

MEXICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

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Migration from Mexico to the United States is one of the most formidable and complex issues on the bilateral agenda today. Mexico now has more emigrants than any other country in the world and over 95 percent of them have gone to the U.S. The United States is the top immigrant-receiving country worldwide, and it hosts more immigrants from Mexico (approximately 30 percent of the total of almost 40 million) than from any other country. The U.S.-Mexican border is by far the world's leading migration corridor. It has been estimated that from 1970 to 2006 the number of persons born in Mexico who reside permanently in the U.S. rose 15-fold, to approximately 12 million. The average annual flow grew from about 220 000 per year in the first half of 1980s to around 610 000 per year in this century.¹ It should also be pointed out that, in all likelihood, 85 percent or more of those who have entered the U.S. since 2000 are undocumented,² which is now one of the main points of controversy.

This migratory flow has been commonplace ever since Mexico was forced to cede half its territory to the U.S. after losing the war in 1848. For many years thereafter, movement between the two countries was entirely unregulated and was relatively small-scale. In 1924, the United States began controlling and restricting entry for the first time. During the 1930s, many Mexicans were deported from the U.S.—including some persons who had been born there, of Mexican parents, and thus were, in fact, U.S. citizens—as scapegoats for the massive unemployment and severe economic hardships imposed by the “Great Depression.”

However World War II produced a shortage of male labor, and once again Mexican workers were needed in the U.S. This renewed demand was filled through what is commonly known as the *bracero* program, which lasted from 1942 to 1964. Under this program, male workers were supplied mainly for agricultural employment and some railroad construction and maintenance on a temporary seasonal basis. Many *braceros* established strong ties to their employers and some settled permanently in the U.S., while others continued to go there to work on a season-

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¹ Jeffrey Passel, “How Many Mexicans Are Coming to the United States and How Are They Faring?” (paper, seminar “U.S. Immigration Reform and Challenges for Mexican Policy,” Mexico City, June 20, 2007).

² Jeffrey Passel, “Unauthorized Migrants: Numbers and Characteristics,” Pew Hispanic Center, Washington D.C., June 14, 2005.

al basis long after the *bracero* program itself ceased to exist. From that time on, unauthorized migration grew steadily so that it had reached significant proportions by the mid-1980s.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed in 1986 to regularize undocumented workers who had been living and working in the U.S. for a considerable period and supposedly stem future growth in unauthorized migration between Mexico and the U.S. The end result, however, seems to have been just the opposite. Large numbers of Mexicans (between 2 and 3 million) who achieved permanent residency in the U.S. began requesting permission for their family members to join them. Many who were discouraged by the long waiting periods began to look for other means to reunite their families north of the U.S.-Mexican border, thus providing a new impetus for undocumented migration in the post-IRCA period.

At the same time economic conditions in both countries greatly facilitated—and in fact propitiated—a significant increase in undocumented migration. While industrial and economic restructuring in the U.S. eliminated many fairly well paying manufacturing jobs, employment opportunities for less skilled and lower paid service workers began to rise, as the numbers of persons willing to accept these jobs declined. Furthermore, economic restructuring and modernization, as implemented in Mexico, created a large supply of redundant labor. Many of Mexico's unemployed, underemployed or informally employed and underpaid workers sought to better their lot by migrating to the U.S. The significant wage differential makes jobs deemed undesirable by many native born U.S. workers desirable enough to attract hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who literally risk their lives to enter the U.S. to work each year.

Migration provides not only an escape valve for much of the labor that the Mexican economy cannot absorb, but also generates foreign exchange and purchasing power from the remittances these workers send back. The cheap, abundant supply of low-skilled workers from Mexico keeps prices down for many domestically produced goods and services in the U.S. and thus contributed significantly to economic growth throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. However, nativist sentiments and xenophobic attitudes have combined with fears of job loss and downward pressure on wages to make immigration policy a highly controversial issue in the U.S. There seems to be no easy way to resolve the contradiction of needing Mexican migrants as a source of cheap unskilled labor and yet not wanting them as residents.

Paradoxically, U.S. legislation and increased border surveillance, designed to keep unauthorized immigrants out, have in effect worked toward an opposite end, keeping those who do manage to enter the U.S. there for longer periods of time and increasing their efforts to bring in family members as well. Thus, for many, the once circulatory patterns of going and coming between Mexico and the U.S. on a regular basis have given way to more permanent settlement. This has in turn exacerbated the xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments prevalent among some segments of the U.S. population. Since IRCA, the U.S. has consistently opposed any further facilitation of freer transit and more permanence for workers from Mexico despite the evident demand for such labor. Nevertheless Mexican immigration has continued to grow over the past few decades contrary to the decline that was expected to result from the North

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and even though entering the U.S. has become much more difficult since 9/11.

In this chapter we will discuss the characteristics of, and most recent changes in, the migratory process and highlight the factors determining its continued growth in recent years. We will address the following issues: Why do so many Mexicans migrate to the U.S.? How can the U.S. economy absorb so many migrants? What kinds of jobs do they find and what are their earnings levels? What opportunities and obstacles do the children of these migrants face in the U.S.? In discussing these issues, we will also try to shed some light on how and why the immigration debate has become such a controversial topic in the U.S. today and hence a conflictive item on the bilateral agenda.

Why Do So Many Mexicans Migrate to the U.S.?

The flow of Mexicans entering the U.S. began to surpass European migration during the 1980s. This sharp increase in Mexican migration was spurred by the country's profound economic crisis and the neoliberal economic policies implemented at that time. Subsequently, in spite of the rhetoric and false hopes pinned on NAFTA—both the Mexican and U.S. presidents maintained that the trade agreement would significantly stem the growing migratory flow—migration from Mexico grew even more during the 1990s. Increased border surveillance after 9/11 has not deterred migrants either; it has only prompted them to remain in the U.S. for longer periods of time, often leading to more permanent settlement. Thus, in recent years Mexico has been the main supplier of cheap unskilled labor for the U.S. market. This is just the most recent twist in Mexico's ongoing search for easy solutions to the country's unresolved economic problems. The Mexican economy began facing difficulties in the 1970s, when the "stabilizing development model" based on import substitution, credited with having produced 30 years of favorable macroeconomic performance, became less and less effective in promoting economic growth.

The oil boom in the late 1970s postponed the crisis for a while, but resulted in over-indebtedness and instability. When international oil prices dropped back to their more normal levels at the beginning of the 1980s, the flow of foreign exchange fell and Mexico was about to default on its foreign debt payments. The payments were finally renegotiated and an "adjustment program" was implemented, abruptly changing the course of economic policies.

