the least educated of all immigrant groups. In 2008, 61.5 percent of Mexican immigrants ages 25 years and older had less than a high school degree, compared to 32.5 percent among all foreign-born adults. As well, 5.2 percent had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 27.1 percent among all foreign born.⁵⁸ Yet there is significant variation in graduation rates among Mexican immigrants as function of their age at arrival: Mexicans who migrate to the United States between the ages of 15 and 21 have only a 28 percent high school completion rate, compared to a 40 percent graduation rate for Mexicans who arrive between ages 5 and 15, and a 78 percent rate for those who arrive before the age of 5.⁵⁹

The skill level of Mexican migrants is gradually rising, as an increasing proportion of immigrants have the equivalent of at least a high school education.⁶⁰ This trend partly reflects educational developments that have outpaced growth in employment opportunities in Mexico — creating incentive for more educated people to emigrate to the United States. When comparing the periods 1985-1990 and 2000-2005, the

⁵⁶ US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Alba, "Mexico: A Crucial Crossroads."

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Grogger and Stephen J. Trejo, *Falling Behind or Moving Up? The Intergenerational Progress of Mexican Americans* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2002), www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_502JGR.pdf.

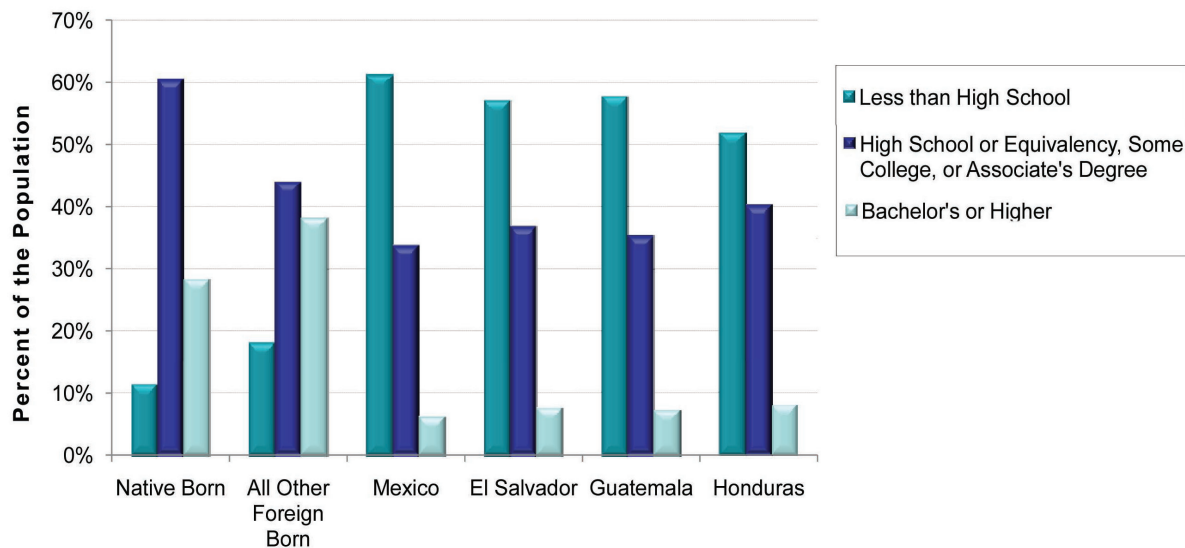
⁶⁰ Aaron Terrazas, *Evolving Demographic and Human-Capital Trends in Mexico and Central America and Their Implications for Regional Migration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2011); Elena Zúñiga and Miguel Molina, *Demographic Trends in Mexico: The Implications for Skilled Migration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2008): 3.



number of Mexican migrants with intermediate education levels rose 25 percent, and the number with higher education increased 21 percent.⁶¹ Thus, the population of Mexican-born professionals in the United States nearly doubled between 1997 and 2007, from 259,000 to 552,000.⁶²

Central Americans have similar education rates — about half have less than a high school education, including 54 percent of Guatemalans, 53 percent of Salvadorans, and 50 percent of Hondurans.⁶³ And only 5 percent of Salvadorans and Guatemalans, and 6 percent of Hondurans aged 25 or older have a college degree.

