

QUANTIFICATION OF MIGRATION

The Mexican-origin Population of the United States in the Twentieth Century

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The Mexican-origin population in the United States has grown substantially over the last century. It consists of several different components and the contribution of the Mexican-origin population to the size of the United States population has increased and continues to increase as a result of growth in each of these components. One part of this population consists of those individuals born in the United States who can trace their ancestry to Mexico. Another component consists of those individuals born in Mexico who have subsequently moved to the United States. The latter group (the Mexican-born population in the United States) can be broken down into three groups: naturalized citizens, legal immigrants and unauthorized migrants from Mexico. Our goal is to provide a general picture of both the past and present size, growth and distribution of the Mexican-origin population within the United States. The following focuses on changes in each group within this population. We begin by examining changes in the way this group has been measured over time. Since the United States Census is the primary source of this information, we focus on changes in these data. Next, we discuss the patterns of growth in the Mexican-origin population over the past century. Finally, we turn

to the potential for future growth and the geographic distribution of the Mexican-origin population in the United States.

Measurement of the Mexican-origin Population

“Ethnicity denotes a social identity deriving from group membership based on common race, religion, language, national origin, or some combination of these factors (Bean and Tienda, 1987: 38).” In part because ethnicity is a multidimensional concept, the way in which the Mexican-origin population has been defined by the United States Census Bureau has changed over the years, during which time Mexican ethnicity has been identified by a number of different indicators (see Table 1). Prior to 1970, Mexican ethnicity could be identified through the use of various objective markers, including place of birth, parents’ place of birth, mother tongue, and Spanish surname. While serving well to identify Mexican-origin persons who were either foreign born or whose parents were born in Mexico, these identifiers failed to adequately identify third or higher generation Mexican-origin persons, especially those who no longer speak Spanish at home or who no longer have a Spanish surname due to intermarriage. These limitations are especially problematic for identifying the Mexican-origin population given the group’s long history in the United States.

Table 1
Identifiers Available in the United States Census or Current Population Survey for the Hispanic Population, 1950–1996

Year	Birth-place	Foreign Parentage	Mother Tongue	Home Language Other than English	Spanish ¹ Surname	Spanish Origin or Descent	Ancestry
1994-96	yes	yes	no	no	no	yes	no
1990	yes	no	no	yes	no	yes	yes
1980	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
1970	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	no
1960	yes	yes	yes ²	no	yes	no	no
1950	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no

Source (1950–1980) Bean and Tienda, 1987; (1990 Census and 1994-96 CPS) Constructed by the authors.

¹ Only available for five southwestern states.

² Available for 25% of the foreign-born population

In response to these concerns, a new measure of ethnicity was added to the 1970 Census in which Mexican ethnicity could be identified through the use of a subjective item, ethnic origin. The census measure of ethnic origin allowed respondents of any generation to identify themselves as having Mexican ethnicity. This measure was included in the 1980 and 1990 Censuses as well. Thus, measures of the size and distribution of the Mexican-origin population since 1970 depend on the ethnic self identification of individuals whereas measures in previous years rely upon the researchers' ethnic classification based on several indicators.

Size of the Mexican-origin Population: 1900–Present

Despite the many changes in the measurement of the ethnic composition of the United States, it is clear that the Mexican-origin population has grown steadily from 385,000 in 1910 to over 18 million in 1996, as demonstrated in Table 2. This

Table 2
Total Mexican-origin Population in the United States: 1900–1996

Year	Total Mexican-origin Population (in Thousands)	Percent of Total U.S. Population
1996	18,039 ¹	6.8
1990	13,393	5.4
1980	8,740	3.9
1970	4,532	2.2
1960	1,736 ²	1.0
1950	1,346	0.9
1940	1,077	0.8
1930	1,423	1.2
1920	740	0.7
1910	385	0.4

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Part 1* (1975), U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980 and 1990, and March Current Population Survey, 1995 and 1996.

¹ These figures are based on CPS data that are adjusted for undercount and thus are not comparable to census figures.