For Mexico, as in the case of most of the other Latin American countries, the 1980s was considered a lost decade in terms of economic growth and well-being for the majority of the population. Subsequent improvement during the Salinas administration (1989-1994) rested on very shaky foundations (volatile foreign capital flows, attracted by high interest rates and manipulation of the exchange rate) as was evidenced by the peso crisis at the end of 1994. After a sharp drop (-6.2 percent) in GDP in 1995, the economy grew at an average rate of just under 5.5 percent for the next

five years. Real GDP did not grow at all in 2001 and remained stagnant until 2004.³ Growth rates from the mid-1990s on seem to indicate that macroeconomic behavior in Mexico depends now, more than ever, on economic performance in the U.S.

Starting in 1999, employment growth in Mexico began to wane, and it was negative in 2004.⁴ Until the early 1960s, over half of the work force was still engaged in agriculture, dominated by subsistence farming. However, agricultural employment has declined significantly since then and currently stands at around 15 percent. Between 1997 and 2006, almost three million workers were forced out of agricultural employment.⁵ Some of these eventually found precarious low-paying jobs in services or construction, while many others opted for migration to the U.S.

Employment growth in construction and services contrasts with the loss of almost 700 000 manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2006. Moreover, less than one-fifth (18 percent) of manufacturing workers are employed by the large firms that produce 80 percent of the sector's value added. A slightly smaller percentage work in *maquiladora* plants, which still have not recovered the 2000 employment levels of 1 291 000 jobs. Almost half of all jobs (48.4 percent in mid-2006) are provided by micro-businesses, with up to only 15 employees in manufacturing or five or fewer in trade and services. Less than one-quarter of the economically active population (EAP) works in medium-sized or large firms.⁶ Almost half (approximately 48 percent) of all wage earners have no written contracts. While 20 percent of those employed reported working fewer than 35 hours a week, 27 percent reported averaging more than 48 hours. Around 40 percent of all workers have no benefits. Only 32 percent are registered in the national social security system (IMSS), with an additional 5.7 percent covered by social security for government employees (ISSSTE).⁷

The official "open unemployment" rate, which was 4.4 percent in mid-2006, clearly underestimates the existing job deficit, and is also an attempt to hide the fact that more than half of the persons counted as employed only work sporadically and/or, in fact, work in the informal sector of the economy. According to Sandra Polaski, informal employment grew during the first half of the 1990s, reaching approximately 50 percent, and although it has declined somewhat, it still stands at around 46 percent.⁸ However an International Labor Organization (ILO) report released in 2004 maintained that over the past few years, informal employment in Mexico had risen from 55 to 62 percent.⁹

³ Presidencia de la República, *Sexto Informe de Gobierno, Anexo Estadístico* (Mexico City: Presidencia de la República, September 1, 2006).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sandra Polaski, "Perspectivas on the Future of NAFTA: Mexican Labor in North American Integration" (paper, colloquium "El Impacto del TLCAN en México a los 10 años," Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, June 29-30, 2004), 17.

⁹ "En la economía informal, 62% de los empleos de México: OIT," *La Jornada*, June 12, 2004, 33.

It is frequently said that Mexico needs to create one million new jobs per year just to maintain current employment levels. This is slightly below the annual average of 1 144 000 new jobs created between 1991 and 1999, according to official figures. Between 2000 and 2006 the average was only 406 000 new jobs per year.¹⁰ The deficit of approximately 600 000 a year coincides rather closely with Jeffrey Passel's estimate of about 610 000 Mexicans migrating to the U.S. every year since 2000.¹¹

It is also frequently argued that it is not so much the outright lack of jobs that is driving increased migration, but rather the lack of adequately paying jobs, or in other words, the wage differential between Mexico and the U.S.¹² In addition to underemployment, disguised unemployment or informal employment, the Mexican work force has also had to withstand steadily declining real wages, which have been eroding individual and family incomes over the past 25 years. The main objective of the price controls imposed after the 1982 crisis was to keep wages from rising. Official data reveals that between 1982 and 2002 nominal wages increased by 150.5 percent, while prices rose 618 percent. The net effect was a 75 percent decline in purchasing power.¹³ Until the end of May 2007, the federal minimum wage in the U.S. was US\$5.15 per hour, or approximately ten times more than the Mexican minimum wage at that time, depending on the exchange rate. Twenty-two percent of workers in Mexico earn the minimum wage or less; almost two-thirds earn up to three times the minimum, and 83 percent earn up to five times the minimum, which turns out to be less than half of the current U.S. minimum wage.¹⁴

The low wages and precarious working conditions so prevalent in Mexico often make migration to the U.S. appear as the only viable alternative. Every state in the country now has some level of international migration. Although most still come from the traditional sending states in the western central region, states in Central, Southern and Southeastern Mexico show high growth rates in the number of recent migrants. Increased female migration is another new trend, along with the extraordinary growth of remittances. The amount sent back to family members in Mexico rose by more than 600 percent between 1995 and 2006. It is estimated that approximately five percent of all Mexican households receive remittances, which represent about 36 percent of their total income.¹⁵ The Mexican Central Bank (Banco de México) recognized that, as of 2003, remittances became the country's second source of foreign exchange, after oil exports, and that they were vitally

¹⁰ Presidencia de la República, *Sexto Informe*.

¹¹ Jeffrey Passel, "How many Mexicans?"

¹² See, for example J. Bortz and M. T. Águila, "Emigración y bajos salarios: cosecha amarga de la globalización," *Memoria* 213, November 2006, 5-8.

¹³ Data from the Banco de México, quoted in A. Ortiz Rivera, "Hijos del salario mínimo," *El Independiente*, August 15, 2003, 4-5.

¹⁴ Presidencia de la República, *Sexto Informe*.

¹⁵ F. Lozano and F. Olivera, "El estado actual de la migración mexicana a los Estados Unidos," in E. de la Garza and C. Salas, comps., *La situación del trabajo en México* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 2006), 413-435.

important in bolstering consumer spending during the economically stagnant years from 2001 to 2003.¹⁶

Some years ago the Mexican government was accused of indifference toward those who left the country to seek work in the U.S. Needless to say, the government has no interest in preventing this north-bound flow. The main concern now seems to be how to make sure that those who go continue to send money to their families back home. Recently, in fact, there have been efforts to strengthen migrants' ties to their homeland. Dual nationality was approved, and hometown associations are actively promoted and supported. Mexican consulates now provide a form of identification (the *matricula consular*, or consular registration) for all who request it. Those living abroad now have the right to vote in Mexican presidential elections. All of these measures help keep those who leave connected in some way to their places of origin. However, in spite of all the adverse conditions in the Mexican labor market and the fact that so many people have friends and relatives living in the U.S., there would not be so many migrants today if there were no opportunities for employment once they cross the border.

How Can the U.S. Economy Absorb So Many Migrants?

