



The Mexican Dream? The effect of return migrants on hometown development

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ABSTRACT

Mexican migrants are returning to their homeland at record rates. Along with material goods, these former migrants may bring with them new ways of thinking about the world and envisioning the future. Still, relatively little is known about the degree to which former migrants affect the wellbeing of their local communities over time. This study evaluates the effect of return migrants on health, education, income, and political participation in Guanajuato, Mexico during the period 2000–2010. The findings imply that returnees may have positive effects within local economies, improving not only income, but also education, healthcare, electoral participation, and overall wellbeing. The results of this study have important implications for policy makers operating within emigration-prone regions of the world.

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1. Introduction

Today, there are more migrants returning to Mexico from the U.S. than there are Mexicans crossing into the U.S. in pursuit of the American Dream (INEGI). In fact, for the first time since the Great Depression net migration flows from Mexico to the U.S. have reversed, with estimates of the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population from Mexico dropping from a peak of 6.9 million in 2007, to 6.0 million in 2012 (Passell et al., 2012).¹

A number of push factors may be related to this historic change, including heightened border enforcement, a rise in deportations, the growing dangers associated with illegal border crossings, and weaker U.S. job opportunities.

Many immigrants may also simply be following through with their original plan to work hard in the U.S. and return home riding on the coattails of their success abroad. However, it appears that improved labor markets in Mexico as well as important shifts in the country's demographics, such as lower fertility rates, may be pulling former migrants back home. Regardless of their reasons for returning, former migrants share one thing in common: They are not the same as when they left. Living and working in the U.S. appears to have changed them, and they, in the process of returning, may be changing Mexico. Still, current research sheds little light on the actual influence of return migrants on hometown communities. The task of this study is to empirically assess the degree to which return migrants impact—if at all—their hometown communities.

Many studies have focused on the effects of immigration. However, the authors are unaware of any empirical research on the effect of return migrants on development over time in their home communities. Given the recent reversal in migration flows, and the potential impact of return migrants on their homelands, this becomes an

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important issue to study. This paper attempts to fill this gap. The study statistically analyzes the effect of return migrants on healthcare, education, income, and political participation and finds that return migrants have a positive effect on all of these measures, suggesting that former migrants may play a key role in underpinning development trends in their home communities.

Results from field research in central Mexico, detailed in Waddell (2013), Waddell (2014), motivate this paper and support its findings. Specifically, since 2009 the authors have met many former migrants settling back into their hometown regions. Across these conversations the authors noticed a recurring trend. In explaining how things should be done in Mexico, former migrants frequently evoke lessons learned while living abroad. For example, in the summer of 2011 during a research visit to the small town of Ojo de Agua, Guanajuato the authors talked to two men who were working on a municipal road. Almost immediately the workers began to express their frustration with the project. According to them, several local families had recently reneged on an agreement to allow the municipal government to use a small part of their land to complete the road. As a result, the project faced a serious impasse that threatened the road's completion. As one of the young men explained,

When I was living in Nebraska this type of thing never would have happened. In the U.S., you see, they do things differently. The people work together for the good of the community and when necessary the government steps in and takes over. Here the government only acts in the interest of those who can pay for it.

The other former migrant, who was nodding his head in agreement, added,

That's why we are different you see. We come back with a new vision of the world and we refuse to do things the way they've always been done. If they stop this project, believe me, we'll head down to the municipal president's office and make sure they know how we feel.

In another instance, María José, who had recently moved back from California, noted,

Here there are traffic laws, but the people don't respect them and the authorities don't enforce them. In Mexico for the right amount of money you can get out of anything and the citizens are the ones to blame because they allow it to go on. They participate in it. If things are going to change it has to start with the people. Myself, I've seen how things can work differently and I'm now determined to contribute to a better Mexico.

On a similar note, Martin, who lived several years in New Mexico and now lives near Jerécuaro, Guanajuato, brought up the importance of cultural habits in driving economic productivity.

In Mexico people work at their own pace. If it gets done today, so be it and if it has to wait until tomorrow, well then that's ok too. In the U.S. though, everyone is working with a deadline and if you don't meet the deadline

you lose your job. Here I have my own tortilla factory and I try to run it like my bosses ran their businesses back in the U.S. I open every day at the same time, I pay attention to quality control, and I always make the customer my priority.

As these men and women show, return migrants often come back to their homelands with a different vision of the world. This tendency is confirmed by existing research, which reveals that living abroad or in larger urban centers alters the way migrants and their family members think about social norms (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011), investments in human capital (Hanson & Woodruff, 2003; Yang, 2008), entrepreneurialism (Woodruff & Zenteno, 2007; Yang, 2008), and politics (Li & McHale, 2009; Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010; Pfutze, 2012; Spilimbergo, 2009; Waddell, 2015). Research in this area reflects the reality that while international immigration has reached historic highs in recent years, a large percentage of migrants eventually end up returning to their homeland. For example, a 2008 study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that after five years roughly 18% of Mexican migrants returned home, whereas 24% of South American migrants returned, 43% of Canadian migrants, and 54% of migrants from the European Union (Dumont & Spielvogel, 2008:172).

Return migrants clearly make up an important percentage of international migration flows. Still, only a handful of studies directly address the effect of return migration on hometown communities (Arce, Renato, & José Antonio, 2011; Batista & Vicente, 2011; Marchetta, 2012; Chauvet & Mercier, 2011; Dustmann, Fadlon, & Weiss, 2010; Marchetta, 2012; Rother, 2009; Von Reichert, Cromartie, & Arthun, 2014), and where they do, results are largely limited to the analysis of small surveys and qualitative field data.

This study looks to build on extant research by considering municipal-level effects of return migration over the years 2000–2010 in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. The research focuses on Guanajuato for several reasons. First, migration is particularly widespread in Guanajuato and has a long history pre-dating the Great Depression (Durand, 1987). Second, Guanajuato is one of the leading return-migrant receiving states in the nation, and it sends more migrants to the U.S. than any other state (INEGI). Third, the state's income per capita and demographics are roughly average for the nation, but with large heterogeneity across municipalities. It has both high-income industrialized cities, like León and Celaya, and poor rural municipalities with large indigenous populations, such as Xichú and Atarjea. Such socio-demographic variation across the state makes Guanajuato an ideal location for exploring the effects of return migration on human development—measured in terms of education, healthcare, income, and civic participation. Finally, data is available at the municipal level for all the variables of interest.²

² For a much more detailed review of historic migration trends out of Guanajuato, see Arias (2004). Old Paradigms and New Scenarios in a Migratory Tradition: U.S. Migration from Guanajuato. In Jorge Durand and

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