² Mexican-origin population calculated as a sum of the Mexican-born population and natives of Mexican parentage.

population nearly doubled in size in every decade except for the period from 1930 to 1960. Some of this growth in the Mexican-origin population can be attributed to natural increase of the U.S.-born population. Mexican American fertility rates are approximately 35 to 40 percent higher than those of Anglos (Bean and Tienda, 1987), while each of these groups appear to experience comparable mortality rates. Thus, even in the absence of migration, the Mexican-origin population would be expected to increase relative to the Anglo population.

Despite its relatively high rate of natural increase, the present day size of the Mexican-origin population in the United States is mostly attributable to immigration from Mexico during the twentieth century. Edmonston and Passel (1994) estimate that the Mexican-origin population would only have been 14% of its current size had there been no immigration from Mexico in the last 95 years. Moreover, the number of immigrants from Mexico living in the United States has been increasingly large both in terms of absolute numbers and in comparison to other immigrant groups. Table 3 presents the size of the Mexican-born population in the United States since 1900. The flow of immigrants from Mexico has fluctuated throughout the twentieth century but it is clear that this population has become an increasingly large component of the total foreign-born population in the United States. By 1996, 27.2 percent of immigrants living in the U.S. originated from Mexico.

Accompanying the growth in the stock of the Mexican foreign-born population in this century, is growth in the flow of immigrants arriving from Mexico. While the flow of immigrants has varied throughout the century, Mexican immigrants have become an increasingly large proportion of the total immigrant stream. Table 4 presents the number of Mexican immigrants arriving in the United States in each decade since 1900. Although the border between Mexico and the United States obtained its modern definition in 1848, records on the Mexican immigration to the United States were not kept until 1908. The accuracy of such data is dubious, moreover, because the border region at that time was largely unsupervised and the nature of immigration from Mexico at the very beginning of the twentieth century is unknown. Two of the border states (Arizona and New Mexico) were only territories under U.S. supervision until 1912.

Nevertheless, it can be seen that fluctuation in the growth of the Mexican-born population in the United States has been due to the political climate in the United States as well as economic demands for labor north of the border. The first large-scale increase in immigration from Mexico onto U.S. territory can be seen occurring between 1911 and 1920, during which time over 200,000 immigrants arrived from Mexico. Increased demands for labor brought about by the exclusion of Chinese workers in 1882, Japanese workers in 1907 and a shortage of European immigrants during World War I encouraged Mexican migration. Numbers of

Table 3
Total Mexican-born Population in the United States: 1900–1996

Year	Mexican-born Population (in Thousands)	Percent of the Total Foreign-born	Percent of the Total Mexican- origin Population
1996	6,679 ¹	27.2	37.0
1990	4,298	21.7	32.1
1980	2,199	15.6	25.2
1970	759	7.9	16.7
1960	576 ²	5.9	33.2
1950	454	4.4	33.7
1940	377	3.2	35.0
1930	617	4.3	43.4
1920	486	3.5	65.7
1910	222	1.6	57.7
1900	103	1.0	

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Part 1* (1975), U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1980 and 1990, and March Current Population Survey, 1995 and 1996.

¹ These figures are based on CPS data that are adjusted for undercount and thus are not comparable to census figures.

² Mexican-origin population calculated as a sum of the Mexican-born population and natives of Mexican parentage.

Mexican immigrants continued to increase as the federal government exempted the Western Hemisphere from the national quota laws of the 1920s and early 1930s in the name of Pan Americanism which was also encouraged by many in the southwest who looked towards Mexico for cheap labor (Reimers, 1992). During the 1920s, over 450,000 Mexican immigrants entered the United States, comprising 11.2 percent of the total immigrant in-flow. However, when the demand for jobs increased during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the United States repatriated many Mexican-origin individuals and the once high levels of Mexican immigration were greatly reduced.