Just as remittances have become more and more important for the Mexican economy, immigrant labor has become more and more important in the U.S. Andrew Sum and his co-authors maintain that the record number of 14 million immigrants arriving in the U.S. between 1990 and 2000 was decisive for filling old and new jobs during the extraordinary period of uninterrupted economic growth from 1991 to 2001.¹⁷ Many people, including George W. Bush and Alan Greenspan, have recognized how important immigrant labor is for the economy today, while others insist that it has been negative for native-born workers.¹⁸ The foreign-born, almost a third of whom are from Mexico, currently make up 15 percent of the work force. Undoubtedly their presence has facilitated certain changes in the U.S. economy, in particular shifts in the employment structure.

In absolute terms, the U.S. work force increased by 140 percent from 1950 to 2005, whereas, relatively, it only grew from 59.2 to 66 percent of the total working-age population.¹⁹ However, important economic and social transformations (the scientific and technological revolution, particularly the revolution in information

¹⁶ R. González Amador, "Las remesas de EU mantienen el consumo interno en México", *La Jornada*, February 4, 2003, 20.

¹⁷ Andrew Sum, Neeta Fogg, Paul Harrington, et al., "Immigrant Workers and the Great American Job Machine: The Contributions of New Foreign Immigration to National and Regional Labor Force Growth in the 1990s" (paper, National Business Roundtable, Washington, D. C., August, 2002), 2.

¹⁸ See S. A. Camarota, "A Jobless Recovery? Immigrant Gains and Native Losses," *Background*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Immigration Studies, October, 2004).

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, January, 2006), 203.

technology; the growth of transnational corporations; the civil rights movement; the feminist movement; globalization; increased access to higher education; economic and industrial restructuring; and neoliberal economic policies, to mention just a few) have significantly changed the characteristics and sectoral distribution of the work force over time.

First of all, employment in agriculture dropped severely in both absolute and relative terms. In 1940, 20 percent of the EAP, or 9.5 million persons, were employed in agriculture compared to 2.2 million, barely 1.6 percent of the EAP, in 2005. Nevertheless, the U.S. continues to be one of the world's leading producers and exporters of agricultural goods. Overall, the proportion of workers involved in producing goods declined from 37.9 percent of the EAP in 1955 to 15.8 percent in 2005, in contrast to the rise of those producing or providing services, which grew from 62.1 percent of the EAP to 83.4 percent.²⁰ Furthermore, thanks in part to the growing trade deficit, the range of goods and services available to U.S. consumers is broader than ever.

In spite of the relative decline in manufacturing employment, the absolute number of jobs in this sector grew until 1979 when it reached 19.4 million. Since then, over 5 million jobs have been lost in manufacturing, which went from employing 30.6 percent of the work force in 1955, to 21.6 percent in 1979 and just 10.7 percent in 2005.²¹ The decline was particularly sharp from 2000 to 2005 when over 3 million manufacturing jobs disappeared, over a third of them in the seven-state Great Lakes region. Most of the workers laid off were men without college degrees who will have a difficult time finding another position that offers similar income levels and benefits. Therefore, many of them have simply dropped out of the work force.²²

Male work force participation rate has declined slowly but surely since the middle of the twentieth century, from 86.4 percent in 1950 to 73.3 percent in 2005.²³ Even the number of prime-working-age men (those between 30 and 55) who are not in the work force has risen and now stands at around 13 percent.²⁴ Female participation, on the other hand, has increased steadily (from 33.9 percent in 1950 to 59.3 percent in 2005), to such an extent that women now constitute 46.4 percent of the EAP. Female participation in the work force rose most heavily during the

²⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, January 2006).

²¹ *Ibid.* and U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1984* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1984); and U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2005* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2006).

²² Howard Wial and Alec Friedhoff, "Bearing the Brunt: Manufacturing Job Loss in the Great Lakes Region, 1995-2005," Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 2006.

²³ U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, January, 1984), 157; and U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, January 2006), 204.

²⁴ Louis Uchitelle and David Leonhardt, "Men not working, and not wanting just any job," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/31/business/31men.html>.

1970s and 1980s. Probably catalyzed first by the feminist movement, the later rise came as a response to greater labor market insecurity and instability in family incomes due to industrial restructuring and neoliberal economic policies. The increase in service-sector jobs also facilitated greater female work force participation.

However, the U.S. work force grew by only 11.5 percent in the 1990s, and it has been calculated that without newly arrived immigrants it would have increased by only 5 percent.²⁵ There is general consensus that new immigrants were vital for employment growth as well as economic growth in general.²⁶ Unfortunately, both women and lower skilled immigrants tend to be paid less than white non-Hispanic males for similar work; hence, their increased labor force participation is also associated with the decline in average wages observable since 1973. Growing polarization, in terms of both types of jobs and earnings levels, has characterized the U.S. labor market in recent decades. Job growth has been heaviest at both the high and the low ends of the skills and earnings spectrum. Mexican migrants, most of whom have low levels of educational attainment, are absorbed and concentrated in low-skilled, low-paying jobs.

What Kinds of Jobs Do They Find and What Are Their Earnings Levels?

For most Mexican migrants who come to the U.S., their primary motivation is to work and earn dollars. It is not surprising, then, that the Mexican-origin population²⁷ has the highest work-force participation rate in the country: 68.4 percent in 2005.²⁸ The male rate of 81.8 percent significantly exceeds that of any other group. Although the female rate (53.6 percent) is slightly lower than for some other population groups, it is much higher than women's participation in the EAP in Mexico, which is around 38 percent. Unemployment rates for those of Mexican origin mirror the ups and downs of economic activity as do unemployment rates in general. For the past three decades or more, unemployment rates for Mexicans and for Latinos in general in the U.S. have consistently been lower than the rates for African Americans but higher than those of the non-Hispanic white population.

It is not unusual for low-skilled recent immigrants to have the least desirable and lowest-paying jobs, which nevertheless provide incomes much higher than

²⁵ Andrew Sum, et al., "Immigrant Workers," 2002.

²⁶ See, for example, Council of Economic Advisers, "Immigration's Economic Impact," June 20, 2007, http://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/cea_immigration_062007.pdf; and Sum, et al., "Immigrant Workers."

²⁷ The term "Mexican origin" refers to all persons born in Mexico who now reside in the United States and also those born in the U.S. of Mexican ancestry (parents, grandparents, etc.). We will use the term "Mexicans" as shorthand for the term "Mexican-origin population" when it is clear from the context that we are referring to both U.S. residents born in Mexico and persons of Mexican origin born and living in the U.S.

²⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Washington, D. C., United States Government Printing Office, January, 2006), 210-211.

they could earn in their countries of origin. Such has been the experience of the vast majority of Mexican migrants to the U.S. since they have relatively few years of schooling and little or no knowledge of English upon arrival. However, certain disadvantages in terms of educational attainment persist even for the second and third generations and affect labor market outcomes for many who were born in the U.S.

