

Something to Think About



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This week the Pew Research Center (Pew) released a study which claimed more Mexicans returned to Mexico during 2009-2014 than came to the United States, a difference of 140,000. Its data came straight from US Census Bureau estimates for Mexican arrivals and the 2014 Mexican National Survey for Demographic Dynamics. Of course, it would be just about impossible to accurately count every individual traveling around North America under the proverbial radar, but it is an interesting finding, or claim, nonetheless.

Frankly, it doesn't really compute, does it? In truth, the US economy is so much larger and more dynamic than the Mexican, so why does Pew purport this has happened?

I will save you my interpretation of its explanation, and simply cut & paste from the executive summary of the report. Here it is:

“The decline in the flow of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. is due to several reasons (Passel et al, 2012). The slow recovery of the U.S. economy after the Great Recession may have made the U.S. less attractive to potential Mexican migrants and may have pushed out some Mexican immigrants as the U.S. job market deteriorated.

In addition, stricter enforcement of U.S. immigration laws, particularly at the U.S.-Mexico border (Rosenblum and Meissner, 2014), may have contributed to the reduction of Mexican immigrants coming to the U.S. in recent years. According to one indicator, U.S. border apprehensions of Mexicans have fallen sharply, to just 230,000 in fiscal year 2014 – a level not seen since 1971 (Krogstad and Passel, 2014). At the same time, increased enforcement in the U.S. has led to an increase in the number of Mexican immigrants who have been deported from the U.S. since 2005 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2014).

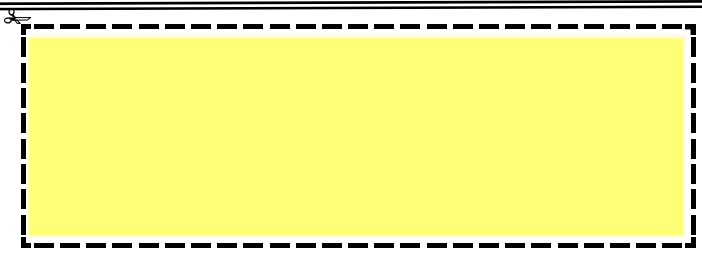
A majority of the 1 million who left the U.S. for Mexico between 2009 and 2014 left of their own accord, according to the Mexican government's ENADID survey data. The Mexican survey also showed that six in ten (61%) return migrants – those who reported they had been living in the U.S. five years earlier but as of 2014 were back in Mexico – cited family reunification as the main reason for their return. By comparison, 14% of Mexico's return migrants said the reason for their return was deportation from the U.S.’

“The drop in the number of Mexicans living in the U.S. also is reflected in the share of adults in Mexico who report having family or friends living in the U.S. with whom they keep in touch. In 2007, 42% of Mexican adults said they kept in contact with acquaintances living in the U.S., while today, 35% say so, according to newly released results from the Pew Research Center's 2015 survey in Mexico.1

The views Mexicans have of life north of the border are changing too. While almost half (48%) of adults in Mexico believe life is better in the U.S., a growing share says it is neither better nor worse than life in Mexico. Today, a third (33%) of adults in Mexico say those who move to the U.S. lead a life that is equivalent to that in Mexico – a share 10 percentage points higher than in 2007.”

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Immigration is nothing more than a human response to globalization and economic opportunity. When borders are porous and tariffs removed, labor will migrate just like any other industry. Just because labor is made up of human beings doesn't mean it isn't subject to economic and cold harsh reality, even if that might offend the sensibilities of more than a few.

In 1990, just before NAFTA, the discrepancy of living standards between our two countries was immense, and I am not just talking about per capita income. According to the World Bank's database, only 66.2% of the Mexican population had access to what is known in academic circles as 'improved sanitation facilities' in that year. The rest of us would refer to this as access to a working toilet. Also in 1990, only 82.3% of Mexicans had access to 'improved water sources,' also known as potable water or an accessible faucet. The infant mortality rate was 46.6 per 1,000 births; the percent of people living below the international poverty rate (\$1.90/day 2011 dollars) was well north of 10%; the immunization rate was around 75%, and enrollment in secondary education (post-elementary school) was 53.1%.