Levels of immigration from Mexico once again increased to pre-1930s levels with the introduction of the Bracero Program from 1943-1964. Starting in World War II, non-Mexican farm workers in California sought higher paying jobs in the defense industry, reducing the available labor supply for farmers. This prompted growers to place pressure on Congress to admit temporary workers, or *braceros*,

Table 4
Immigration from Mexico to the United States: 1900–1995

Years	Number Arriving from Mexico in the Decade	Percent of All Immigrants Arriving in the Decade
A. Published Totals		
1991-1995	1,490,040	28.5
1981-1990	1,655,843	22.6
1971-1980	640,294	14.2
1961-1970	453,937	13.7
1951-1960	299,811	11.9
1941-1950	60,589	5.9
1931-1940	22,319	4.2
1921-1930	459,287	11.2
1911-1920	219,004	3.8
1901-1910	49,642	0.6
B. Numbers of Mexican Arrivals Excluding IRCA legalizations ¹		
1991-1995	440,662	11.3
1981-1990	693,213	11.6

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *1995 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1997.

¹ Numbers of those legalizing their immigration status from the *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* (1989–1995).

from Mexico. During the peak of the program in 1956, 445,197 workers were recruited (Reimers, 1992). Although these workers were expected to be temporary residents in the United States, many stayed along with their family members. While growers fought to retain the supply of cheap Mexican labor, Congress refused to extend the program beyond 1964.

Despite the end of the Bracero Program, both unauthorized and legal migration from Mexico has continued to grow during the past three decades. In particular, the numbers of Mexican immigrants admitted to the United States have recently increased dramatically, reaching 1.7 million or 22.6 percent of the flow in the 1980s and 1.5 million or 28.5 percent of the flow in just the first half of the 1990s. The size of the legal population increased dramatically during the late

1980s and early 1990s due to the amnesty provisions of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Under IRCA those unauthorized migrants who had lived in the United States since 1982 or who had been working in the United States in agriculture for at least six months were offered the opportunity to legalize their migration status. Numbers of those entering the United States are inflated because those legalizing their status under the IRCA provisions are included in these counts. Between 1989 and 1994, IRCA offered legal status to approximately 2 million unauthorized Mexican agricultural workers and other migrants who had been living illegally in the United States since 1982. Panel B of Table 4 illustrates the effect of the legalizations under IRCA on the size of the flow of immigrants from Mexico. When those legalizing their status under the amnesty provisions are removed from the official numbers of immigrants arriving in the decade, the size of the Mexican immigrant population entering between 1981 and 1995 is greatly reduced and is more comparable to the size of the flow during the 1970s.

The component of the Mexican-born population in the United States that receives the most popular attention is the unauthorized migrant population. While this segment of the Mexican-origin population in the United States is most visible in the media, its size is often debated because it is difficult to accurately evaluate. Table 5 presents the estimated size of the unauthorized Mexican migrant population from 1980 to 1996. The methods used to arrive at these estimates are presented in

Table 5
Examples of Various Estimates of the Unauthorized Mexican Migrant Population

Year	Est. Number of Unauthorized Mexican Migrants	Unauthorized Mexican Migrant Population as a Percentage of:			
		Total Foreign- born Pop'n	Mexican Foreign- born Pop'n	Mexican-origin Population	Total U.S. Population
1996	2,700	11.0	40.4	15.0	1.0
1990	1,321 ¹	6.7	30.7	9.9	0.5
1980	1,131 ¹	8.0	51.4	12.9	0.5

Source: Estimates of enumerated unauthorized Mexican migrant Population from (1980) Warren and Passel, 1987; (1990) Warren, 1995; Estimates of the total unauthorized Mexican migrant population (1996) INS (1997).

¹ Estimate includes only the enumerated portion of the Mexican unauthorized population.

the separate appendix, “Issues in Estimating Unauthorized Migration to the United States.” The estimated enumerated unauthorized Mexican population in 1980 was about 8 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population, 51 percent of the total Mexican-born population in the United States and about 13 percent of the total Mexican-origin population in the United States. By 1996, the unauthorized Mexican population had increased to represent nearly 11 percent of the foreign-born population in the United States, but was only 36 percent of the Mexican foreign-born population. Although unauthorized migration from Mexico continues, legal immigrants constitute by far the largest component of the Mexican-born population in the United States despite the attention given to unauthorized migrants.

