Characterizing Contemporary U.S. Immigration: Three Types of Rural Mexican Migrants

Jeffrey S. Smith

Department of Geography, Kansas State University

Abstract

The U.S. prides itself as being a country of immigrants. Yet, each successive wave of newly arriving people has been accompanied by stresses and strains within American society. Likewise, each wave of immigrants has been motivated by different factors. Some have sought better economic opportunities or religious and political freedoms while others have escaped war, famine, or persecution. Since 1965, Mexico has been the leading country of origin for immigrants arriving in the U.S. As represented in the rhetoric surrounding the 2016 Presidential elections, the general public is largely uninformed about the distinctions among Mexican immigrants. Popular perception holds that Mexican immigrants are a homogeneous population possessing the same objectives when coming to the U.S. The purpose of this article is to highlight the three types of migrants leaving rural Mexico. Based on data gathered from ethnographic fieldwork, I show that goal-oriented migrants differ dramatically in demographic characteristics than migrants who come repeatedly or permanently settle in the U.S. This article articulates what motivates differing Mexican immigrants with the hope that the information will help officials better serve this large and diverse population.

Keywords: U.S. Immigration, Rural Mexico, Goal-oriented Migrants, Repeat Migrants, Permanent Migrants

Introduction

Since its beginning, the United States has always been a country settled by immigrants and it receives more immigrants than any other country in the world (Bouvier and Gardner, 1986; Connor and López, 2016). Each year the U.S. admits approximately one million foreign-born people as new lawful permanent residents (DHS, 2017). Additionally, there are an estimated 11 million unauthorized immigrants who live and work (reside) in the country (Passel, 2015).

In the nearly 200 years since the U.S. first began collecting records on immigration, there has been considerable change in the countries of origin. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Europeans comprised the majority of the newly arriving immigrants. They established a *host culture*[1] into which all other immigrants sought accommodation. In the modern era of U.S. immigration (1965 to the present) however, Mexico has surpassed all other countries as the leading source for newly arriving people (Pew Research Center, 2016).

When it comes to immigration, people hold some of the strongest, most passionate opinions. Seldom, however, are those opinions based on facts (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). Rhetoric during the 2016 Presidential election demonstrated that the general public is largely uninformed about U.S. immigration. Furthermore, there is little knowledge about the distinctions among Mexican immigrants. Instead, it is commonly assumed that immigrants from Mexico are a homogeneous population who share the same objectives when coming to the U.S. At times, this has led to considerable confusion and misinformation. Insight into the distinctions among Mexican immigrants could help government officials, social service workers, and caregivers more fully address the needs of this large and diverse

---

[1]The term "host culture" is defined by Fellmann at al. (2010) as the established and dominant component of a society within which immigrant groups seek accommodation. The mainstream component establishes the cultural norms, customs, and practices (e.g. language, religion, system of government) of a population. To varying degrees, newly arriving immigrants interact with the established cultural foundations of the host culture.

population. The main purpose of this article is to highlight the three types of migrants who are leaving rural Mexico and coming to the U.S.

Figure 1. U.S. Immigration, 1820 to 2010. Source: adapted from U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2014.
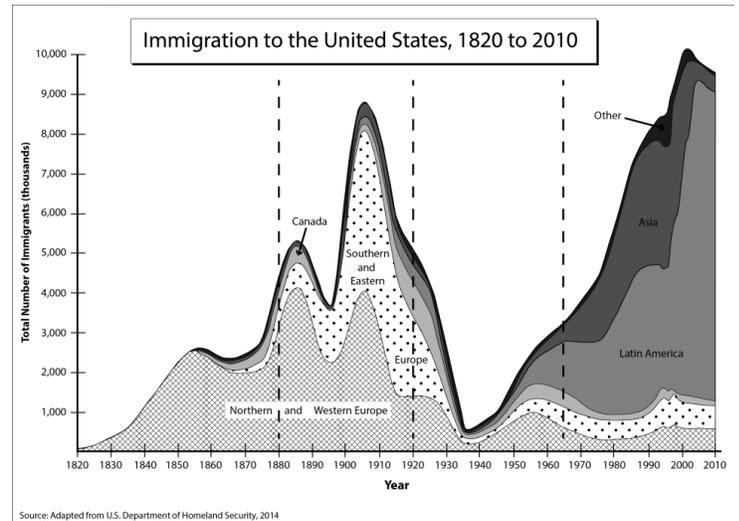
Evolution of U.S. Immigration

