



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration Policy: Surveys among Latinos in the U.S. and in Mexico

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Although an overwhelming majority of Hispanics expresses positive attitudes toward immigrants, relatively few Hispanics favor increasing the flow of legal immigration from Latin America and a significant minority, concentrated among native-born Latinos, is concerned that unauthorized migrants are hurting the economy. One hotly-debated means to discourage unauthorized migration—laws that deny drivers' licenses to people who are in the country illegally—draws support from a majority of the native born, according to a survey of the Latino population in the United States conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center (PHC).[♦]

Meanwhile, separate PHC surveys conducted in Mexico show that about four of every ten adults in the Mexican population say they would migrate to the United States if they had the means and opportunity and that two of every ten are inclined to live and work here without legal authorization. The willingness to migrate, even illegally, is evident in all sectors of Mexican society including the middle class and the well-educated as well as those who are poor and who only completed low-levels of schooling.

Several major immigration reform bills were introduced in Congress earlier this summer, and President George W. Bush has said recently that he expects to see action on the topic when he and the Congress return to Washington in September. The various proposals under consideration generally aim to deal with two broad sets of policy challenges: Determining the status of the estimated 11 million persons, most of them Latinos, who currently live in the country without authorization. And, managing future migration flows.

Regarding the unauthorized population already in the United States, the PHC Survey of U.S. Latinos shows greater support among Hispanics for proposals that would offer permanent legal status to unauthorized migrants now in the country than for President Bush's suggestion to create a temporary worker program.

Latino public opinion overall looks favorably on immigrants. For example, clear majorities of U.S. Hispanics in several PHC surveys have said that unauthorized migrants help the economy by providing low cost labor. But these views are neither unanimous nor monolithic. At least a third of the native born consistently complain that the unauthorized hurt the economy by driving down wages. Attitudes among Latinos toward options in immigration policy reflect a variety of views on immigrants and their impact on the country as well as assessments of the specific pros and cons of individual measures.

In terms of future migration flows, the PHC Mexico Survey shows that a large share of the Mexican population would consider participating in a temporary work program. However, the policy challenges may still grow given that the inclination to migrate is evident across a broad swath of the Mexican population.

[♦] The terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably throughout this report.

The Center has conducted extensive and repeated surveys of the U.S. Hispanic population for more than three years and has probed attitudes toward immigrants, immigration and immigration policy options in a variety of ways. A review of those findings, which can be found in Appendix A of this report, shows substantial consistency in these views. When asked to prioritize public policy issues, Latinos do not rank immigration as highly as education, health care or jobs. On the flow of legal immigrants from Latin America, more Hispanics want to see the numbers either kept as they are or reduced than favor an increased flow. On this question and others, native-born Latinos are less enthusiastic about immigration than the foreign born. Roughly speaking, between a fifth and a third of native-born Hispanics offer negative responses to various questions about immigrants, particularly the undocumented, or on policies that would help the unauthorized acquire legal status. These sentiments are generally strongest among the middle-aged and the middle class in the native-born Latino population.

The PHC Survey of U.S. Latinos, June 2005 was conducted by telephone among a nationally representative sample of 1,001 Latino respondents from June 14 to June 27. The survey has a margin of error of 3.1% for the full sample.

Major findings include:

- An overwhelming majority of Latinos (80%) say that immigrants today strengthen the United States because of their hard work and talents while only a small share (14%) say they are a burden because they take jobs, housing and health care. The breadth of this positive assessment differs according to respondents' nativity. The foreign born are nearly unanimous (89% vs. 5%) in taking a positive view of immigrants while the native born are somewhat more divided (65% vs. 28%).
- Asked specifically about undocumented or illegal migrants, most Latinos (68%) say they help the economy by providing low-cost labor rather than hurt the economy by driving wages down (23%). The foreign born are again more positive (76% vs. 15%) than the native born (55% vs. 34%).
- Hispanics are divided in their views of laws that deny drivers' licenses to unauthorized migrants with 41% saying they approve of measures that prohibit licenses to anyone who is here illegally or without authorization while 55% disapprove. Among the native born 60% approve of such laws while 29% disapprove. The foreign born split the other way with 29% approving and 66% disapproving. A slight majority (53%) of Latino registered voters said they approve of such measures.
- Most Hispanics think that the number of legal immigrants coming to the United States from Latin America should stay the same (43%) or be reduced (13%). A little less than a third (31%) believe the number should be increased.
- A slight majority (56%) of Hispanics favors proposals to create a temporary worker program that would allow currently illegal migrants to live and work in the United States legally for a number of years before obliging them to return home. A much larger majority (84%) favors proposals that would give unauthorized migrants permanent legal status here and eventually allow them to become U.S. citizens.

In order to probe the views of potential migrants in Mexico, the nation that is by far the largest single source of new arrivals to the United States, the Center conducted surveys of nationally representative samples of the Mexican population in February and May of this year. Both surveys had samples of 1,200 adults who were interviewed in their homes and both had a 3% margin of error. Identical questions on migration were asked in both surveys and produced similar results.

Major findings include:

- Asked whether they would go live in the United States if they had the means and opportunity, 41% responded positively in the February survey and 46% in the May survey.
- A fifth of Mexican adults (21% in both surveys) said they would be inclined to go live and work in the United States without authorization.
- A majority of Mexicans (52% in February and 54% in May) say they would be inclined to go to the United States through a temporary worker program that would require them to return to Mexico in some years and even greater majorities (68% in February and 71% in May) said their relatives and friends would be interested in participating.
- The propensity to migrate is evident in all sectors of Mexican society although it is somewhat higher among males, young adults and people with relatives already in the United States. It is by no means restricted to either the poor or the less educated. For example, more than a third (35%) of Mexican college graduates said they would go to the United States if they had the means and the opportunity and more than one in eight (13%) said they were inclined to do so without authorization.

The Pew Hispanic Center is a nonpartisan research organization supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Its mission is to improve understanding of the U.S. Hispanic population and to chronicle Latinos' growing impact on the entire nation. The Center does not advocate for or take positions on policy issues. It is a project of the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan "fact tank" in Washington, DC that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world.