

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE MIGRATION

U.S.-Mexican Migration

Philip Martin

Mexico hosts a significant foreign population—some 440,000 foreigners were registered with the National Migration Institute as permanent residents of Mexico in 1995, including 150,000 U.S. citizens.¹

There is a significant migration between the U.S. and Mexico. Most U.S.-Mexican migration involves Mexican citizens who are returning after seasonal employment in the U.S. In addition, it is believed that many legal Mexican immigrants return to settle in Mexico—return migration may be equivalent to 20 to 30 percent of annual Mexican immigration. Finally, some U.S. citizens—many of Mexican origin—move to Mexico each year, especially after they retire from their U.S. jobs. There were reportedly 150,000 U.S. citizens registered with Mexico's National Migration Institute as permanent residents of Mexico in 1995.

There are also temporary foreign workers in Mexico grouped, as in the U.S., at the extremes of the job ladder. According to press accounts, Mexico issues about 125,000 work permits to foreign workers each year, mostly seasonal permits for Guatemalan farm workers, and there are reportedly “thousands” more unauthorized foreign workers in Mexico (Migration News, January, 1995), including many unskilled Central Americans employed at the bottom of the Mexican labor market picking coffee beans, doing unskilled construction work, or employed in Mexican households as maids and gardeners.

Many of the factors that sustain Mexico-U.S. migration also sustain Central American-Mexican migration, viz, Mexican labor markets that have become dependent on Guatemalan and other foreign workers, workers pushed across the border by significant wage and unemployment gaps, and networks of friends, relatives, and labor contractors who can bridge the border. Early in 1996, it was reported that Mexico was apprehending an average 300 Central Americans and Asians per day, double the number in 1995 (Migration News, January 1996).

There were in 1994 reportedly thousands of professional foreign workers in Mexico, including both legal and illegal “dryback” Americans. Unlike most other Western Hemisphere visitors, who get 30 day tourist visas, Mexico issued 2 million Americans 6 month tourist visas in 1993.² Americans who live in Mexico can then simply cross into the United States every 6 months, and get a new tourist visa on their return to Mexico.³

The U.S. Department of State estimated that, as of May 1, 1993, some 2.6 million U.S. citizens lived abroad, including 522,000 in Mexico, 335,000 in Canada, 215,000 in the United Kingdom, 160,000 in Germany, 131,000 in the Philippines, 125,000 in Israel, and 103,000 in Italy (Bratsberg and Terrell, 1996, 791).

Notes

1. In the 1990 Mexican Census, some 300,000 residents of Mexico were reportedly born in another country, and 600,000 did not specify a country of birth.

2. In 1994, an estimated 17 million U.S. residents visited Mexico, and they accounted for about three-fourths of Mexico’s \$7.5 billion tourism revenues.

3. Some U.S. residents of Mexico report that it is easier to live and work “illegally” in Mexico by manipulating tourist visas than it is to obtain the proper residence visa. Americans doing business in Mexico are granted 30-day business visas, and they must prove that they are affiliated with an established U.S. or Mexican company, and that they are not displacing equally-qualified Mexicans, to obtain a longer business visa. American retirees who want to register as Mexican residents must have an income of at least \$2,000 a month.