In 1820 the U.S. government began serious efforts to collect data on immigration. In that year, 128,502 people were admitted into the country with 78% originating from Europe (DHS, 2014). Between 1820 and the present there have been three main waves of immigrants coming to the U.S. (Figure 1). The first wave occurred between 1820 and 1880. During this era most of the newly arriving immigrants originated from Northern and Western Europe, especially from the countries of United Kingdom, Germany, and Ireland. The second wave occurred between 1880 and 1920. During this era, Northern and Western Europeans continued to migrate to the U.S., but they were eclipsed by Southern and Eastern Europeans including people from Russia, Italy, and Austria/Hungary.

A wide variety of push and pull factors motivated people to emigrate to the U.S. In many cases people sought refuge from war, famine, and persecution (especially religious and political) at home.

Others came to the U.S. seeking better economic opportunities or freedoms they could not enjoy in their country of birth. Each successive

wave of newly arriving immigrants brought cultural stresses and strains, but the host culture absorbed them into the fabric of American society.

Between 1920 and 1965 the number of immigrants arriving in the U.S. was significantly less. In 1965 the U.S. government passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which eliminated the national origins quota (beginning in the 1920s priority was given to people from certain countries) and replaced it with a new system. After 1965 priority was now given to potential immigrants who already had family members living in the U.S. as well as people with specialized skill sets. Under the guiding force of this new immigration legislation, between 1965 and the present, the majority of the foreign-born population admitted into the U.S. arrived primarily from Latin America and Asia. Each wave of newly arriving immigrants has brought with them distinct cultural backgrounds which has led to change within American society. Those cultural adjustments have contributed to a new round of stresses and strains within the U.S.

A Geographic Perspective on the Stresses of U.S. Immigration

In February 2016, a Gallup poll found that immigration (especially "illegal immigration") ranks third after the economy and a general dissatisfaction with the government as the most critical issues facing America today (Gallup, 2016). The survey results indicate that "illegal immigration" is a particularly concerning issue. In many ways unauthorized immigrants have become a lightning rod or scapegoat for much of the negative energy and frustrations that people have toward immigrants in general.

One explanation commonly advanced as to why many in the general public are so concerned about immigration is because there are more foreign-born people (immigrants) living in the U.S. than at any time in America's history. Although there was a peak in the early 1900s, it is true that the total number of immigrants living in the U.S. has never been higher (Figure 2). Editorials throughout wide-ranging media outlets reflect the concerns that people have about the number of immigrants living in the

Figure 2. Number and Percentage of Immigrants in the United States, 1850 to 2030. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2001; U.S. Census Bureau 2015.
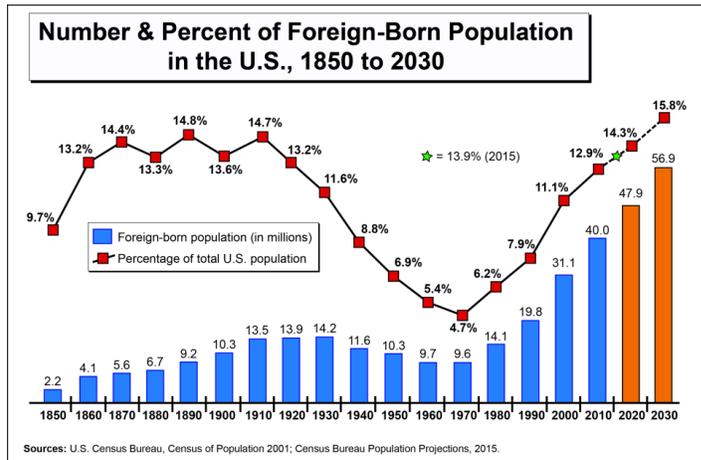
country (Singer 2004). Since the founding of the U.S. in the 1700s however, newly arriving immigrants have always been a source of consternation for current U.S. citizens. The same frustrations the country witnessed at the turn of the twentieth century are being repeated today. Data suggests that concerns about immigration are centered not only on the total number of immigrants, but also on the percentage of the population they comprise (Figure 2). In the late 1800s and early 1900s immigrants made up about 15% of the U.S. population. That was a time when Irish and Italian immigrants were bearing the brunt of resentment and hostilities. Today, first generation immigrants make up 13.9% of the total population, and the percentage is projected to continue increasing (Lopez and Bialik 2017). Comprising the largest single immigrant group, individuals from Mexico are now bearing the brunt of resentment and hostilities because parts of the host culture are not adjusting well to their presence.

