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Free trade, food-processing, and migration: An analysis of Mexican immigration in the U.S. Great Plains Region

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ABSTRACT

This paper empirically identifies the factors driving Mexican immigration into the U.S. Great Plains region, focusing especially on the role of work in the Mexican and U.S. food-processing sectors, which in the context of NAFTA-induced foreign direct investments, opens up paths for migration along occupational lines into the U.S. from Mexico. Using a unique dataset on Mexican migration, the study addresses three related questions in a series of multivariate logistic regression analyses. First, is employment in the U.S. food-processing sector associated with Mexican migration into the Great Plains region? Second, does employment in the Mexican food-processing sector predict employment in the Great Plains food-processing sector? Finally, is the political–economic context linking Mexico and the U.S. related to the formation of occupational channels linking the food-processing sectors in Mexico and the U.S.? The findings demonstrate that the U.S. food-processing sector is a strong predictor of Mexican migration to the Great Plains region; Mexican migration is strongly channeled along occupational lines from Mexico to the U.S.; and the implementation of NAFTA, a period of intensive political–economic integration, strengthens the occupational channel between the food-processing sectors.

1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, Mexican migration to the United States has become much more geographically diverse (Massey, 2008). Once limited largely to urban areas in the 'Big Five' receiving states (California, New York, Florida, Illinois, and Texas), Mexican migration has dispersed throughout the United States, leading to the rise of new destinations (Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). The Great Plains region hosts many of these new destination communities, most of which are located in rural areas and are home to large food-processing operations (Rochin, 2000; Gouveia & Saenz, 2000; Kandel & Parrado, 2005).

New destinations in the Great Plains region provide a unique opportunity to examine the causes of Mexican migration to the United States. Although Mexican migration in the region predates the emergence of new destinations in the 1990s (Carranza, 1990; Smith, 1981; Weber, 1992; Garcia, 1996), Mexicans, and Latinos more broadly, have been underrepresented in the U.S. Great Plains (Gouveia & Saenz, 2000). Because Mexican immigration has not been extensive in the region, the emergence of new destinations makes it possible to investigate the dynamics motivating migration in relative isolation from other confounding influences in areas with larger numbers of established settlements.

This paper empirically identifies the factors driving Mexican immigration into the U.S. Great Plains region. The paper focuses on Mexican migration because Mexicans constitute the largest single immigrant group in the Great Plains region (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). To develop a more comprehensive understanding of Mexican migration in the region, documented and undocumented migrants are included. The role of the food-processing sector on

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migration is a key factor in the emergence of new destinations in the U.S. (Kandel & Parrado, 2005) and is, therefore, the focus of this study.

This study addresses two related gaps in the research literature. First, although there is a growing literature on the consequences of Mexican immigration to new destinations in the U.S. Great Plains region (Millard & Chapa, 2004; Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005; Massey, 2008), research on the structural causes of these flows remains limited (Rochin, 2000; Gouveia & Saenz, 2000). Second, previous research largely emphasizes demand-side explanations: that is, how employment opportunities in the U.S., especially in the food-processing sector, attract Mexican migrants. Yet, the factors motivating migration might not be confined to demand-side influences within the U.S. Indeed, as economies have become more tightly interconnected through globalization, the factors motivating international migration are increasingly situated at the international level and now include, among others, international trade linkages and investment capital flows (Portes & Walton, 1981; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, & Taylor, 2005; Sanderson & Kentor, 2008, 2009; Sassen, 1988). Given that the Mexican and U.S. economies have become increasingly integrated, particularly since the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, it is worth exploring whether there are factors operating in both the countries that might motivate Mexican migration into new destinations in the U.S. Great Plains region.

2. Globalization, migration, and occupational channeling

Migration from Mexico to the U.S. is the largest sustained flow of migration in the world (Castles & Miller, 2009; Massey et al., 2005). The Mexican migration stream into the U.S. Great Plains region exemplifies a key global trend in international migration. At the global level, international migrants are moving from and into a more diverse array of countries than ever before (UN, 2009): international migration is globalizing (Castles & Miller, 2009). As it globalizes, many countries with very little history of either sending or receiving migrants are now confronting the challenges and opportunities posed by international migration.

This dynamic also manifests at the sub-national, or regional level, as evidenced by the case of Mexican migration to the Great Plains region. Mexican migration within the U.S. is becoming more geographically diverse to the extent that regions with relatively little recent experience of Mexican migration are becoming hotspots for these flows. The U.S. Great Plains region is one such region. Thus, it reflects the broader, macro-level trend toward the globalization of migration patterns to include newer receiving sites.

International migration is a complex phenomenon driven by multiple causes ranging from the individual level to the global, macro-structural level (Massey et al., 2005). Yet our understanding of how macro-level structural dynamics translate into micro-level individual decisions to migrate and to where remains limited. Focusing on the changing context of work provides analytical leverage in linking macro and micro-level migration dynamics. Economic restructuring in both the U.S. and Mexico over the past 35 years has changed work dynamics in both countries, and these changes have ostensibly had implications for the magnitude and patterning, both geographic and temporal, of Mexican migration to the U.S.

Because the two countries are situated in different places in the world political economy, economic restructuring has taken different forms and had different effects in the U.S. and Mexico, as is described below. However, in both countries, restructuring is rooted in changes in the relationship between capital and labor. That is, economic restructuring involves changes in investment patterns, which in turn stimulate changes in migration patterns. The new geography of investment capital creates *inter*-national linkages between particular places in both origin and destination countries that produce a new geography of labor migration between these places. Again, these new geographies of capital and labor flows are initiated and developed through economic restructuring processes that link places of origin and destination.

One of the key factors involved in economic restructuring is foreign direct investment (FDI). FDI is capital invested by a firm to finance long-term operations in a foreign country. Over the past 40 years, FDI has increased dramatically at the global level as market liberalization allowed more firms in wealthy countries – mainly in the U.S., the European Union, and Japan – to invest in operations in middle-income and poor countries (Stallings, 2007). Large foreign firms have also invested more capital, but they have invested in a much wider array of countries, drawing more countries into global production, trade, and exchange circuits. The global dispersal of FDI has generated new migration streams from middle-income and poor countries and directed these streams to specific destinations (Sassen, 1988; Sanderson & Kentor, 2008, 2009). The preponderance of evidence demonstrates that international migration flows occur largely along structural paths developed by the cultural, material, political, military, and economic relations between countries, and FDI is one such important structural path: “Migrations do not just happen; they are produced. And migrations do not involve just any possible combination of countries; they are patterned” (Sassen, 1998, p. 56). Thus, the U.S. receives migrants largely from countries with which it shares these historical relationships, including most importantly, Mexico.

Economic restructuring in Mexico occurred first through World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) initiatives that transformed the Mexican economy from one based upon an import substitution platform to one based upon an export-oriented platform of industrialization (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). From 1980 to 1991, Mexico underwent a series of restructuring initiatives, including 13 structural adjustment loans from the World Bank and 6 agreements with the IMF (McMichael, 2004, p. 144). These forms of restructuring reduced restrictions on FDI (Middlebrook & Zepeda, 2003), which stimulated massive and persistent flows of foreign investment into the Mexican economy. As a result, Mexico was further integrated into the broader global political economy as a major exporter, primarily of manufactured goods