More Mexicans Leaving Than Coming to the U.S.

Net Loss of 140,000 from 2009 to 2014; Family Reunification Top Reason for Return

BY ANA GONZALEZ-BARRERA

More Mexican immigrants have returned to Mexico from the U.S. than have migrated here since the end of the Great Recession, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of newly available government data from both countries. The same data sources also show the overall flow of Mexican immigrants between the two countries is at its smallest since the 1990s, mostly due to a drop in the number of Mexican immigrants coming to the U.S.

From 2009 to 2014, 1 million Mexicans and their families (including U.S.-born children) left the U.S. for Mexico, according to data from the 2014 Mexican National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID). U.S. census data for the same period show an estimated 870,000 Mexican nationals left Mexico to come to the U.S., a smaller number than the flow of families from the U.S. to Mexico.

Measuring migration flows between Mexico and the U.S. is challenging because there are no official counts of how many Mexican immigrants enter and leave the U.S. each year. This report uses the best available government data from both countries to estimate the size of these flows. The Mexican data sources — a national household survey, and two national censuses — asked comparable questions about household members’ migration to and from Mexico over the five years previous to each survey or census date. In addition, estimates of Mexican migration to the U.S. come from U.S. Census Bureau data, adjusted for undercount, on the number of Mexican immigrants who live in the U.S. (See text box below for more details.)

Calculating the Flow from the U.S. to Mexico

To calculate estimates of how many people left the U.S. for Mexico, this report uses data from the 2014 Mexican National Survey of Demographic Dynamics, or ENADID and the 2010 and 2000 Mexican decennial censuses. Each asked all respondents where they had been living five years prior to the date when the survey or census was taken. The answers to this question provide an estimated count of the number of people who moved from the U.S. to Mexico during the five years prior to the survey date. A separate question targets more recent emigrants—people who left Mexico. It asks whether anyone from the household had left for another country during the previous five years; if so, additional questions are asked about whether and when that person or people came back and their reasons for returning to Mexico.
To calculate estimates of how many Mexicans left Mexico for the U.S., this report also uses U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (2005-2013) and the Current Population Survey (2000-2014), both adjusted for undercount, which ask immigrants living in the U.S. their country of birth and the year of their arrival in the U.S.

Mexico is the largest birth country among the U.S. foreign-born population – 28% of all U.S. immigrants came from there in 2013. Mexico also is the largest source of U.S. unauthorized immigrants (Passel and Cohn, 2014).

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.
Mexican immigrants have been at the center of one of the largest mass migrations in modern history. Between 1965 and 2015 more than 16 million Mexican immigrants migrated to the United States – more than from any other country (Pew Research Center, 2015). In 1970, fewer than 1 million Mexican immigrants lived in the U.S. By 2000, that number had grown to 9.4 million, and by 2007 it reached a peak at 12.8 million. Since then, the Mexican-born population has declined, falling to 11.7 million in 2014, as the number of new arrivals to the U.S. from Mexico declined significantly (Passel et al., 2012); meanwhile the reverse flow to Mexico from the U.S. is now higher.

The decline in the number of Mexican immigrants residing in the U.S. has been mostly due to a drop of more than 1 million unauthorized immigrants from Mexico from a peak of 6.9 million in 2007 to an estimated 5.6 million in 2014 (Passel and Cohn, 2014).

**The View From Mexico**
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. (https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http://pewrsr.ch/1MBBB9O&text=33%25%20of%20adults%20in%20Mexico%20say%20those%20who%20move%20to%20the%20U.S.%20lead%20a%20life%20that%20is%20equivalent%20to%20that%20in%20Mexico)

Asked about their willingness to migrate to the U.S., 35% say they would move to the U.S. if they had the opportunity and means to do so, including 20% of adults in Mexico who would do so without authorization. This is unchanged from 2009 when a third of adults in Mexico said they would be willing to migrate to the U.S., and 18% said they would do it without authorization (Pew Research Center, 2009 (http://www.pewglobal.org/2009/09/23/most-mexicans-see-better-life-in-us-one-in-three-would-migrate/)).

Roadmap to the Report

This report is organized as follows. The first chapter analyzes statistics on migration between Mexico and the U.S. from data sources in both countries. The second chapter uses U.S. Census Bureau data to examine characteristics of Mexican immigrants residing in the U.S. in 1990 and 2013. The third chapter, based on a nationally representative survey of adults living in Mexico, examines trends in Mexican attitudes about life in the U.S. and future interest in migrating there, and their opinion of U.S. President Barack Obama’s executive action to expand the number of unauthorized immigrants who are allowed to stay in the U.S. legally and work temporarily. Appendix A includes a statistical portrait of Mexican immigrants, compared with all Latin American immigrants and Asian immigrants, while Appendix B explains the report’s methodology and data sources.

Is Mexico Still the Largest Source of New Immigrants to the U.S.?
For decades, Mexico has been the top source of newly arrived immigrants to the U.S., but with a recent decline in the flow of new immigrants to the U.S. from Mexico, and an increase in the number of new immigrant arrivals from China and India, Mexico may no longer be the top source of U.S. immigrants. The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that China overtook Mexico in 2013 as the leading country for new immigrants (Jensen, 2015). However, under a different measure, Mexico remains the top source of immigrants – at least for now, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau data.

Estimates of the number of newly arrived immigrants vary depending on the measure used. The Census Bureau’s analysis was based on the number of foreign-born people who said they lived outside of the U.S. in response to the American Community Survey question, “Did this person live in this house or apartment one year ago?” Using this measure for 2013, about 147,000 Chinese immigrants came to the U.S., compared with 129,000 Indian immigrants and 125,000 Mexican immigrants. (The difference between the number of Indian and Mexican immigrants is not statistically significant.)

By contrast, Mexico remains the world’s top source of newly arrived immigrants to the U.S. under a different American Community Survey question that asks, “When did this person come to live in the U.S.?” Under this measure, 246,000 Mexicans, 195,000 Chinese and 199,000 Indians arrived in the U.S. in 2013 and 2012. (We report two years because the 2013 arrivals represent only about half of the year given the way the data are collected.)

Regardless of the exact number of new immigrants from each country arriving in the U.S. each year, the trends are clear: Over the past decade, immigration from China and India to the U.S. has increased steadily, while immigration from Mexico has declined sharply. This shift in immigration is noteworthy because since 1965 Mexico has sent more immigrants (16.2 million) to the United States than any other country, in what has been the largest wave of immigration in U.S. history (Pew Research Center, 2015).

A Note on Terminology

1. These results are based on face-to-face interviews conducted among a representative sample of 1,000 randomly selected adults from across the country between April 7 to 19, 2015. http://www.pewglobal.org/international-survey-methodology/?country_select=Mexico&year_select=2015