A second explanation for the increasing stresses of contemporary immigration stems from the changing geographic distribution of newly arriving immigrants. Throughout U.S. history the six states of California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas have served as the main ports of entry for the foreign-born population arriving in the U.S. (Passel and Cohn, 2009). Not only have those six states processed newly arriving immigrants, but they also absorbed them into their social fabric. These six states have built capacity to receive and integrate

newly arriving immigrants, such that immigrants and their cultures have become part of the cultural character of the place. Until 1990 these same six states were home to the highest percentage of unauthorized immigrants. In the early 2000s, however, things changed and new gateway states emerged (Singer, 2004; Passel and Cohn, 2009).

Table 1. Estimates (in Thousands) and Percentages of Total Unauthorized Immigrants in 1990 and 2012 within the U.S., and in Traditional and New Destinations, and a sample of new destination states.

Place	1990		2012	
	#	%	#	%
U.S. Total	**3,525**	**100%**	**11,200**	**100%**
Six Traditional Destinations	**2,850**	**81%**	**6,775**	**61%**
California	1,500	42%	2,450	22%
Florida	240	7%	925	8%
Illinois	200	6%	475	4%
New Jersey	95	3%	525	5%
New York	350	10%	750	7%
Texas	450	13%	1,650	15%
New Immigrant Destinations	**710**	**19%**	**4,425**	**39%**
Arizona	90	3%	300	3%
Colorado	30	1%	180	2%
Georgia	35	1%	400	4%
Louisiana	15	.4%	55	.5%
Maryland	35	1%	250	2%
Missouri	10	.3%	65	.5%
Nevada	25	.7%	210	2%
North Carolina	25	.7%	350	3%
Virginia	50	1%	275	2%

Source: Adapted from Passel and Cohn 2009; Passel 2015.

As shown in Table 1, in 1990 the six traditional immigrant destination states were home to 81% of all unauthorized immigrants. The most recent data available (2012) indicates that California continues to lead all states with the most number and the highest percentage of unauthorized immigrants. Furthermore, when combined the six traditional immigrant destinations account for 61% of all unauthorized immigrants. However, the rest of the country is now home to 39% of all foreign born individuals

who are *out of status* (unauthorized) (Passel 2015). In 2012, other states such as Arizona, Georgia, and North Carolina, have notable unauthorized immigrant populations. More importantly, the 11+ million unauthorized immigrants are now found in every state within the U.S. whereas, in the 1980s and 1990s that was less common (Schmalzbauer, 2014). Many members of the host culture who are unaccustomed to interacting with immigrants have become uncomfortable with these changes. For example, a number of governments in these states (e.g. Arizona and Georgia) have passed draconian laws seeking to curtail the number of unauthorized immigrants in their states.

As government officials, community leaders, and public service workers strive to address the issues and concerns about contemporary immigration, they need a clearer picture of the situation. One way to improve our understanding of the characteristics of today's migrants (especially those of Mexican origin) is to explore the nuances among them. The remainder of this article provides an overview of the three types of migrants who have been leaving rural Mexico and emigrating to the U.S.

