

Monica Munoz
SOC 101 SEC 2
04/07/16

Mexican Immigration: A Chosen or Forced Decision?

I. Overview

The United States was initially formed by immigrants from all parts of Europe. Once it was established as an independent country with borders, the US received thousands of immigrants per year, and it still does. In the early 19th century immigration came mainly from Western Europe and, in the late 19th and early 20th century, a second wave of immigration from people coming from Eastern Europe and Asia occurred (Wilson, 2007). Thus, although immigration to the United States is not a recent phenomenon, the wave of immigration has shifted primarily to immigrants from Latin America. The Latin American country leading this wave of immigration is Mexico. As Durand states, “[b]y far the most important source for immigration to the United States is Mexico. During the 1980s, legal immigration from Mexico reached the remarkable figure of 3 million persons” (Durand, 2001). This figure, however, only accounts for legal immigration and not illegal immigration, which is becoming more of social issue of debate nowadays as the Mexican population in the US is rapidly increasing. According to a Pew Research, “[i]n 2014, 5.6 million unauthorized immigrants from Mexico lived in the U.S., down by about 1 million since 2007. Despite the drop, Mexicans still make up about half (49% in 2014) of unauthorized immigrants” (Gonzales-Barrera, 2015).

The existence of illegal immigration “[has] tended to generate ethnic tensions” (Wilson, 2007) as some citizens believe that illegal and legal immigrants are given privileges that should be reserved for US citizens only. Thus, the US government is always contemplating solutions to

minimize the number of illegal immigrants; “[t]he USA government’s response to the migration flows from Mexico was embodied in the United States Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which was aimed at controlling undocumented migration and legalizing established illegal populations in the USA” (Mendoza, 2008). This reform included sanctions for those who hired illegal employees, amnesty for undocumented immigrants that wanted to stay for a particular time, and tighten border patrol. This policy was effective in slowing down illegal immigration but “by 2000 the number [had] increased to 4,808,000 expanding the total number of unauthorized Mexican migrants to 9,177,000” (Mendoza, 2008).

In order to better understand the issue of Mexican legal and illegal immigration in the United States, we first need to look at the problem within a larger social perspective by analyzing the social structural and institutional forces that are impacting or causing the problem. In this paper I will explore the social structures of Mexico’s economy and policies as well as US’s governmental policies, the role of organized crime, and family and culture in order to understand the underlying outside causes that motivate and/or pressure an individual to immigrate to the United States. In order to do this, a variety of scholarly articles and websites are going to be studied.

II. Mexican Economic Structure

Although Mexico is rapidly developing into a powerful nation, the economic structure and the way it is implemented by the Mexican government, does not favor many Mexicans. It is common for outside people to think that Mexico’s economy and standards of living are well beneath those of the United States. However, Mexico is becoming a powerful nation that is

rapidly developing and catching with the top countries “with over a trillion-dollar economy and per capita annual income (in 2004)” (Wilson, 2007). As Mexico is developing, so is its industrialization primarily because of its urban regions; Mexico has one of the largest urban regions in the world which is Mexico City (Wilson, 2007). However, the structure of this development is affecting many Mexicans. It is not that Mexicans immigrate because they are greedy or want to create a higher standard of living in the US, they want to escape the negative impacts of economic structure that, although it might be helping many, it is negatively impacting some. General wages, for instance, are different in Mexico and the US; “GDP per capita in the United States is four times that of Mexico, and given the greater income inequality and macroeconomic instability in Mexico, for many low-skill workers the average income differential realized by immigrating to the United States may well be greater than four times” (Wilson, 2007). Thus in order to escape the inequality of low wages for low-skill workers in Mexico, many Mexicans immigrate to the US where they will at least earn four times more. This problem can be analyzed through the sociological conflict perspective; since Mexico’s economic structure is creating good opportunities of economic advancement for some but is also leaving many citizens in poverty, there exists class inequality. This inequality created by the structure of the economy is forcing many individuals to immigrate to the US where they can at least hope to have a little more to survive.

Another example in the Mexican economic structure for which many individuals immigrate to the US is the lack of complete financial markets in Mexico. Financial markets are markets that trade securities such as stocks and bonds. Most individuals that immigrate for this reason, however, have the capacity to do so legally. As Wilson mentions, “[d]ue to incomplete markets for capital, consumer credit, mortgage credit, and insurance, some workers who are not

necessarily displaced might temporarily immigrate to the United States as a means of accumulating assets” (Wilson, 2007). This might be more the cause for businessmen who need those financial markets or assets in order to continue their business. In this case also, many businessmen or wanna-be businessmen don not have an option but to immigrate, at least temporarily, to the US for complete financial markets.