Figure 9. Education Levels among Mexican, Central American, Native Born and All Other Foreign-Born US Residents, Ages 25 and Older (2009)



Source: US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

English language skills showed that about three-quarters of Mexican immigrants were limited English proficient (LEP) in 2008 — 73.8 percent reported speaking English less than “very well,” much higher than the 52 percent reported among all foreign-born ages 5 and older.⁶⁴ Central Americans are similarly limited English proficient, with Guatemalans the least English proficient (74 percent LEP), followed by Hondurans (73 percent), and Salvadorans (72 percent).⁶⁵

E. Employment and Income

According to the 2009 and 2010 Current Population Survey, 80 percent of immigrant men from

61 “Intermediate levels” includes all high school graduates, those with some college but no degree, and those with an associate degree in an occupation/vocational program or an associate degree in college academic program. “Higher education” includes those with bachelor’s degrees, master’s degrees, professional degrees (e.g. law, medicine, etc.) and doctoral degrees. See Zúñiga and Molina, *Demographic Trends in Mexico: The Implications for Skilled Migration*: 9.

62 Zúñiga and Molina, *Demographic Trends in Mexico: The Implications for Skilled Migration*.

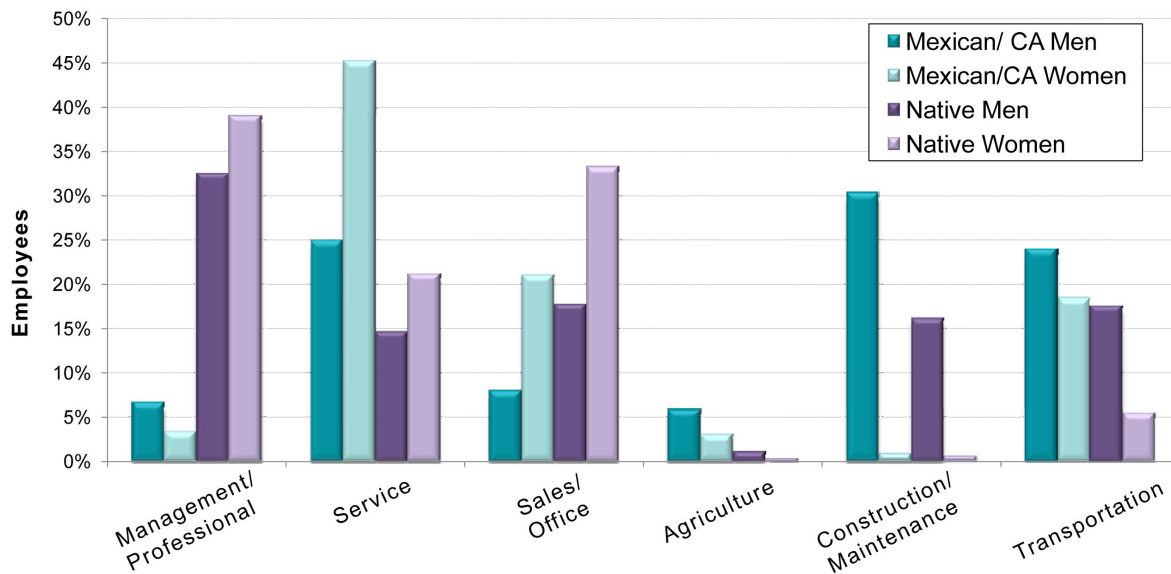
63 Pew Hispanic Center, “Hispanics of Salvadoran Origin in the United States, 2008;” Pew Hispanic Center, “Hispanics of Guatemalan Origin in the United States, 2008;” Pew Hispanic Center, “Hispanics of Honduran Origin in the United States, 2008.”

64 The term limited English proficient (LEP) refers to any person age 5 and older who reported speaking English “not at all,” “not well,” or “well” on the ACS survey. Individuals who reported speaking only English or speaking English “very well” are considered proficient in English.

65 Terrazas, “Mexican Immigrants in the United States.”

Mexico, 81 percent from Honduras, 84 percent from Guatemala, and 87 percent from El Salvador were employed in the US civilian labor force.⁶⁶ Mexican and Central American immigrants are overwhelmingly represented in specific industries that are predominantly low-skilled. For men, construction, extraction, and transportation and service occupations accounted for at least 62 percent of those employed in the civilian labor force as of 2008 (see Figure 10).⁶⁷

Figure 10. Industry of Employment, by Nativity and Sex (%), 2009



Source: MPI analysis of microdata from a sample of the 2009 ACS, published by Ruggles, Alexander, Genadek, Goeken, Schroeder, and Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0 [Machine-readable database]* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010).