Three Types of Rural Mexican Immigrants

Data for this section of the article were derived from a larger research project that looks at the impact that remittances are having on rural Mexico. I started the project in 2006 by collecting background information from published data and secondary literature on immigration from rural Mexico. After securing IRB approval to conduct interviews among adult men and women in the village of Chalchihuites, Zacatecas, Mexico, I began the fieldwork component of my data collection during the summer of 2006. Preliminary data were gathered from open-ended, guided interviews with local residents and their families, as well as community leaders (e.g. government officials, local priests, social workers, attorneys, health officials, and business owners). Most of the information collected came from one-on-one conversations as well as focus group discussions with women in the village who have a husband/ boyfriend in the U.S. Through the snowballing technique I interacted with more than 75 people.

Since 2006 I have continued conducting interviews but mainly with immigrants living in the United States (especially in the states of Kansas, Colorado, Texas, and Oklahoma). In total I have conducted well over 200 interviews with a wide variety of individuals who understand the contemporary migration process. I documented my findings with detailed field notes kept in dedicated journals and over 700 digital photos.

The village of Chalchihuites was selected as a case study for two main reasons. First, Chalchihuites is located in one of the primary sending states within Mexico. In fact, according to Mexico's census agency INEGI (2000), 45% of the town's population has emigrated to the U.S. for employment reasons. From discussions with numerous local residents, I have learned that the percentage is probably much higher (ca. 65%). As is consistent with other geographic studies (e.g. Jones, 2014), this case study approach draws information from one village to help inform patterns and processes that are applicable to similar villages in other parts of rural Mexico. Second, the village is small enough in size (ca. 4,000 residents) that it meets the definition of rural and yet it also serves as the county seat. Therefore, demographic and economic data are readily available through INEGI.

The first type of migrant entering the U.S. from rural Mexico is the *goal-oriented migrant*. Intuitively, goal-oriented migrants are compelled to emigrate to the U.S. to meet a specific financial goal. As revealed from my interviews and fieldwork, most are young, single men who possess considerable bravado, which sometimes gets them in trouble with the law. The most common financial goal these young men have is to earn enough money to buy a new pickup and impressive clothing. Because these purchases can be quite expensive, young goal-oriented migrants tend to work for about three to five years in the U.S. to meet their goal. Interestingly, for most young men, working in the U.S. has become a right of passage into adulthood. Most young goal-oriented migrants send the least amount of money home; their focus is on meeting their financial goal. When they return home, they show off their new purchases. In the long run however, they have little else to show for their time and efforts working in the U.S.

When migrants make the decision to return to the U.S. on a regular basis they become examples of the second type of migrant I call *repeat migrants*. From my experience, until 2010 this *was* the most common type of rural Mexican migrant. Repeat migrants are individuals who have had a taste of the money that can be earned by working in the U.S. Plus, they have come to appreciate the quality-of-life and financial opportunities that accompany that higher income. My research reveals that repeat migrants tend to be at a later stage in the life-cycle process than the typical goal-oriented migrant; they are commonly married and many have started a family. These migrants have decided that having a home in Mexico is most desirable, but their main source of income is derived from a job in the U.S. The most common practice has been to work for about 10 months in the U.S. and then return home during the holiday season in late November to early January. By having a steady, reliable source of income in the U.S. they can provide their family with a stable quality-of-life. Few repeat migrants are able to become financially independent however. Most do not earn enough money or invest it wisely to establish a business of their own. According to Robert Suro (2003), 78% of the money they earn is used for everyday household expenses.

The third type of migrant leaving rural Mexico is the *permanent migrant*. Permanent migrants are individuals who have worked for a lengthy period of time in the U.S. and have decided that continuing to migrate back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico is no longer desirable; they make the decision to move permanently to the U.S. Having spent considerable time in the U.S., permanent migrants typically speak English better than the other two types of migrants. But more importantly, because they are more familiar with U.S. cultural customs, they are able to integrate into U.S. society more easily. A majority of permanent migrants strive to bring their entire family to the U.S.; first their spouse and dependent children, then their extended family. It is worth noting that, as the U.S. government has stepped-up its efforts to stem the flow of unauthorized immigration (especially during the current Presidential administration), many migrants who would have otherwise returned to rural Mexico on a regular basis

during the holiday season have now decided that the "costs" and "risks" of returning home are too great. This includes both documented and undocumented immigrants from Mexico. They have decided to stay in the country permanently. According to information published by the Pew Research Center, 65.7% of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico have been in the U.S. for at least ten years (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Conclusion