Other academic studies suggest 12.5% of the population didn't have access to electricity, with some Mexican states, like Chiapas, having only 70% access or below. What's more, access to electricity in traditional farming communities was significantly less than the national average, with something like only 50% access in rural Chihuahua. Also, and this one is a kicker, the country study of Mexico at the Library of Congress estimates 19.5% of all Mexican households had a dirt floor in 1990. Finally, per capita income (using purchasing power parity and current \$\$) was only \$5,820.

As such, you can reasonably intuit the average Mexican worker outside of the major population centers lived a lifestyle not unlike what you might have found in the rural American South before WWII, or even the 19th century in many communities. Unfortunately, a large segment of the Mexican population worked in a relatively inefficient agricultural complex, which was getting ready to compete with our vast commercial agricultural complex.

What happened? Well, when the US started dumping cheap corn on the Mexican market after NAFTA, many Mexicans, particularly in traditional farming communities, found they could no longer afford even what little they had. So, a lot of them simply picked up and moved to where the opportunity was, El Norte.

To that end, the 1990 US Census counted about 4.3 million Mexican-born immigrants in the US. 10 years later, the 2000 Census estimated there were 9.2 million Mexican-born immigrants living here. That is an increase of 4.9 million, or 1,342 persons per day for an entire decade. However, believe it or not, the torrent slowed, at least the growth rate, as by 2010, the number of Mexican-born immigrants living in the US had grown to 11.7 million, and has, as I have mentioned, been going down since.

The real reason why this has happened? I would argue living conditions have improved for the average Mexican, even if life remains difficult by our standards...particularly in areas where the government doesn't exert much true control, leaving that to the cartels, like border towns and states.

By the most recent estimates from the World Bank (2013-2015 depending on data set), consider the following: 85.2% of Mexicans have access to improved sanitation, up from 66.2% in 1990; 96.1% have access to improved water sources, up from 82.3%; the average life expectancy at birth has increased 7 years since 1990 to 77.4; less than 3% of

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the population appears to be living on less than \$1.90 (constant 2011 dollars), down from over 11% in 1990; infant mortality has dropped significantly from 46.6 per 1,000 to 13.8; immunization rates have climbed to 97.0% from 75.5; enrollment in secondary education has soared to 87.65 from 53.1%; access to electricity rates vary from 97-99% of the total population depending on source; an estimated 93% of Mexican households have a television, and while 19.5% of Mexican households had a dirt floor in 1990, only about 6.2% did in 2010. Finally, that per capita income number has grown from \$5,280 in 1990 to \$16,500 in 2010.

Basically, average living standards have improved dramatically in Mexico over the last two decades, with the national averages on many metrics meeting, and even exceeding, more than a few US cities, towns, and counties. Economically, it resembles what is known as the Great Migration in the United States, when over 6 million African-Americans left the rural American South for economic opportunity, along with legal rights, in the Midwest and North. As living standards in the South improved, particularly in states like Georgia, North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia, Florida, and Texas, while opportunity waned in the Midwest and North, many African-Americans have emigrated back down South in what sociologists have called the Second Great Migration.

To be sure, living standards in the US are still higher than they are in Mexico. However, that isn't the real issue. It is whether living conditions have improved enough in the latter to make the proposition of getting to the United States, or staying here, worth the risk, particularly for illegal or undocumented workers.

Moving forward, there will continue to be a steady stream of people flocking to this country, if only to flee the violence in cartel controlled areas. On the flipside, there will be more than a few who are already here who will start to wonder whether they are really that much better off in the United States. For many, the answer will be 'not really,' particularly when they consider the distance from friends, family, and familiarity.

As a result, the percent of Mexican-born immigrants in the United States will shrink relative to the overall size of the foreign-born population; maybe not by a lot initially, but it will shrink nonetheless. Gradually taking their place will be immigrants from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, and Central Asia. Basically, the aggregate numbers will probably be about the same, they just won't all be coming from Mexico (not that they always have, even if that is the popular misconception).

In the end, this is an extremely interesting trend, and Americans need to ask themselves this question before demanding fences and more armed guards: "what does it say about the economic opportunities in my community if there aren't any foreign-born workers in it?"

...after all, I will show you an economically disenfranchised neighborhood when all the 'tiendas' are bordered up shut in it.