Immigrant women have lower workforce participation rates than men, especially in the case of Mexicans. Only 47 percent of Mexican immigrant women participated in the labor force in 2009-10. Among Central Americans the gap is smaller, with Salvadoran and Guatemalan women working the most (64 percent), followed by Hondurans (54 percent). A plurality of immigrant women who were employed worked in the service industry — approximately 44 percent (see Figure 10).⁶⁸ While most nonworking Mexican and Central American immigrant men were either in school, unemployed (i.e., seeking work), or disabled, the main reason women from these countries were out of the workforce in 2009 was because they were taking care of households or family members.⁶⁹

Even within low-wage sectors, Mexican and Central American immigrants are employed in the lowest-paying jobs; and they have lower median incomes than other foreign-born groups, and substantially lower incomes than their native-born counterparts (see Table 3). As of 2006, 44 percent of Mexican immigrants fell in the bottom quintile of the male wage distribution.⁷⁰ About a quarter of Mexican, Honduran, and Guatemalan immigrants live below the poverty line, along with 18 percent of Salvadorans — poverty rates well above the share for the general US population, which is 14.3 percent.⁷¹

66 US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS) 2009 and 2010.

67 US Census Bureau, ACS 2008.

68 US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

69 Marc R. Rosenblum, Randy Capps, and Serena Yi-Ying Lin, *Earned Legalization: Effects of Proposed Requirements on Unauthorized Men, Women, and Children* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2011), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/legalization-requirements.pdf.

70 Roger Waldinger and Renee Reichl, "Second-Generation Mexicans: Getting Ahead or Falling Behind?" *Migration Information Source*, March 2006, www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=382.

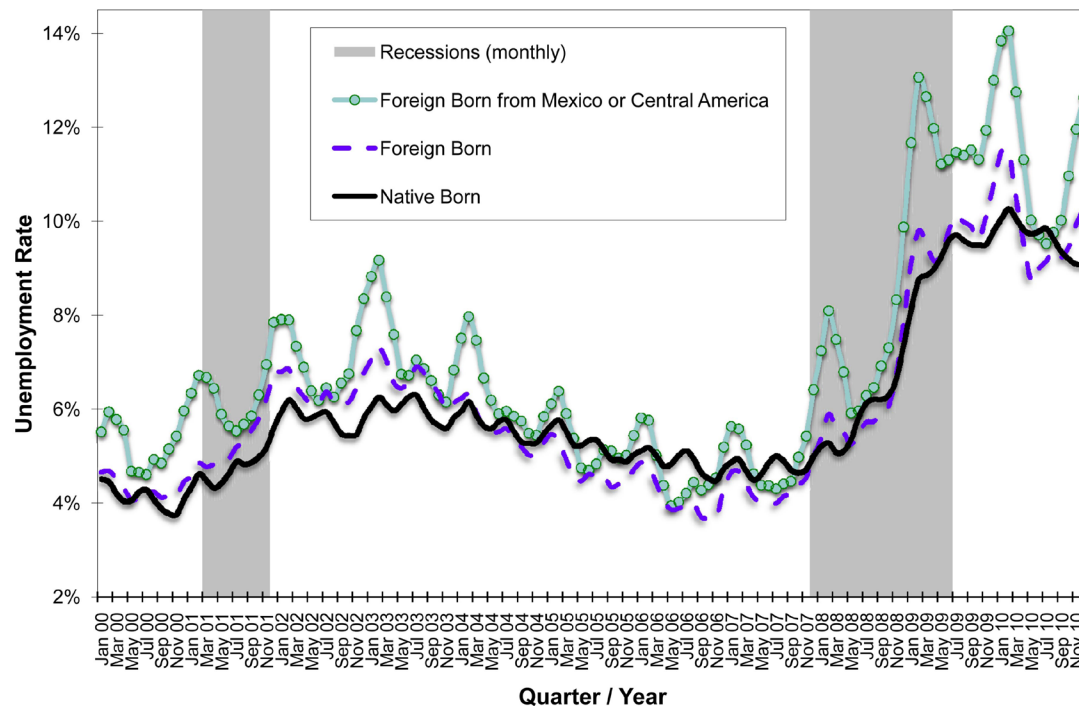
71 US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

**Table 3. Median Individual and Household Income, by National Origin, 2009**

	Natives	All Immigrants	Mexican Immigrants	Guatemalan Immigrants	Salvadoran Immigrants	Honduran Immigrants
Individual Income	\$26,209	\$27,805	\$16,940	\$17,497	\$19,715	\$16,723
Household Income	\$50,764	\$46,828	\$35,383	\$36,996	\$41,357	\$34,987

Source: US Census Bureau, ACS 2009.