The last component of the Mexican-born population in the United States are those immigrants who have become citizens of the United States. Table 6 presents the numbers of Mexicans who naturalized for selected years going back to 1960. Compared to other immigrant groups in the United States, Mexican immigrants have been slow to naturalize (Grebler, 1966; Bean and Tienda, 1987). There may be several factors influencing this comparatively low rate of naturalization but English language ability is frequently cited as the largest barrier to citizenship among Mexican immigrants (Reimers, 1992). It is clear from Table 6 that the proportion of Mexicans who are becoming citizens is increasing over time. Immigrants must reside in the United States for five years before becoming citizens of the United States. The number of immigrants becoming citizens is likely to increase substantially in the near future as those legalizing their status under IRCA become eligible for naturalization (Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1992).

Table 6
Number of Naturalizations among Mexican-born Persons in the
United States: 1950–1996

Year	Number of Naturalizations Among Mexicans	Number per 10,000 Mexican-born Persons In the United States
1995	67,238	110.9
1990	17,564	40.9
1980	9,341	4.2
1970	6,195	0.8
1960	5,913	1.0

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (1996).

Projected Growth of the Mexican-origin Population

As the preceding discussion has illustrated, the Mexican-origin population in the United States has grown substantially over the last century and this group continues to make up an ever increasing proportion of the United States population. The growth of the Mexican-origin population is expected continue into the next century as well due to both natural increase and increased net immigration. According to the population projections made by the Census Bureau, the Hispanic-origin population will grow more in the next sixty years than all of the other racial and ethnic groups combined (Day, 1995). Table 7 presents the projections of the size of the Hispanic-origin population based on the U.S. Census projection from 1995. This projection assumes that the Hispanic population will have the highest annual number of immigrants entering the country than any other racial/ethnic group (350,000 annually). The Census Bureau projections are based on the assumption

Table 7
Projected Size of the Mexican-origin Population
in the United States: 1995–2040

Year	Projected Size (in Thousands) for the:		
	Hispanic Population	Mexican Population (Estimate 1) ¹	Mexican Population (Estimate 2) ²
1995	26,936	16,135	16,337
2000	31,366	18,788	19,259
2010	41,139	24,642	25,876
2020	52,652	31,539	33,908
2030	65,570	39,276	43,211
2040	80,164	48,018	54,031

Source: Projection of the Hispanic Population from Day, Jennifer Cheeseman, *Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1995 to 2050*. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, pp. 25-1130, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1996.

Projection of the Mexican-origin population constructed by the authors.

¹ Assuming that the proportion of the Hispanic population that is of Mexican origin remains the same as observed in 1990 (59.9%).

² Assuming the Mexican-origin population will continue to increase as a proportion of the total Hispanic population by 1.5 percentage points per decade.

that the Hispanic-origin population will continue to have higher fertility rates than other racial/ethnic groups. Fertility among Hispanics is currently matched only by Asians in the United States.

These projections indicate that the Hispanic-origin population will reach a size of 80.1 million by 2040, or nearly one quarter of the total U.S. population (Day, 1995). The last two columns of Table 7 present the population projection for the Mexican-origin population alone. Unfortunately, the Census Bureau does not make population projections for the Mexican-origin population separately from the entire Hispanic-origin population. Therefore, we adjust the Census Bureau projection for the entire Hispanic-origin population to approximate the projections for the Mexican-origin population. We make our projections by adjusting the Census projections based on the proportion of the Hispanic-origin population that is of Mexican origin. Two projections are presented each of which is based on slightly different assumptions. The first projection assumes that the proportion of the Hispanic populations that is Mexican origin will stay the same. The Mexican-origin population represented roughly sixty percent of the Hispanic-origin population in 1990. Our first projection for the Mexican-origin population, therefore, is made by simply taking sixty percent of the estimate for the entire Hispanic-origin population made by the Census Bureau. The second projection for the Mexican-origin population presented in Table 7 assumes that the Mexican-origin population will continue to increase as a proportion of the Hispanic-origin population over the next several decades.¹ Specifically, we assume that the Mexican-origin population will increase from 60 percent of the total Hispanic-origin population in the United States in 1990 to 67.4 percent of the Hispanic population in 2040. Based on either set of assumptions, the Mexican-origin population in the United States will more than double in size over the next sixty years. In fact, these projections indicate that the Mexican-origin population alone will be larger than the projected size of the Black population by the year 2040.

