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U.S.-Mexico Migration—Prospects for Reform

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Recent evidence points to a dramatic shift in migration patterns involving Mexico, traditionally the United States' biggest migrant contributor. According to a recent Pew Hispanic Center report, 35 percent of the 10.2 million unauthorized adult immigrants in the United States have been U.S. residents for 15 or more years.¹ That figure was 16 percent in 2000, suggesting that the bulk of the unauthorized immigration may have already occurred. If so, the right moment may be approaching for immigration reform.

The decline is borne out in other studies as well. In fiscal year 2011, the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended nearly 328,000 persons attempting to illegally cross the border, a number comparable to border arrests in 1970s and much lower than the peak of a decade earlier in 2000, when 1.6 million immigrants were arrested while attempting to cross.² In fact, some demographers believe that net immigration to the United States is currently around zero—or even negative—when factoring in Mexicans returning to Mexico.

What is driving this shift? In Mexico, several trends have converged over the past decade. One is the steady performance of the Mexican economy since the peso devaluation in 1994. With the exception of Mexico's sharp recession in 2009, when its economy contracted 6 percent, Mexico's economy has grown at a solid clip. While Mexico has not seen the 5 to 6 percent annual growth needed to make a serious dent in unemployment, it has avoided the recurring financial crises of the past. Economic growth combined with government initiatives such as *Oportunidades*, Mexico's conditional-cash-transfer program, has reduced the push factor in Mexico's migration over much of the past decade.

Demographic changes within Mexico are also likely contributing to its declining emigration rate. In 1970, the average woman had nearly seven children. This figure stands

¹ Paul Taylor et al., *Unauthorized Immigrants: Length of Residency, Patterns of Parenthood* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, December 2011), p. 4.

² United Press International, "Fewer arrested at U.S.-Mexico border," December 4, 2011, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2011/12/04/Fewer-arrested-at-US-Mexico-border/UPI-86361323013178/.

at about two offspring today, translating into fewer job seekers per year entering the Mexican labor force when compared to the 1990s.³ This number will continue to decline in the coming decades, making for a less crowded labor market in Mexico.

Rising rates of violence along the U.S.-Mexico border also seem to play a role in reducing migration from Mexico. Because of the border's importance in shipping narcotics to the United States, illegal migration has become more risky. Anecdotes suggest that cartels are taking over the smuggling of migrants and that fees charged by *coyotes* have soared. Increased border enforcement has also made the journey more perilous, as routes into the United States have adapted to the growing presence of agents, fences, and remote sensors. The increased risk associated with crossing the border has likely caused many potential migrants to question the benefits.

Changes within the United States have also dampened the pull factor that has long driven unauthorized immigration. Lackluster U.S. economic growth for much of the past decade and persistently high unemployment since the 2008–2009 recession have stemmed the tide of migration. Because some of the sectors of the economy that have taken the hardest hit are also the sectors that employ the bulk of unauthorized immigrants—namely, construction—it follows that many Mexicans considering emigrating would hold out for better times.

Whether the decline is permanent is the crux of the debate. Although economic growth prospects are still far on the horizon in the United States, when growth returns it is uncertain whether migration from Mexico will pick up again or whether it simply peaked in the early 2000s. This question has important implications for migration policy in both countries.

For the United States, prospects for policy reform could shift from stanching a flow to easing procedures for obtaining work visas that could bring more illegal migrants out of the shadows and allow them to return to Mexico when their work is done. These steps could help resolve what to do

³ Damien Cave, "Changes in Mexico Slow Illegal Immigration to U.S.," *New York Times*, July 6, 2011.

about the 12 million or so unauthorized Mexican immigrants currently living in the country.

For Mexico, more workers deciding to remain home could help build momentum for enacting the rule of law and economic reforms such as less burdensome regulations for small businesses and fewer protections for state and family monopolies. Such measures would help boost the job supply. Serious education reform would help prepare workers for higher-paying positions now partly filled by foreigners in Mexico.

Because Mexico and the United States are both holding presidential elections in 2012, policy changes are probably not possible for at least a year. However, the new administrations that will take shape on both sides of the Río Grande may present a chance for reform. Both countries have long “kicked the can down the road” when tackling the thorniest issues, but changed conditions in both countries may open a window of opportunity to address Mexico-U.S. migration.

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