Department of Labor statistics indicate that the Mexican-origin work force is more or less evenly distributed among four of the five major occupational categories: 24.1 percent in services; 22 percent in natural resources, construction and maintenance occupations; 19.7 percent in production, transportation and material moving; and 20 percent in sales and office occupations. Only 14.2 percent are employed in the fifth major category of managerial or professional positions, which is much lower than 34.7 percent for the entire work force and lower than any other racial or ethnic group. Only 3.1 percent of all Mexican workers are employed in the sub-category of farming, fishing or forestry; nonetheless, the percentage employed in these activities, where wages tend to be extremely low, is much higher than that of any other group.²⁹

Significant numbers of Mexicans are employed in manufacturing and construction (11.2 percent and 15.9 percent, respectively), where there are some well-paying positions for highly skilled, experienced workers. However, most hold low-paying, low-skilled jobs. Just over 11 percent have office and administrative support positions, but many of these are female-dominated occupations where salaries tend to be low. The same holds true for most of the sales jobs that provide employment for 8.7 percent of Mexican workers. Another 9.1 and 8.8 percent, respectively, work preparing and serving food and cleaning and maintaining buildings and grounds, and their wages are very low. Within each of the general occupational categories or sub-categories, Mexicans and other Latinos tend to be concentrated or constitute a relatively high proportion of all workers in certain specific occupations: certain branches of light rather than heavy manufacturing; cleaning and maintenance services for buildings and grounds; food preparation and handling; cashiers in self-service stores and retail sales; and certain types of construction work, to mention a few.

Data for employment by industry reveals that some branches have come to depend more and more on Latino workers, almost two-thirds of whom are Mexican (see table 1).³⁰ Between 1990 and 2005 the proportion of Latinos in the work force grew from 7.5 to 13.1 percent. At the same time in the animal slaughtering and processing industry it rose from 17 to 39.3 percent. In construction, it increased from 8.5 to 23 percent. In some branches (landscaping services, cutting and sewing apparel, private household service) where Latino participation was already high, the growth is less spectacular. Latino participation in food manufacturing grew from

²⁹ Ibid., 224-225.

³⁰ Ibid., 234-238; and *Employment and Earnings*, January, 1991, 196-199.

14.1 to 27.7 percent and was even more pronounced in certain sub-sectors. Carpet and rug mills showed the sharpest rise: in just 15 years the percentage of Latino workers grew from 10.1 to 31.6 percent. Dalton, Georgia is the carpet capital of the United States, and Latinos are now around 40 percent of the town's total population.

TABLE 1
INDUSTRIES WITH HIGH CONCENTRATION OF LATINO WORKERS (2005)

<i>Industry</i>	<i>% Latino 1990</i>	<i>% Latino 2005</i>	<i>Increase in % Latinos 1990-2005</i>
Total	7.5	13.1	74.7
Animal slaughtering and processing	17.0	39.3	131.2
Landscaping services*	25.2	37.5	48.8
Cut and sew apparel	22.6	35.8	58.4
Car washes*	22.5	35.4	57.3
Private households	17.6	33.9	92.6
Fruit and vegetable preserving and specialty foods	21.0	32.8	56.2
Services to buildings and dwellings	18.0	32.3	79.4
Carpet and rug mills	10.1	31.6	212.9
Crop production	19.5	29.1	49.2
Support activities for agriculture and forestry	15.4	27.9	81.2
Food manufacturing	14.1	27.7	96.5
Bakeries, except retail*	13.0	27.3	110.0
Warehousing and storage	13.8	24.7	79.0
Dry cleaning and laundry services	14.6	24.5	67.8
Retail bakeries	14.4	24.4	69.4
Textiles, apparel and leather	20.2	24.4	20.8
Specialty food stores*	13.1	24.4	86.3
Traveler accomodation	15.2	23.7	55.9
Soap, cleaning compounds and cosmetics	14.5	23.6	62.8
Construction	8.5	23.0	170.6

* There is no data for these industries in 1990; the figures shown in the first column are for 1994 and the change is with respect to that year.

Source: Author's calculations with data from *Employment and Earnings* (January 2006), 234-238.

Occupational and industrial concentration among Latino workers is intertwined with their geographical concentration. Approximately three-fourths of all Latinos live in just seven states. However, in some states in the South, the Midwest and the West, the Latino population —still quite small numerically— grew from more than 200 to almost 400 percent between 1990 and 2000, because of employment opportunities.³¹ Often Mexicans and others are actively recruited to fill jobs in meat packing or poultry processing plants, or carpet and rug mills, that local workers now disdain. The same holds true for agricultural work in many parts of the

³¹ Passel, "How Many Mexicans?"

Southeast or states like California, Texas and Oregon. The demand for workers to carry out undesirable low-paying jobs rose significantly at the end of the twentieth century, and coincided with the arrival of new waves of immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries, who were more than willing to take such jobs.

Most of the occupations with large numbers of Latinos are low-skilled, low-wage jobs requiring no more than a high school education (see table 2). In occupations with over a 100 000 Latino workers where median weekly earnings are above the overall median, the percentage of Latinos, with respect to the total number employed, tends

TABLE 2
OCCUPATIONS WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBERS OF LATINO WORKERS (2005)

<i>Occupations</i>	<i># Latino</i>	<i>% Latino</i>	<i>Median Weekly Earnings</i>
Total 16 Years and Over	18,566,630	13.1	\$651
Construction laborers	608,328	40.8	\$502
Janitors and building cleaners	566,202	27.3	\$408
Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	559,076	16.4	\$624
Cooks	538,534	29.3	\$336
Cashiers	498,150	16.2	\$336
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	486,464	35.2	\$335
Grounds maintenance workers	443,938	37.4	\$389
Carpenters	438,468	24.4	\$556
Farming, fishing and forestry occupations	393,328	40.3	\$372
Retail salespersons	383,264	11.8	\$494
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	353,976	19.6	\$456
First-line supervisors/managers of retail sales workers	317,070	9.0	\$631
Secretaries and administrative assistants	300,914	8.6	\$562
Waiters and waitresses	294,831	15.3	\$352
Nursing, psychiatric and home health aides	285,000	15.0	\$388
Stock clerks and order fillers	248,370	17.0	\$427
Painters, construction and maintenance	241,150	35.0	\$466
Child care workers	240,549	18.1	\$332
Customer service representatives	240,123	13.1	\$524
Packers and packagers, hand	188,032	41.6	\$372
Automotive service technicians and mechanics	168,858	17.7	\$629
Receptionists and information clerks	167,872	12.2	\$466
Food preparation workers	162,016	24.4	\$321
Elementary and middle school teachers	154,344	5.9	\$826
First-line supervisors/managers of office and administrative support	143,820	9.0	\$686
First-line supervisors/managers of non-retail sales workers	138,572	9.8	\$881

Source: Author's calculations based on data in *Employment and Earnings* (January 2006).