As the American government seeks to find ways to resolve the immigration issue, one thing they might consider is a new guest worker program – one that would include a menu of options tailored to the objectives of the three types of migrants. This could be short-term employment for goal-oriented migrants or a path to citizenship for permanent migrants. At the same time, there are a number of things that local governments and community leaders can do to mitigate some of the inherent stresses and strains associated with immigration. First, local officials can help U.S. citizens who encounter immigrants for the first time understand the benefits they offer. As reported in numerous publications by the American Immigration Council (e.g. Ojeda and Robinson, 2013), immigrants help fill jobs that otherwise go unfilled, they strengthen and diversify the local economy with new businesses, and they help repopulate dying towns throughout rural America. At the same time, local governments and community leaders can provide information and assistance that will help immigrants better understand the cultural traditions of the host culture so the immigrants can integrate more effectively. By understanding some of the differences among immigrants from Mexico, government officials and social service workers can offer assistance that is better tailored to each individual's distinct situation.

References

Bouvier, L. F. & Gardner, R. W. (1986). Immigration to the U.S.: The unfinished story. *Population Bulletin 41* (4): 3-50.

Connor, P. & López, G. (2016). *Five facts about the U.S. rank in worldwide migration.* Pew Research Center. Retrieved from www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/18/5-facts-about-the-u-s-rank-in-worldwide-migration/

DHS (U.S. Department of Homeland Security). (2014). *Yearbook of immigration statistics, 2013.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Retrieved from: www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_yb_2013_0.pdf

DHS (U.S. Department of Homeland Security). (2017). *U.S. Lawful Permanent Residents: 2015.* Retrieved from https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Lawful_Permanent_Residents_2015.pdf

Fellmann, J.D., Bjelland, M.D., Getis, A. & Getis, J. (2010). *Human Geography: Landscapes of Human Activities.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Gallup. (2016). Most Important Problem. Retrieved from www.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx.

INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía). (2000). XII Censo General de Población y Vivienda, 2000. www.inegi.gob.mx/.

Jones, R. C. (2014). The decline of international migration as an economic force in rural areas: A Mexican case study. *International Migration Review 48* (3): 728-761.

Lopez, G. & Bialik, K. (2017). Key findings about U.S. immigrants. Pew Research Center. 3 May. Retrieved from http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/03/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

Nyhan, B. & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior 32*(2): 303-330.

Ojeda, R.H. & Robinson, S. (2013). *Adding it up: Accurately gauging the economic impact of immigration reform.* American Immigration Council. Retrieved from www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/adding-it-accurately-gauging-economic-impact-immigration-reform.

Passel, J.S. (2015). Testimony of Jeffrey S. Passel – Unauthorized Immigrants Population: National and State Trends, Industries, and Occupations. Retrieved from www.pewhispanic.org/2015/03/26/testimony-of-jeffrey-s-passel-unauthorized-immigrant-population/.

Passel, J.S. & Cohn, D. (2009). A portrait of unauthorized immigrants in the United States. Retrieved from http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/04/14/a-portrait-of-unauthorized-immigrants-in-the-united-states/.

Pew Research Center. (2016). Origins and destinations of the world's migrants, from 1990-2015. Retrieved from www.pewglobal.org/2016/05/17/global-migrant-stocks/.

Pew Research Center. (2017). Five facts about illegal immigration in the U.S. Retrieved from www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/27/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/.

Schmalzbauer, L. (2014). *The Last Best Place? Gender, Family, and Migration in the New West.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Singer, A. (2004). *The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways. Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy*, The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20040301_gateways.pdf.

Suro, R. (2003). *Remittance Senders and Receivers: Tracking the Transnational Channels.* Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center. Retrieved from www.pewhispanic.org.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2001). 2000 Census of Population and Housing. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2015). 2014 National Population Projections: Summary Tables. Retrieved from www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2014/summary-tables.html.