The projections presented in Table 7 make it clear that the Mexican-origin population in the United States will continue to increase for some time. However, there are other factors beyond natural increase that could alter the amount of growth of the Mexican-origin population. Changes in immigration or ethnic identity could affect future growth. For example, as those who legalized under IRCA become eligible for citizenship in the United States, they will also be eligible to petition to bring family members to this country (Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1992). Mexican immigrants have the largest pool of relatives who could become migrants to the United States under the family reunification provisions than any other foreign-born group in the United States (Schulte and Wolf, 1994). This factor would result in an even more rapid growth of the Mexican-origin population than was projected in Table 7.

Another source of change that could affect the projected size of the Mexican-origin population is changing rates of intermarriage and/or changing self identification among the children of mixed-ethnicity parents. The projections in Table 7 do not account for the possibility of changes in the patterns of exogamy. Intermarriage between racial/ethnic groups may alter the way future generations identify themselves given the present categories of race and ethnicity. Therefore, differential patterns of exogamy may alter the projected size of these groups (Bean et al., 1997). By 1990, 20.8 percent of Mexican-origin wives were married to non Mexican-origin husbands (Bean et al., 1997).

Edmonston, Lee and Passel (1994) have presented population projections adjusted for differential exogamy rates among Hispanics and other racial/ethnic groups. Increases in exogamy are built into their projections. Their estimates, presented in Table 8, show that the Hispanic-origin population in the United States could vary from between 50.9 million and 77.4 million people by 2040 depending on actual rates of exogamy. Table 8 also presents projections for the Mexican-origin population based on the same patterns of exogamy built into the Edmonston, Lee and Passel projections for the entire Hispanic-origin population. These projections demonstrate that, if the Mexican-origin population remains approximately 60% of the total Hispanic-origin population, individuals of Mexican origin will number

Table 8
Projected Size of the Mexican-origin Population in the United States
Adjusted for Potential Exogamy: 1995–2040

	Hispanic-origin Pop'n (in millions)		Mexican-origin Pop'n (in millions)	
	Single Ancestry Only ¹	Single and Mixed Ancestry ²	Single Ancestry Only ³	Single and Mixed Ancestry ⁴
1990	22.4	22.4	13.4	13.4
2000	28.6	31.9	17.1	19.1
2010	35.0	42.1	21.0	25.2
2020	41.1	53.0	24.6	31.7
2030	46.5	65.0	27.9	38.9
2040	50.9	77.5	30.5	46.4

Source: Bean, Cushing, Haynes and Van Hook (1997), Edmonston, Lee and Passel (1994).

Notes: ¹ Both parents are of Hispanic origin.

² At least one parent is of Hispanic origin.

³ Both parents are of Mexican origin.

⁴ At least one parent is of Mexican origin.

between 30 and 46 million by the year 2040 depending upon their rates of exogamy. These projections for the Mexican-origin population range as low as 63 percent of those Census Bureau projections that do not consider the affect of exogamy on the size of the Hispanic-origin population. Thus, these adjusted projections indicate that the Mexican-origin population may not grow as quickly as suggested by those projections that are not adjusted for differential rates of exogamy.

The Geographic Distribution of the Mexican-origin Population

In addition to its changing size and changing sources of growth, the Mexican-origin population has also experienced changes in its geographic distribution within the United States. Historically, the Mexican-origin population has been concentrated in the southwestern part of the country. Five states, Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas, contain the majority of the Mexican-origin population. The proximity of these states to Mexico made them a likely point of destination for immigrants. Mexican immigrants have been more geographically concentrated than their U.S.-born counterparts although both groups are more likely to be found in the Western or Southern States than other Hispanic groups. Whereas Mexican immigration prior to World War II was largely to rural southwestern areas where jobs in agriculture, mining and the railroads were found, more recent migrants have become increasingly urban although still concentrated in the southwest (Bean and Tienda, 1987).