TABLE 3
OCCUPATIONS WITH THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGES OF LATINO WORKERS (2005)

<i>Occupations</i>	<i># Latino</i>	<i>Median Weekly Earnings</i>	<i>% Latino</i>
Total 16 Years and Over	13.1	\$651	18,566,630
Cement masons, concrete finishers and terrazzo workers	54.4	\$519	64,736
Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers and tapers	46.8	\$511	117,936
Roofers	42.0	\$500	115,080
Butchers and other meat, poultry and fish processing workers	42.0	\$444	122,640
Packers and packagers, hand	41.6	\$372	188,032
Construction laborers	40.8	\$502	608,328
Graders and sorters, agricultural products	40.5	\$402	27,945
Farming, fishing and forestry occupations	40.3	\$372	393,328
Carpet, floor and tile installers and finishers	40.0	\$482	118,800
Helpers, construction trades	38.6	\$437	43,618
Helpers, production workers	37.8	n.d.	21,924
Packaging and filing machine operators and tenders	37.6	\$410	113,928
Grounds maintenance workers	37.4	\$389	443,938
Pressers, textile, garment and related materials	35.7	n.d.	24,990
Dishwashers	35.4	\$296	93,456
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	35.2	\$335	486,464
Painters, construction and maintenance	35.0	\$466	241,150
Brickmasons, blockmasons and stonemasons	33.7	\$598	82,565
Sewing machine operators	33.6	\$360	90,384
Cleaners of vehicles and equipment	33.5	\$385	116,245
Dining room and cafeteria attendants and bartender helpers	30.4	\$347	113,392
Laundry and dry-cleaning workers	29.4	\$372	52,332
Cooks	29.3	\$336	538,534
Cutting workers	28.6	\$496	28,600
Pest control workers	27.8	\$508	19,182
Janitors and building cleaners	27.3	\$408	566,202

Source: Author's calculations based on data in *Employment and Earnings* (January 2006).

to be low. For all occupations with high concentrations—or in other words the highest percentages—of Latinos (see table 3), median weekly earnings were below the overall median of US\$651 in 2005.³² Latino workers are affected by the disappearance of internal job ladders in many industries, on one hand, and, on the other, by social networks for recruiting that channel them into certain types of jobs.³³

³² USDOL, *Employment and Earnings*, January, 2006, 218-223 and 258-262.

³³ See Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: The New Press, 1998); and Roger Waldinger and Michael I. Lichter, *How the Other Half Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Undocumented immigrants are all the more vulnerable because of their irregular status. Furthermore, their numbers have grown markedly over the past few years. According to Jeffrey Passel's estimations approximately half of all Mexicans living in the United States today are undocumented, as are 85 percent of those who have entered since 2000.³⁴ In general, however, employment is precarious for the lowest-skilled Latinos because of changes implemented in response to increased international competition, which have made the labor market increasingly more segmented and stratified.

Many new "labor market niches for immigrants" have grown along with the seemingly endless supply of newcomers. Most of them can earn up to 10 or even 15 times more than in their countries of origin. Nevertheless they are relegated to the lowest socioeconomic strata in the United States. Even though Latino workers make up a growing proportion of the work force, they continue to experience high poverty rates, high unemployment rates and low incomes.³⁵ Relative wages have noticeably declined in almost all the occupations that now have high concentrations of Latino workers (see table 4). The drop is particularly noticeable in some of the specialized construction trades, where median weekly earnings were higher than the general median in 1990, and by 2005 they were considerably lower.³⁶ Thus over the past 20 years, Latino workers have generally experienced wage decline with respect to other population groups in the United States.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, in the case of women, and the early 1990s, for men, Latinos have had lower median incomes than the rest of the population. Latino men's median income is slightly lower than Afro-Americans', and there is a substantial gap between these two groups and non-Hispanic whites. For men who work full time year round, Latinos' median income has been lower than Afro-Americans' since the mid-1980s, and the gap is growing, as is the much larger gap between Latinos and non-Hispanic whites (see graph 1).

Latina women's median income is considerably lower than that of African American women, who actually have incomes somewhat closer to non-Hispanic white women's. In the case of women who work year-round full time (see graph 2), Latina's median income has consistently been the lowest of all, since it began being registered, and the difference is growing.³⁷ Among all Latino workers, Mexican males and females have the lowest median incomes.³⁸

Even though Latino families and households' median incomes are slightly higher than African Americans', the gap between both of these groups and non-Hispanic

³⁴ Passel, "How many Mexicans?"

³⁵ Thomas-Breitfeld, "The Latino Workforce," Statistical Brief no. 3. Washington, D.C.: National Council of La Raza, 2003.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Labor, January 1991, 196-199, 223-227; and January, 2006, 218-223, 258-262.

³⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2004*, www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hispanic/ASEC2004/2004CPS; accessed February 2, 2006.

³⁸ For a more detailed analysis of Latinos' occupations and earnings in the United States, see Elaine Levine, *Los nuevos pobres de Estados Unidos: los hispanos* (Mexico City: UNAM and Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2001), Chapter 3.

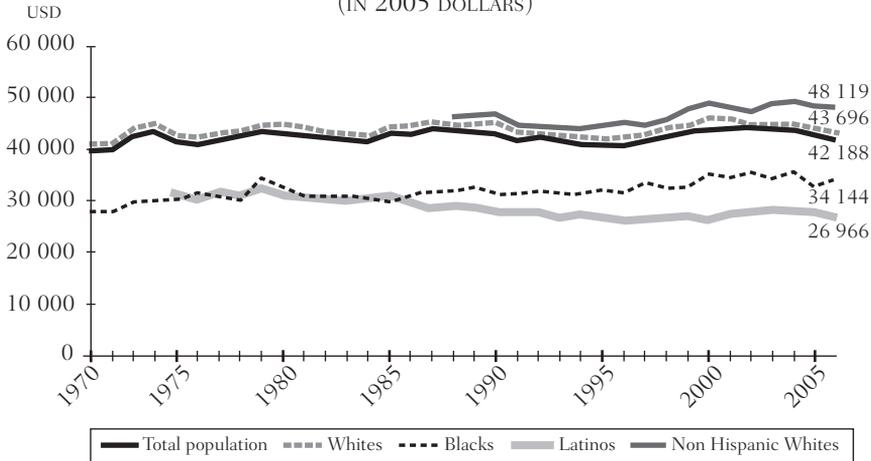
TABLE 4

COMPARISON OF MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS IN OCCUPATIONS WITH HIGH PERCENTAGE OF LATINOS (1990 AND 2005)

