

The Effects of Large-Scale Emigration on Mexico

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For everyone alive in Mexico today there has always been a “North of the Border.” Migration between Mexico and the U.S. began over 160 years ago when Mexico lost approximately half of its territory to its northern neighbor. However, the flow of migrants has increased significantly over the past three decades. Mexico is a country where a huge metropolis, Mexico City, and the colonial splendor of several cities coexist with widespread rural misery and urban squalor. Fifteen percent of the population lives in small rural communities of less than 1 000 persons. Thirty-seven percent of the population lives in localities of fewer than 15 000 inhabitants while approximately 20 million inhabitants, 18 percent of the entire population of 112 million, are concentrated in and around Mexico City.

According to the World Bank, the flow of migrants from Mexico to the United States constitutes the world’s top migration corridor. Mexico has the largest number of out-migrants in the world today, and over 95 percent of Mexico’s emigrants go to the U.S. Mexico is the world’s third remittance-receiving country. However, in contrast to India, China, and the Philippines, other countries high on the list of remittance receivers, the vast majority of Mexico’s emigrants are low-skilled workers with limited earning capacity. Surprisingly, though, in absolute terms, Mexico is an important provider of skilled labor to the U.S. In 2006, Mexico ranked second in the number of skilled immigrants working in the U.S. (462 000). Nevertheless that figure constitutes less than 5 percent of the total number of Mexicans in that country. Furthermore, it is not easy to determine the exact number of Mexicans currently living in the U.S. Undercounting may be considerable, and there is still a significant amount of circular migration despite stricter

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border controls since 9/11/2001, which have led many migrants to remain in the U.S. for longer periods of time or even indefinitely. Pew Hispanic Center calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau data placed the number at about 12.4 million in 2010.

Approximately 11 percent of Mexico's population now resides in the U.S., and if we were to count all of the almost 32 (31.8) million persons of Mexican ancestry living in the U.S., that figure is equivalent to 28.3 percent of Mexico's current population. All states and almost all of the municipalities in each state have at least some emigration. Over 70 percent of those leaving Mexico in any given year are between 15 and 39 years old. Approximately 9 percent of the physicians trained in Mexico have emigrated, which is also the case for over 15 percent of the college educated population.¹ Recently many entrepreneurs and local politicians in the northern states have moved their families to the U.S. to escape from the increasing violence related to drug trafficking and organized crime in Mexico.

Nevertheless the overwhelming majority of Mexico's emigrants are poor and poorly educated, having completed at most nine years of schooling. All they need to get to the U.S. is enough physical stamina to make the trip. For most, the reasons for migrating vary from earning money to buy a stove or washing machine for a wife or mother, to having some money set aside in order to get married or saving enough to build a house or establish a small business in their hometown. Other motivations may be to pay off debts, unexpected family emergencies like illnesses, or special occasions and celebrations. For some young men the immediate goal may be simply to buy an expensive truck or a van as a symbol of status and success.

According to the National Population Council (Conapo) five of Mexico's 32 states showed very high international migration in 2000: Zacatecas, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Durango, and Nayarit. Seven more (Jalisco, Colima, Morelos, Guerrero, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosí, and Hidalgo) showed high migration intensity. Even in the southeastern-most states of Tabasco, Chiapas, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, and Campeche,

which have very low international migration intensity, there were few *municipios* with no migration at all.

Remittances from migrants, which reached a peak of US\$26 billion in 2007, fluctuate between 2 and 3 percent of Mexico's gross domestic product (GDP) and represent the country's second source of foreign exchange after oil exports. The percent of households receiving these monies may be as high as 10 percent in some states and as low as 2 percent in others. Furthermore, the amount of remittances received does not necessarily coincide with a state's migration intensity. Almost 28 percent of all remittances registered in 2010 went to just three states (Michoacán, 10.1 percent; Guanajuato, 9.3 percent; and Jalisco, 8.3 percent). Altogether, 12 states received 73 percent of the monies sent and the remaining 20 states only 27 percent. It should also be mentioned that there are some important discrepancies between the Bank of Mexico's reports of remittances entering the country and the amounts reported by families in the National Survey of Household Income and Expenditures (ENIGH), which indicates either over-reporting by the Bank of Mexico or under-reporting by households, or some of both.

In addition to the fact that remittances declined significantly in 2008, some families in the poorest states like Oaxaca and Chiapas, who had bit of money saved up from previously received funds, actually sent money back to their relatives in the U.S., who had lost their jobs because of the economic crisis, so that they could remain there for a while longer to look for other employment. In many cases, remittances may constitute an important component of family or household income, as much as 30, 40, or even 50 percent or more. For some households the money sent home by an absent son or husband may be all the monetary income they have. Approximately 80 percent of the remittances received are spent on food and housing. This money may make the difference between going to bed hungry or not, having a cement floor instead of a dirt floor, and sleeping on a cot instead of on the floor. Sometimes remittances are spent on religious festivals or for a daughter's fifteenth birthday celebration. Money sent home may mean children will have video games to play with, but will not see their father for months at a time or even years in some cases.