Table 9 presents the geographic distribution of the Mexican-origin population from 1950 to 1990. By 1960 two states, California and Texas, contained the majority of the Mexican-origin population. However, the distribution of the Mexican-origin population within these states has changed significantly over time. For example, in 1960, Texas and California each contained around 31 percent of the Mexican-origin population. By 1990, California had 45 percent of this population while Texas had less than 30 percent. Given that the size of the Mexican-origin population was so similar in both states in 1960, the large increase in California suggests that it has become an increasingly attractive destination for migrants. In addition to a shifting a distribution of Mexican-origin individuals within the five southwestern states, there has been a decrease in the proportion of this population found only in these five states. In 1970, 87 percent of the Mexican-origin population lived in one of the five southwestern states. By 1990, 84 percent of this population did so. Other states such as Illinois, Michigan and Washington have attracted increasingly large Mexican-origin populations as well (Bean and Tienda, 1987). The decreasing geographic concentration of this group is likely to continue as the Mexican-origin population continues to grow in the next century.

Table 9
Mexican-origin Population in the Five Southwestern States: 1950 to 1990

State	1950		1960		1970		1980		1990	
	Number (in 000s)	% of All Mex.-origin	Number (in 000s)	% of All Mex.-origin	Number (in 000s)	% of All Mex.-origin	Number (in 000s)	% of All Mex.-origin	Number (in 000s)	% of All Mex.-origin
Arizona	126	5.5	207	5.9	240	5.3	396	4.5	619	4.6
California	758	33.2	1,456	41.4	1,857	41.0	3,637	41.6	6,071	45.3
Colorado	119	5.2	152	4.3	104	2.3	207	2.4	279	2.1
New Mexico	249	10.9	276	7.9	119	2.6	234	2.7	329	2.5
Texas	1,027	45.0	1,423	40.5	1,619	35.7	2,752	31.5	3,900	29.1
Other States		-		-	593	13.1	1,514	17.3	2,195	16.4
Total	2,282	100.0	3,514	100.0	4,532	100.0	8,740	100.0	13,393	100.0
Percent in the five Southwestern States						86.9		82.7		83.6

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census: 1970, Persons of Spanish Origin, *Subject Reports PC(2)-1 C*; 1980, Persons of Spanish Origin by State: 1980, *Supplementary Report PC80-S1-7*; General Social and Economic Characteristics, *United States Summary PC80-1-C1*; 1990, General Social and Economic Characteristics, *United States Summary*.

Conclusion

While persons of Mexican ancestry have been part of the population of this country since its beginnings, they have become an increasingly large component of the population over the course of the twentieth century. This growth is a result of both natural increase and immigration from Mexico with legal migration contributing the most to the overall growth. The flow of migrants from Mexico to the United States has fluctuated with changes in the political and economic climates of both countries but has increased overall. The proportion of the Mexican-origin population in the United States made up of immigrants had been decreasing throughout the beginning of the century but has increased since 1960. Because the recent flow of immigrants from Mexico has been so large, the proportion of the Mexican-origin population that is foreign born will continue to be high and may, in fact, be larger than that of other ethnic groups in the United States.

The Mexican-origin population has and will continue to have an impact on the ethnic makeup of the United States. Not only will the proportion of the Mexican-origin population that is foreign born continue to be large but the Mexican-origin population in the United States will become an increasingly important component of the overall population, as the projections presented above indicate, probably becoming the largest minority group early in the next century. This growth has implications for the future social, economic and political conditions of the United States. Its young age structure relative to non-Hispanic whites, for example, means that the Mexican-origin population will contribute more to the working-age population, will have a greater stake in the educational system and may, as a result, become more politically active. In addition, since the Mexican-origin population in the United States will continue to be made up of many foreign-born individuals, both immigration policy in the United States and relations with Mexico will have an increasing impact on this portion of the U.S. population.

Note

1. According to the results from the Current Population Surveys (March, 1986 and 1996), the Mexican-origin population has increased from 62 percent of the Hispanic-origin population in 1986 to 63.4 percent in 1996.

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