<i>Occupations</i>	<i>Median Weekly Earnings 1990</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Median Weekly Earnings 2005</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>% Latinos 2005</i>	<i># Latinos 2005</i>
Total 16 Years and Older	\$415	100.0	\$651	100.0	13.1	18,566,630
Cement masons, concrete finishers and terrazzo workers	\$414	99.8	\$519	79.7	54.4	64,736
Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers and tapers	\$440	106.0	\$511	78.5	46.8	117,936
Roofers	\$341	82.2	\$500	76.8	42.0	115,080
Butchers and other meat, poultry and fish processing workers	\$314	75.7	\$444	68.2	42.0	122,640
Packers and packagers, hand	\$258	62.2	\$372	57.1	41.6	188,032
Construction laborers	\$347	83.6	\$502	77.1	40.8	608,328
Farming, fishing and forestry occupations	\$257	61.9	\$372	57.1	40.3	393,328
Carpet, floor and tile installers and finishers	\$376	90.6	\$482	74.0	40.0	118,800
Helpers, construction trades	\$272	65.5	\$437	67.1	38.6	43,618
Packaging and filling machine operators and tenders	\$313	75.4	\$410	63.0	37.6	113,928
Grounds maintenance workers	\$267	64.3	\$389	59.8	37.4	443,938
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	\$220	53.0	\$335	51.5	35.2	486,464
Painters, construction and maintenance	\$382	92.0	\$466	71.6	35.0	241,150
Brickmasons, blockmasons and stonemasons	\$506	121.9	\$598	91.9	33.7	82,565
Sewing machine operators	\$292	70.4	\$360	55.3	33.6	90,384
Cleaners of vehicles and equipment	\$249	60.0	\$385	59.1	33.5	116,245
Laundry and dry-cleaning workers	\$220	53.0	\$372	57.1	29.4	52,332
Cooks	\$226	54.5	\$336	51.6	29.3	538,534
Cutting workers	\$319	76.9	\$496	76.2	28.6	28,600
Janitors and building cleaners	\$280	67.5	\$408	62.7	27.3	566,202
Painting workers	\$385	92.8	\$562	86.3	25.7	50,886
Bakers	\$304	73.3	\$411	63.1	24.6	45,018
Food preparation worker	\$215	51.8	\$321	49.3	24.4	162,016
Carpenters	\$412	99.3	\$556	85.4	24.4	438,468
Crushing, grinding, polishing, mixing and blending workers	\$391	94.2	\$498	76.5	24.1	22,413

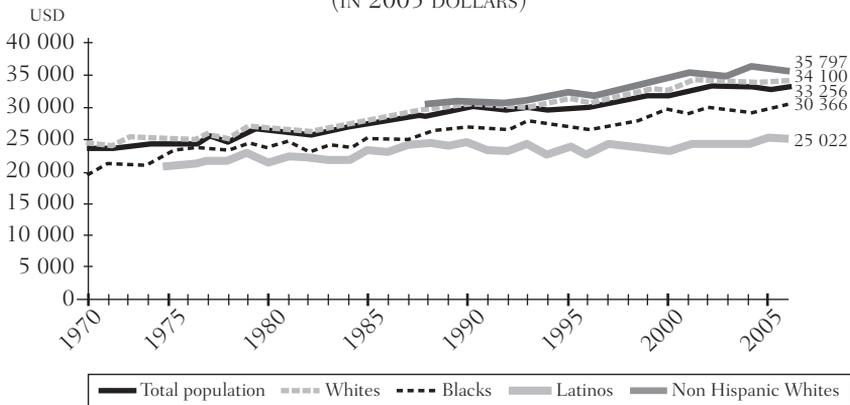
Source: Author's calculations based on data in *Employment and Earnings* (January 1991 and January 2006).

GRAPH 1
 MEDIAN INCOME FOR ALL MALES WORKING FULL TIME, 1970-2005
 (IN 2005 DOLLARS)



Source: Constructed by the author with data from the Current Population Survey, Historical Income Tables.

GRAPH 2
 MEDIAN INCOME FOR ALL WOMEN WORKING FULL TIME, 1970-2005
 (IN 2005 DOLLARS)



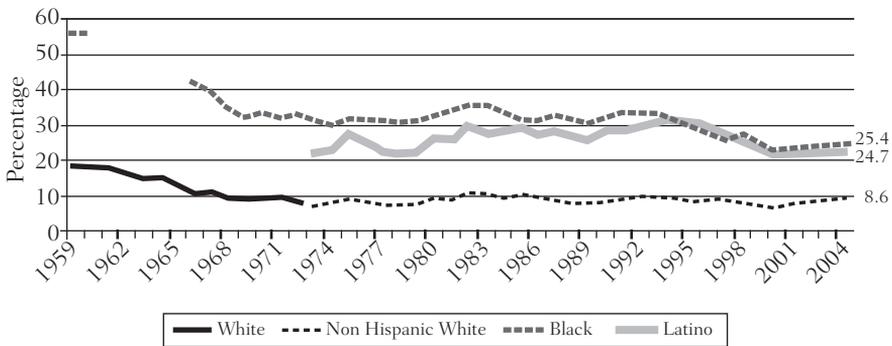
Source: Constructed by the author with data from the Current Population Survey, Historical Income Tables.

white families and households tends to grow. Furthermore, Latino families and households appear to do better than African American ones not because of individual earnings—which as we have just seen tend to be lower than those of African American men and women, respectively— but because there are more persons employed per family or household. At the same time, however, there are usually

also more dependents. Latino households often include members of the extended family (uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.), and even individuals who are not family members but perhaps come from the same hometown. The net effect is that the higher incomes have to meet the needs of a larger number of persons; thus, from 1985 on, Latinos' per capita income has been lower than African Americans'. In 2003, the difference was just over US\$2,000 per year (US\$13,492 and US\$15,583, respectively), and non-Hispanic whites' per capita income was almost double (US\$26,774).³⁹

While the poverty rate for African Americans has been cut in half since 1959, the rate for Latinos has not improved overall, beyond that observed in the early 1970s, when such data was first registered. In general, Latino poverty rose between 1972 and 1994 (from 22.8 percent in 1972 to 30.7 percent in 1994), and then returned to prior levels as a result of the economic expansion thereafter (see graph 3). African Americans, who comprised 31.1 percent of those living below the poverty threshold in 1966, were only 25.4 percent in 2004, whereas Latinos, who were 10.3 percent of those living in poverty in 1972, comprised 24.7 percent by 2004 (see graph 4).⁴⁰ In other words, a little more than one-eighth of the total population is Latino but Latinos now constitute almost one fourth of all those with incomes below the poverty line. If these tendencies continue, Latinos will not only be the largest ethnic or racial minority—as the 2000 census classifies them—they may also soon become the most impoverished. Moreover, the proportion of recently arrived Mexicans and Latinos living in poverty definitely exceeds the overall rates.