Children left behind tend to experience sensations of abandonment and may become estranged from absent parents. When a parent or parents are absent for considerable periods of time their paternal authority tends to erode despite the fact that they may regularly send money for their children's upkeep. Female migration has increased significantly over the

past decade or so. Many women go to join their husbands in the U.S. However, more and more single women and single mothers are going to the U.S. on their own to find a means of supporting themselves and their children and often to escape from abusive family situations in Mexico.

Many migrants who have been away longer and have re-located their families to the U.S. will often build houses in their hometowns with the expectation of retiring there one day or for when the family might come to Mexico for vacations. These houses usually stand out from the rest of the dwellings in the area and also are generally unoccupied for long periods of time. Such houses are often referred to in the villages as “*casas solas*” or solitary houses. For those who are permanent residents of the U.S., and can therefore travel back and forth freely, the patron saint’s day in their hometown is a time when many make return visits and occupy their houses for a few weeks each year. Often, work building, expanding, or repairing migrants’ houses provides jobs for men who have not migrated or are between trips.

Male absence is not necessarily empowering and liberating for the women left behind. Some women do gain autonomy and are empowered by managing household affairs on their own, but most are dominated by traditional social structures and surveillance by in-laws. Younger women in particular often reside with their husband’s parents in his absence, and remittances are often sent to the migrant’s mother rather than his wife. When both spouses migrate, men are usually more willing to help out with certain household and child care responsibilities in the U.S. but usually revert to typically *macho* behavior and dominance upon returning to Mexico.

Women and children often assume the agricultural labors previously performed by absent men. Sometimes, if no one is able to work the land, agricultural plots are either sold or abandoned. Small-scale agriculture is no longer viable for most and educational and employment opportunities are scarce throughout most of Mexico’s small villages and towns. In many places, there are no schools beyond sixth grade. Gangs and criminal activity are becoming more widespread for lack of other alternatives. Adolescents whose parents have sent them back to Mexico to keep them away from the influence of Latino gangs in the U.S. often establish or connect with already existing gangs in their home communities.

In some remote areas, people may be quickly incorporated into the digital age as a means of communicating with loved ones far away. Internet services have rapidly sprung up in many small villages. The way younger people dress may change. Means

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of transportation may vary for some. Eating habits have also morphed significantly in some places: tastes acquired in the U.S. for more processed foods and especially junk foods often have a negative impact on health. In general, women and children’s psychological and emotional health has been greatly affected by family members’ migration. One issue that has been widely commented on is the propagation of HIV-AIDS among women in rural areas. Another issue not so widely discussed is the fact that many women suffer from ailments commonly related to stress and anxiety because of the constant worries related to having their husbands far away, wondering if they will reach their destination safely, if they will find work, if and when they will send money home, whether or not they might establish a permanent relationship with someone in the U.S., and if and when they will have earned enough money to return to Mexico, which usually ends up taking longer than originally expected.

Some men eventually send for their wives and children to join them in the U.S. while others may form new relationships and new families north of the border. Circular migration, formerly quite common, has declined considerably because of stricter border enforcement conditions in the U.S. since September 11, 2001. Once the immediate problems of finding housing and employment have been resolved, migrants begin to socialize with others in similar situations. Soccer teams provide one of the most common forms of recreation and socialization. Some places boast female teams as well. Practically everywhere women organize the sale of food and beverages to those who come to watch the games.

As more migrants from the same sending community begin to settle in a particular place in the U.S., they often form hometown associations. These associations, in addition to sponsoring social and community activities in the U.S., sometimes provide collective remittances and finance projects in the sending communities. They may contribute funds for building soccer or bull fighting arenas, basketball courts, or other multi-purpose recreational facilities. They often provide funds for paving streets, road construction, water works, or similar pub-

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lic works projects. Restoration of local churches is another type of project frequently taken on by hometown associations. They often contribute generously to patron saint's day celebrations or other religious festivities in Mexico, as well as to similar celebrations in the U.S. They may donate ambulances or school buses to their hometowns; sometimes they build community libraries that can end up poorly staffed and terribly under-utilized. In some cases, there are differences of opinion and conflicts between local residents in Mexico and those belonging to the associations formed in the U.S. about what collective remittances should be used for. In general, while these projects and donations may improve daily life for some in the sending communities they do not radically change the underlying circumstances that force people to leave in the first place.

The overall impact that such large-scale out migration has on Mexico and the Mexican people is a complicated and contradictory issue. Many aspects and facets of varying degree and intensity must be taken into account, along with both individual characteristics of migrants and their families and other more general socioeconomic factors. It seems clear however, that in spite of all the dangers involved in crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without proper documents, people are still willing to risk their lives for the mirage of the American Dream. In many villages and towns, from very early on, children do not daydream about doing, being, or becoming something in Mexico. They imagine themselves going to *el Norte* to make their dreams come true. When a father or mother migrates, it does not mean their children will not have to do the same when they grow up. In all likelihood, they will go, too; it just makes it a little easier for them to do so. When older brothers go, younger ones usually follow. For Mexico, emigration is not a planned and articulated development strategy; it is simply a self-perpetuating individual and family survival strategy. ■■

NOTES

¹ Dilip Ratha, Sanket Mohapatra, and Ani Silwal, *World Bank Migration and Remittances Fact Book 2011* (n. p.: World Bank, 2010).