

# Repairing the broken US immigration system

The movement of people and goods between Mexico and the United States began taking place regularly long before either of these two countries emerged as sovereign nations. And once the current border was established in 1848, routine flows to exchange goods and visit family and friends on “the other side” continued. Large-scale labour migration was set in motion during the *bracero* program (1942–1964), but it was mainly male and circular. However, some of the contacts and patterns established then were maintained, and a small but steady trickle of undocumented Mexican workers ensued.

Over the past two to three decades, this ongoing migration has been marked by significant quantitative and qualitative changes. Circular migration has given way to long-term settlement as more and more labour migrants have sought to reunite their families north of the border. More single as well as married women have joined the migratory flow to seek work in the United States.

## THE EXPANDING MIGRANT LABOUR FORCE

Industrial and economic restructuring in the United States has eliminated many well-paying manufacturing jobs. Nevertheless, until recently, employment opportunities for relatively low-skilled and low-paid workers in both services and construction rose significantly. At the same time, economic restructuring and modernization implemented in Mexico created a large supply of redundant labour. Hence, many of Mexico’s unemployed or underemployed and underpaid workers sought to better their lot by migrating to the United States. Mexico has thus become an important source of cheap labour for many US industries in addition to agriculture, such as construction, landscaping, building cleaning and maintenance, food prepar-

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ation, and meat and poultry processing, to mention just a few.

There is some evidence that by migrating and maintaining transnational ties, poor migrants with low skills—as is the case for most of the recent Mexican migrants to the United States—improve their social and economic status within their communities of origin. Their families are often better housed and better fed than those in which there are no migrant workers. After paying debts and covering basic survival needs, migrants send remittances and savings back home. These are usually used to construct or improve housing and general

living conditions. Providing more schooling for children remaining in Mexico is often a priority. After a time, small businesses may be established with such funds. This is to be expected since the quest for improved employment conditions and earnings is the driving force behind contemporary migratory flows to begin with.

There are, however, some negative aspects. Families may be separated for long periods, or even permanently. And although return migrants may achieve relative success in enhancing the socioeconomic status of their communities of origin, upon their resettlement in Mexico, they face few long-range economic prospects for continued socioeconomic mobility because of the generally depressed local economies characteristic of most sending regions. Furthermore, for those who do not return, the continuation of upward socioeconomic mobility once they have settled in the United States may be even more elusive.

## SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY

Throughout most of the 20th century in the United States, the conventional wisdom was that low-skilled, newly arriving immigrants would logically occupy the lowest rungs of the occupational ladder, but given the opportunity, their children or grandchildren would likely be able to gain entrance to the “middle class.” However, over the past several years, some authors have begun to question this notion, given the persistent socioeconomic disadvantages experienced by certain groups of recent immigrants, particularly Mexicans and some other Latinos. Opinions are divided between those who maintain that over the course of a generation or so the descendants of today’s immigrant population will achieve levels of upward socioeconomic mobility similar to those attained by previous

immigrant populations and those who think that the road to upward mobility is considerably more difficult today, and therefore that the process will be much slower.

It may well be that the hardships experienced by immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century have been paled by time or that the light at the end of the tunnel simply seems farther off for many of today's newcomers because their journey has just begun. Nevertheless, the circumstances prevailing today make the upward climb very difficult for the descendants of low-skilled immigrants with limited schooling—which is the case for most currently arriving Mexican migrants, who happen to comprise the largest immigrant group in the United States today. The conditions in which these immigrants live and work and the conditions in which their children live and are schooled constitute serious obstacles to their upward socioeconomic mobility.

Many new socioeconomic groups appeared along with the seemingly endless supply of newcomers. Most 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 labour force, they continue to experience high poverty rates, high unemployment rates, and low incomes. There has been a noticeable relative wage decline in almost all of the occupations that now have high concentrations of Latino workers. The drop is particularly noticeable in some of the specialized construction trades, where median weekly earnings were higher than the general median in 1990 but are now considerably lower. Thus, over the past 20 years, Latino workers have generally experienced a wage decline with respect to other population groups in the United States.

Among Latinos, those of Mexican origin tend to have the lowest incomes. Not only do Mexicans earn less because of lower educational attainment, they also tend to receive lower returns for all


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levels of education. Undocumented workers are a particularly vulnerable group because of their irregular status. On occasion, employers themselves have reported them to authorities for deportation without pay after several weeks of work. Still, their numbers have increased markedly over the past few years. It is estimated that at least half of all Mexicans residing in the United States are undocumented, and the proportion among those who arrived after 2000 is thought to be about 85 percent.

### **A DYSFUNCTIONAL AND BROKEN SYSTEM**

Obama's position on immigration reform stems from a recognition that the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States has risen tremendously since 2000, and that those who seek legal entry to the United States have to wait far too long for their applications to be processed. He has referred to the current immigration system as dysfunctional and broken. He favours increased border security and voted for additional fencing along the border. He advocates "cracking down on employers who hire undocumented immigrants." Furthermore, he believes that "[i]mmigration raids are ineffective . . . and have placed all the burdens of a broken system onto immigrant families." Thus far, Obama seems to be committed to supporting a system that would somehow allow "undocumented immigrants who are in good standing to pay a fine, learn English, and go to the back of the line for the opportunity to become citizens," which implicitly means they would not be deported or have to leave the country voluntarily. He has also advocated putting "greater emphasis on keeping immigrant families together."

However, given the current economic crisis, none of this is likely to happen early on in the Obama presidency. Interestingly enough, Obama has also stated the belief that the United States needs "to do more to promote economic development in Mexico" in order to decrease the flow of undocumented immigrants. This is another discussion that will have to be postponed until the US economy turns itself around. It would also be heartening if the Mexican government would seriously confront the fact that it too needs to do more to promote economic development in Mexico in order to stem the flow of undocumented emigrants to the United States. That might eventually provide a better basis for dealing with the de facto labour market integration that has already taken place between Mexico and the United States and which will no doubt continue in the future one way or another.

Those who migrate to the United States from Mexico, either temporarily or permanently, are usually seeking a better livelihood and a better life for their children. However, these children, whether they remain in Mexico or go to the United States with migrant parents, are sometimes the ones most short-changed by this process. If they remain in Mexico, they may suffer from the temporary (or sometimes permanent) loss of and separation from the absent parent, without really gaining a great deal in terms of better material circumstances and enhanced prospects for their own livelihood. If, on the other hand, they migrate to the United States, although they are better housed and better fed, they will nevertheless probably be relegated to the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. In either case, in either country, their aspirations and their dreams, their potential and their talents, will most likely remain largely unrealized, unless some very significant changes are made on both sides of the border. 

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