GRAPH 3
POVERTY RATE BY GROUPS, 1959-2004

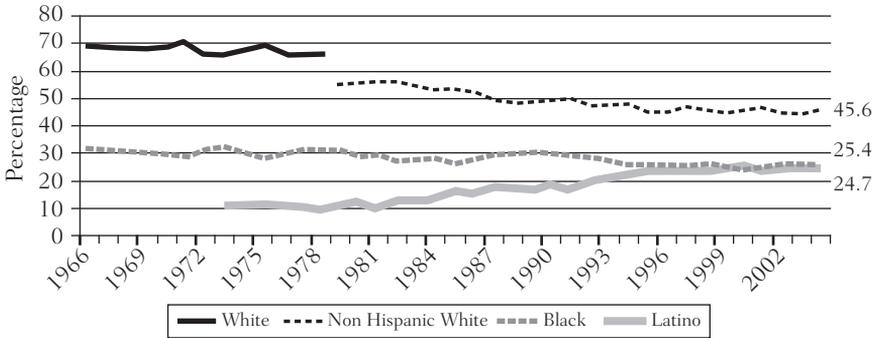


Source: Constructed by the author with data from the Current Population Survey, Historical Poverty Tables.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

GRAPH 4
DISTRIBUTION OF PERSONS IN POVERTY BY GROUP; 1959-2004



Source: Constructed by the author with data from the Current Population Survey, Historical Poverty Tables.

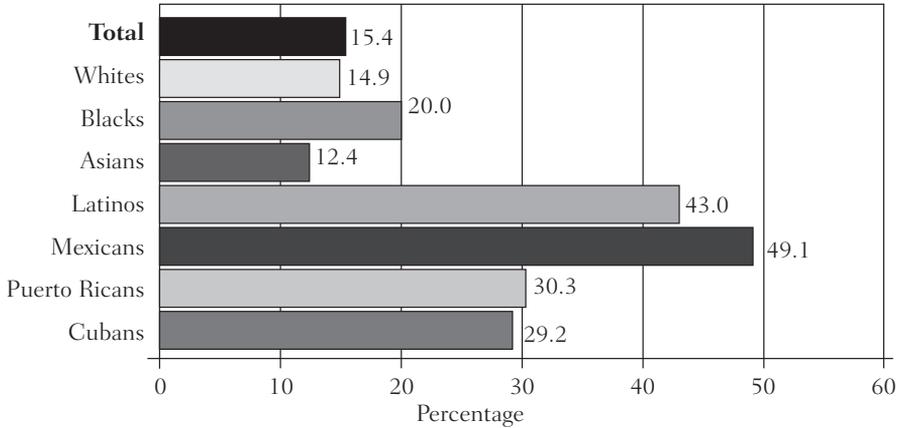
What Opportunities and Obstacles Do the Children of Mexican Immigrants Face?

The differences observed in incomes and socioeconomic status can be partially explained by differences in years of schooling, particularly in recent decades, given the high correlation between earnings and educational attainment observable in the United States. Despite this connection, however, dropping out of high school is still fairly prevalent among Latinos. Access to higher education is still quite limited for most Latino youth, consequently limiting their employment options and also the perspectives for intergenerational socioeconomic mobility. As shown in graphs 5 and 6, Mexicans lag furthest behind in terms of educational attainment in the United States.

The high percentage of Mexicans who have not finished high school, or its equivalent in Mexico, is largely due to the fact that compulsory education there only includes nine years of schooling. In fact, many small villages only have elementary schools. Upon finishing the ninth grade, or *secundaria* in Mexico, many families consider that their children’s formal education has concluded, and they are ready to go to work. At that time, young people from regions with high migratory rates may choose to set out on their first journey north. This helps explain, to some extent, why educational attainment for Mexicans in the U.S. is so low.

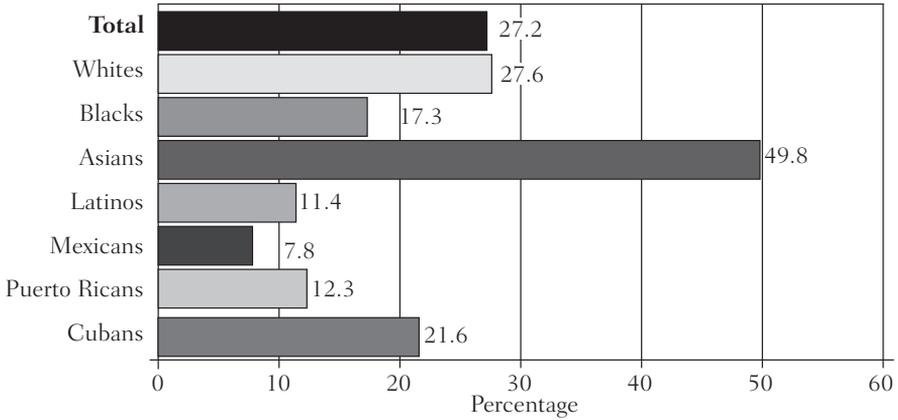
Something not so easily explainable, however, is the great disparity in income levels for persons with similar levels of educational attainment. At all levels, the average incomes of white males are considerably higher than those of African American males or females, Latino males or females and white females. The differences grow as educational attainment rises, and can only be attributed to persistent, racial, ethnic and gender discrimination in the U.S. labor market (see graph 7).

GRAPH 5
 PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WITHOUT HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA, 2003



Source: Constructed by the author with data from the Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 2004-2005.

GRAPH 6
 PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WITH COLLEGE DEGREE OR MORE, 2003

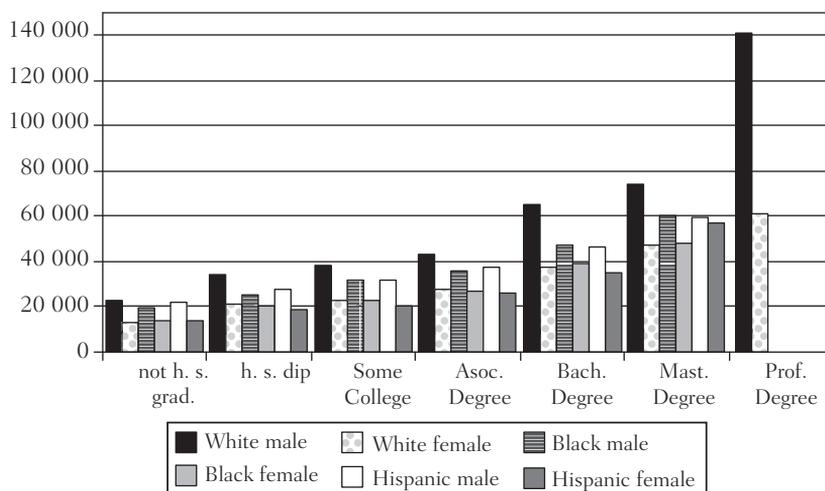


Source: Constructed by the author with data from the Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 2004-2005.