III. Mexican and American Governmental Institutions

The industrialization of Mexico also brought about the dislocation of workers which resulted in a domino effect where the US had to reinforce its borders and all of these caused even greater number of illegal immigrants. With the process of industrialization, Mexico sought to innovate and as a result the government implemented the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which was an agreement between Mexico, Canada, and the US. This policy of free trade, however, “failed to avail itself of other opportunities to protect or promote small-scale maize farming. As a result, corn imports from the United States increased three-fold after NAFTA, prices dropped by nearly half, and 2.5-3 million poor farmers in Mexico have found themselves under increasing economic pressure” (Wilson, 2007). Hence, with prices so low, and without any help, since farm programs have declined dramatically (Wilson, 2007), farmers were left in poverty and this effect can still be seen today. However, not only were these workers left in poverty but many were left even without the equipment to do their work. With industrialization and the expansion of markets, traditional farming techniques, which are more popular in the uneducated, are unable to survive; “workers, who formerly used traditional methods of production, are unable to equip themselves with the newer, more modern industrial implements” (Wilson, 2007). As a result, “[a]n estimated 1.5 million Mexican farmers have left

farming” (Wilson, 2007). These farmers not knowing any other skill, are forced to immigrate to the US to continue to work in the only profession they know, as farmers. However, as they lack the means and money for proper documentation, most do so illegally.

As the number of Mexican illegal immigration increased with the years because of the NAFTA implementation, the US saw the necessity to increase border patrol. As the article “Reinforcement of Border Control Measures Begins” of the 1996 Los Angeles Times indicates, the border patrol underwent a reinforcement during the 90s due to the number of Mexicans trying to cross illegally. This is still true today as the border is constantly being reinforced and many advocate for even a more drastic reinforcement; “Nowadays, with [this] massive strict control [...], the migrant’s decisions include permanent or temporary options, making Mexican migration much more oriented toward remaining permanently and bringing their families to the USA” (Mendoza, 2008). This is due to their knowledge of the possibility that if they return to Mexico they might not be able to return to the US because they will be shut out. Thus, once they enter the US and are presented with new reinforcements of the border patrol, they are less likely to go back to Mexico because they will know it will be more difficult to get back in. Hence, strong border patrol could be forcing many illegal immigrants to stay in the US.

IV. Mexican Organized Crime

The current wave of violence and crime that Mexico is experiencing has placed many of its citizens in a position where it is desirable, if not necessary, to immigrate to a safer US. In fact, “[f]rom December 2006 to 2010, 34,550 killings were officially linked to organized crime, a dramatic increase from previous years (2000-2006)” (Contreras, 2014). Due to the drug and

cartel related violence that many cities in Mexico are experiencing, it can even be argued that an individual's location of residency in Mexico increases its chances to immigrate to the US at some point, regardless of doing so legally or not. As Contreras argues, "drug-related violence and organized crime activities are affecting migration dynamics in Mexico. An important number of Mexicans are relocating to the United States, and to other cities within their country, to escape drug-related homicides and criminal activity that has spiked since 2008" (Contreras, 2014). For example, there is more violence and danger in cities that are located closer to the border between Mexico and the United States. In addition, close proximity to the US also makes more likely the immigration of these individuals to the United States. Thus Mexican organized crime affects a person's decision to immigrate to the US.

VI. Factors in Family and Culture

Family and culture play an important role in the immigration of Mexicans to the US. For instance, it is more likely for an individual to immigrate to the US if he/she already has family living there; "[c]ontacts in the new location may help the migrant to find housing and employment among other things. Sociologists refer to such communities as "ethnic enclaves"" (Wilson, 2007). An "ethnic enclave" is an area with a high particular ethnic concentration which people of the same ethnicity tend to go to. This is due to the similarity in culture and values which also affect the location where the individual immigrates to (Mendoza, 2008). An individual's family thus tends to settle on "ethnic enclaves". Thus, social networks are really important in reinforcing and individual's decision to immigrate.

VII. Conclusion

Although individualistic factors might play a role in Mexican immigration, from a sociological perspective, outside structural factors play a heavier role. The structure of Mexico's rising economy has created an issue of social inequality which reduces the wages of many workers to more than four times less than wages in the US. It also affects many farmers who lack the attention necessary for them not to fall into poverty due to high tariffs and lack of innovated farming techniques. The reinforcement of border patrols also unbalances the inflow and outflow of illegal immigration since many, afraid to be shut out, stay in the US. Mexican organized crime is also a big outside structure that threatens the security of many Mexican citizens and as a result many decide to immigrate in order to have a safer living. Finally, family location and connections in the US greatly impacts whether an individual decides to immigrate to the US or not. Hence, it can be concluded that all of these outside social factors that are beyond the individual's control force many Mexicans to immigrate to the US legally and illegally. Thus, for many is not really an individual choice, but the only possible action.

In order to solve the controversial issue of Mexican Immigration structural changes need to happen. First of all, Mexican governmental policies need to change and the government needs to change parts of its economic structure by offering more help to farmers and low-skill workers. Farmer programs need to be re-implement in order to prevent farmers from falling into poverty. Organized crime needs to be attacked in order to reduce the insecurity that many Mexican citizens suffer every day; this can even be done with the help of the US government. By tweaking Mexico's economy and governmental policies of both Mexico and the US, this issue can be improved and made more positive.

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