

About the Survey

Fieldwork was conducted at Mexican consulates in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, Raleigh and Fresno from July 12, 2004, to Jan. 28, 2005. A total of 4,836 individuals responded to a 12-page questionnaire in Spanish. All respondents were in the process of applying for a *matrícula consular*, an identity card issued by Mexican diplomatic missions. This was not a random survey but one designed to generate the maximum number of observations of Mexican migrants who were seeking further documentation of their identity in the United States. (For further details see the methodological appendix at the end of this report.)

The Pew Hispanic Center is an independent research organization, and it formulated the questionnaire and controlled all of the fieldwork and data preparation. The Center wishes to thank the Ministry of Foreign Relations of Mexico, the Institute for Mexicans Abroad and the Mexican consulates in the seven cities where the survey was conducted for permitting the fieldwork to take place on consular premises. The data and conclusions presented in this report are the exclusive responsibility of the Pew Hispanic Center and do not necessarily reflect the official views of either the foreign ministry or the government of Mexico.

The Economic Transition to America

by Rakesh Kochhar

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Executive Summary

The vast majority of undocumented migrants from Mexico were gainfully employed before they left for the United States. Thus, failure to find work at home does not seem to be the primary reason that the estimated 6.3 million undocumented migrants from Mexico have come to the U.S. Policies aimed at reducing migration pressures by improving economic conditions in Mexico may also need to address factors such as wages, job quality, long-term prospects and perceptions of opportunity.

Once they arrive and pass through a relatively brief period of transition and adjustment, migrants have little trouble finding work. Family and social networks play a significant role in this; large shares of migrants report talking to people they know in the U.S. about job opportunities and living with relatives after arrival. They easily make transitions into new jobs, even though most find themselves working in industries that are new to them. Also, many are paid at minimum-wage levels or below, and it is not uncommon for these workers to experience relatively long spells of unemployment.

The demand for labor appears to play a strong role in shaping the economic destiny of Mexican migrants. Regardless of their background and origin in Mexico or their year of arrival, migrants are concentrated in the same handful of industries in the U.S.—agriculture, hospitality, construction and manufacturing. However, there are also signs of change in the characteristics of migrants and the nature of the demand for them. The more recently arrived and younger migrants from Mexico are better educated than their predecessors (though their education levels remain low by U.S. standards). They are also increasingly coming from a greater variety of regions in Mexico and making homes in new Mexican-migrant settlement areas in the U.S., such as New York and Raleigh, N.C. The latest arrivals are less likely to be farm workers and more likely to have a background in other industries, such as commerce and sales. More and more, Mexican migrants are being hired in the construction and hospitality industries in the U.S.

These findings emerge from the Pew Hispanic Center's Survey of Mexican Migrants. The survey provides detailed information on the demographic characteristics, living arrangements, work experiences and attitudes toward immigration of 4,836 Mexican migrants who completed a 12-page questionnaire as they were applying for a *matrícula consular*, an identity document issued by Mexican diplomatic missions. Fieldwork was conducted in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, Raleigh and Fresno, Calif., from July 12, 2004, to Jan. 28, 2005. While respondents were not asked directly to specify their immigration status, most are believed to lack authorization to work in the U.S. Thus, the survey provides a unique opportunity to study the economic status of a population that is otherwise very difficult to measure.

About the Report

This report is the third in a series of reports on findings from the Survey of Mexican Migrants. The first examined attitudes toward immigration and major demographic characteristics (Suro, 2005a), and the second covered attitudes about voting in Mexican elections (Suro, 2005b). A fourth study on banking and remittances and an additional report on gender and family structure are forthcoming. The completed reports are available at the Pew Hispanic Center Web site (www.pewhispanic.org). The full dataset of survey responses may also be downloaded from the Center's Web site.

The major findings of this study are:

- Unemployment plays a minimal role in motivating workers from Mexico to migrate to the U.S. Only 5% of the survey respondents who have been in the U.S. for two years or less were unemployed while still in Mexico.
- Unemployment in the U.S. is above normal only for respondents who have been here for less than six months. Nearly 15% of the latest arrivals reported they were not currently working. But only about 5% of respondents who migrated more than six months ago reported they were unemployed in the U.S.
- Immigration status has little impact on the likelihood of unemployment in the U.S. Respondents who reported that they have a U.S. government-issued ID had the same employment experiences as those who do not have any documents making them eligible for legal employment.
- Family networks play a key role in locating jobs for migrants. More than 80% of respondents have a relative other than a spouse or child in the U.S., and talking with friends and relatives in the U.S. was the most commonly cited method—by 45% of respondents—for finding information about jobs in the U.S.
- There is a steady and strong demand for migrant workers from Mexico in agriculture, construction, manufacturing and hospitality. These four industries employ about two-thirds of the survey respondents, irrespective of their background in Mexico or their year of arrival.
- Migrants from Mexico are responsive to regional variations in demand for their services. Construction is the dominant industry for employing migrants in Atlanta, Dallas and Raleigh; hospitality is the major employer in New York City; manufacturing in Chicago; and agriculture in Fresno.
- A very high percentage (38%) of migrants reported experiencing a spell of unemployment lasting more than a month in the past year. This unusually widespread—compared to other U.S. workers—experience of temporary unemployment is evident among Mexican migrants regardless of their year of arrival, legal status, education and survey city.
- The median weekly earnings of survey respondents are only \$300. Earnings are especially low among women, those who speak no English and those who do not have a U.S. government-issued ID.
- Migrant workers in the survey have a background that resembles the core of Mexico's labor force. Two-thirds of respondents who entered the U.S. in the past two years worked in agriculture, construction, manufacturing or retail trade in Mexico. That is also true for 57% of the labor force in Mexico.

- Migrant characteristics differ according to the length of time a respondent has been in the United States. Most respondents (72%) lack even a high school education, but the youngest and most recently arrived have higher levels of schooling than long-term migrants. The percentage of migrants coming from the agriculture sector in Mexico has dropped from 41% among those who arrived more than 15 years ago to 20% among recent arrivals. Higher proportions of migrants are now coming to the U.S. with a background in construction, manufacturing and sales.
- The percentage of survey respondents employed in agriculture in the U.S. has dropped from 17% of those in country more than 15 years to 9% of recent arrivals. At the same time, the percentage employed in construction and hospitality has increased from 23% to 42%.

Founded in 2001, the Pew Hispanic Center is a nonpartisan research organization supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, a Philadelphia-based charity. The Pew Hispanic Center's mission is to improve understanding of the diverse Hispanic population and to chronicle Latinos' growing impact on the nation. 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. It does not advocate for or take positions on policy issues.

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Kochhar has over 15 years of research experience in the areas of labor economics and price and wage measurement and analysis. Prior to joining the Pew Hispanic Center, he was Senior Economist at Joel Popkin and Company, where he served as a consultant to government agencies, private firms, international agencies, and labor unions.

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