Despite these clear income differentials, Roberto Suro maintains that “In the United States today the most impenetrable barriers to economic mobility are not to be found in the labor markets, but in the nation’s public school systems.”⁴¹ A

⁴¹ Roberto Suro, *Strangers Among Us, Latino Lives in a Changing America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 314.

GRAPH 7
AVERAGE YEARLY INCOME BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, 2002



Source: Constructed by the author with data from the Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 2004-2005.

little further on, he adds, “The segregation of winners and losers in American society still bears a high correlation to race and ethnicity but most of the segregating takes place before people look for their first job,”⁴² in other words, while they are still in school, or when they drop out of school. As we have already mentioned, educational attainment is one of the most important determinants of income. A large portion of the Mexican population in the U.S. has not completed high school (or its equivalent in Mexico). Referring to the vicious circle metaphor seems unavoidable. Low family incomes and parents with little schooling are among the factors most often associated with poor performance in school and high probabilities of dropping out.

In general, in the United States today, rich children and poor children do not usually attend the same schools. Most African American and Latino children attend schools where racial and ethnic minorities predominate and the preparation they receive may be quite different from that offered to their non-Hispanic white and Asian peers, who attend other schools in other neighborhoods. Commemoration (in 2004) of the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court decision banning racial segregation in public schools was dampened by persistent *de facto* segregation. Since school assignment is determined by place of residence, schools in many cities throughout the country are, in fact, even more segregated than they were 50 years ago. Furthermore, the inequality in funding between rich school districts and poor ones is growing. “By relying on local property taxes as a crucial source of

⁴² Ibid.

funds, the U.S. has created a caste system of public education that is increasingly separate and unequal.”⁴³

Moreover, segregation occurs not only between schools but also within schools. In any given school students may be grouped in ways that in effect result in separating Afro-Americans and Latinos from non-Hispanic whites and others. New means are constantly being devised that differentiate the educational experiences and outcomes for poor minority children from those of their middle- and upper-class counterparts.⁴⁴ Funding, infrastructure, and even teaching practices, goals and content differ to such an extent that the aims and objectives of the teaching-learning process end up being not at all similar. Thus, the dreams and aspirations, the opportunities and options for poor Latino immigrant children are limited almost as soon as they enter school in the United States. The public school system is, by and large, preparing them for the same kinds of low-skilled, low-paying jobs their parents have.

Final Considerations

Latino participation in the U.S. work force is expected to grow significantly over the next few years and reach 17 percent by 2014.⁴⁵ Labor Department projections indicate that the number of low-skilled, low-wage, service sector jobs will also rise considerably. Given the country’s changing demographic profile—an aging population with low birth rates—and the low cost of unskilled Mexican labor, new immigrants will still be finding employment opportunities in the U.S. for years to come. Even though birth rates have recently declined somewhat in Mexico, prevailing economic policies will probably assure a ready supply of emigrants for some time yet. Thus, the demand for, and supply of, Mexican immigrant labor in the U.S. will surely continue well into the next decade.

For more than 10 years now the U.S. has been unsuccessfully grappling with the need for immigration reform. Nevertheless, and in spite of Mexican former President (2000-2006) Vicente Fox’s repeated references to the possibilities for an “immigration agreement” between the two countries, there is no indication that the U.S. is willing to consider anything other than unilateral action on this issue. However, thus far, any action whatsoever has been elusive. Many proposals for immigration reform have been introduced into Congress over the past several years, but few of them have gotten as far as to have actually been voted on. Senators Edward Kennedy (Democrat) and John McCain (Republican) have been the most persistent proponents of such legislation, but even these bipartisan attempts, of which there have been several successive versions, have all failed.

⁴³ Emily Mitchell, “Do the Poor Deserve Bad Schools?” *Time*, vol.138, no. 25, October 14, 1992, 42.

⁴⁴ See Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, “Tomorrow’s Jobs,” *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006*, 7th ed. (Washington, D. C., Bureau of Labor Statistics), Bulletin 2600, http://www.bls.gov/oco/print/oco_2003.htm, 2005; last modified December 20, 2005.

In January 2004, President Bush launched his own proposal for a new and enhanced Temporary Worker Program. In December 2005, the House of Representatives passed the highly controversial and highly punitive proposal sponsored by Representative James Sensenbrenner, which after 239 votes for and only 182 against, became known as H.R. 4437. This sparked massive protests by Latinos and many others throughout the country in the spring of 2006. Different and considerably more flexible legislation was subsequently approved by the Senate at the end of May, but it was obviously not possible to reconcile the sharp differences between the two. Toward the end of 2007, it became clear that any action on immigration reform will have to wait until after the 2008 presidential elections.

Since there has been no federal action in this area, many states have passed their own laws, most of which are restrictive measures with an anti-immigrant bias. Federal officials have staged selective raids at some worksites, and many undocumented workers have been deported. The climate of fear that prevails in many localities nationwide now contrasts sharply with the exuberance of the 2006 marches and demonstrations.

Oddly enough, the Republican front runner at this time, and presidential candidate, John McCain, and the two Democratic contenders, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, have voiced similar views on the need to regularize the status of the approximately 12 million currently undocumented immigrants in the U.S., over half of whom are presumably Mexican. All three voted “yes” on the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act approved by the Senate in 2006, but also voted “yes” to the Secure Fence Act creating 700 miles of new fence along the U.S.-Mexico border. They all favor granting in-state college tuition and even some sort of path to residency or citizenship, for undocumented youth brought into the country by their parents when they were younger. Obama and Clinton voted “no” on explicitly declaring English as the national language, whereas McCain voted “yes.”

However, their apparent agreement on wanting to provide undocumented workers with an opportunity to earn legal status is by no means a guarantee that legislation to that effect will be approved by the new Congress after the elections. Many legislators are virulently opposed to granting what they consider to be “amnesty” to those who, they argue, “have not played by the rules.” Most of these same law-makers—and many people in general—are not nearly as interested in punishing and sanctioning employers who hire undocumented workers as they are in taking action against the workers themselves.

The entire question of immigration reform with all of its ramifications and related issues is a highly controversial subject throughout the U.S. Despite the fact that almost everyone agrees that the existing system has broken down and needs to be fixed, it is not at all clear that there will be enough consensus on any of the questions involved to be able to pass new laws in the near future. What is clear is that, in the minds of most, immigration is now strongly linked to national security and hence not an issue open to bilateral discussion. In fact, immigration has always been dealt with in the U.S. as a unilateral rather than a bilateral or multilateral issue.

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