As Figure 11 illustrates, immigrant employment in general, and Mexican and Central American employment in particular, are more cyclical and sensitive to the business cycle than native employment. Immigrants are often the first fired during economic downturns, resulting in higher unemployment during these periods, and the first rehired, with quickly falling unemployment, during periods of recovery. Thus, from June 2007 to June 2010, the unemployment rate for Mexican and Central American-born workers averaged 9.1 percent, compared to 7.5 percent for all foreign-born workers and 8.3 percent for natives. Mexican and Central American unemployment peaked at 14.6 percent in January 2010. By July 2010 it fell to 9.8 percent, the same unemployment rate as natives, and slightly above the unemployment rate for all immigrants (9.6 percent). The dramatic decline in unemployment among Mexican and Central American immigrants appears to reflect seasonal trends, though the 4 percentage-point drop in the unemployment rate is twice as large as the typical May to July drop of around 2 percentage points each year over the past decade.⁷²

Figure 11. Bimonthly Unemployment Rates by National Origin, January 2000–November 2010

Note: Unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted. Areas shaded in grey indicate a recession as identified by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Source: MPI analysis of microdata from the Monthly Basic Current Population Survey, January 2000 to November 2010.

⁷² US Census Bureau, CPS, July 2010.



V. Conclusions

While migration between central Mexico and the US southwest dates back to the 19th century, immigration from Mexico and from the Northern Triangle of Central America is mostly a recent phenomenon, as the total number of immigrants from these four countries living in the United States increased from fewer than 1 million in 1970 to almost 14 million in 2009. At the same time, Mexican and Central American immigrants have dispersed from their traditional settlement states in the US southwest and Illinois to establish substantial communities (at least 1 percent of the population) in 17 US states, with most of the growth in new destination states occurring since 1990. Immigrants have also diversified their occupational profile, expanding from traditional employment in agriculture to also represent important shares of the workforce in building maintenance, construction, food service, manufacturing, and transportation.

Growth and diversification of the Mexican and Central American immigrant populations in the United States have been a function of structural factors, policy decisions, and the interaction between them. In particular, after migration mostly stopped during the Great Depression, the US-Mexican Bracero Program played an important role after World War II in fostering emigration pushes within Mexico, in creating new markets for migrant workers throughout a broader swath of the United States, and in establishing the social networks connecting migrant communities on both sides of the border. By the 1960s, these market forces made many employers and many communities increasingly dependent on migration flows, but with the end of the Bracero Program after 1964 and the imposition of Western Hemisphere per-country limits after 1976 there were few opportunities for legal migration from Mexico.

Migration pressures continued, however, as economic and noneconomic push factors in Mexico and Central America along with sustained demand for low-wage workers in the United States produced a large opportunity differential between the United States and the rest of the region. Within the United States, tacit acceptance of unauthorized employment resulted in a strong jobs magnet and — in the absence of legal visas — a high level of illegal migration. Increased immigration enforcement efforts since the 1980s have not prevented rapid growth in the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States, and likely contributed to worsening conditions for some unauthorized workers and immigrant communities, as well as to the transition from mostly circular to mostly long-term illegal migration patterns.

These changes contribute to the current controversy over US immigration policy. As in previous periods of US history, rapid immigration inflows of relatively new immigrant groups have sparked an anti-immigrant backlash among some segments of the US population. At a time of economic uncertainty, low-educated, low-wage LEP immigrants are a lightning rod for broader concerns about US fiscal problems and labor market restructuring. And while prior immigration waves preceded numeric limits, the backlash in the current period is more intense because a high proportion of recent migration has been illegal.

What are the implications for policymakers in the United States? On one hand, the size and demographics of these immigrant groups direct attention to the demand for careful policy reform: too many unauthorized Mexican and Central American immigrants remain in the United States to ignore dysfunctional aspects of the system, yet their important role in the US economy and within their communities also means that any proposals for immigration reform are deeply contentious. On the other hand, the history of US immigration policy demonstrates the difficulty of getting these issues right, as well-intentioned efforts to modernize the system in the 1960s and to enforce migration controls beginning in the 1980s often have produced unintended results — including at a macro level the very outcomes now driving demand for reform.

These consequences weigh heavily on the policy debate today, and the challenge for policymakers will be to convince a skeptical public that new legislation will not only reform a broken system, but also will avoid similar discontinuities down the road.



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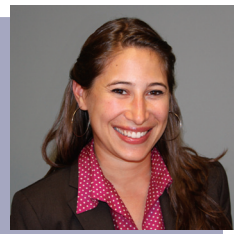


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