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Return migration predictors for undocumented Mexican immigrants living in Dallas



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ABSTRACT

This study uses a survey of undocumented Mexican immigrants living in Dallas to identify variables that predict the likelihood of return migration of undocumented Mexican immigrants. Male immigrants and immigrants under age 25 are more likely to intend to return to Mexico. Surprisingly, length of US residence is not a significant predictor of intended return. In contrast, prior immigrant experience is a significant predictor of intent to return to Mexico. Highly educated immigrants are likely to intend to return to Mexico, probably because the relative skill benefit is greater in the origin country. Immigrants from the Mexican state of Guanajuato are likely to intend to return to Mexico, while those from San Luis Potosi are likely to intend to remain in the US. Immigrants who own a home in Dallas are likely to remain in the US, while those who own land in Mexico are likely to return to Mexico.

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1. Introduction

Prior to the late 1980s, most undocumented Mexican immigrants returned to Mexico after working in the US (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). Two major immigration policy changes made return migration less likely. First, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) gave amnesty to millions of Mexican immigrants illegally residing in the US and allowed them to apply for permanent residency (Durand, Massey, & Parrado, 1999). Second, the Border Reform and Control Act, enacted in response to 9/11, made illegal border crossings more difficult, deterring undocumented immigrants from attempting return migration to Mexico (Cornelius, 2007; Riosmena, 2004). Rendall, Brownell, and Kups (2011) find that the US economic downturn between 2007 and 2009 did not prompt return migration of undocumented migrants. Instead, undocumented immigrants waited for economic conditions to improve. Passel and Cohn (2009) find that the influx of

Mexican immigrants to the US declined by 40.0% between 2006 and 2009; the majority of this decline was attributed to a decline in the entry of undocumented immigrants.

While the literature on undocumented immigration from Mexico to the US is extensive, the return migration intentions of undocumented immigrants living in the US have not been as extensively explored. This study uses the Pew Hispanic Center's study of undocumented Mexican immigrants living in Dallas between 2004 and 2005 to identify variables that predict immigrant intent to return to Mexico. The results indicate that undocumented immigrants' return intentions are related to immigrant demographic characteristics and to socioeconomic factors associated with immigrant origin and destination communities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Migration theories

Massey et al. (1993, 1994) examine theories relevant to migration and integrate these theories to explain contemporary international migration. Neo-classical economic

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theories posit that migration is a result of differences in wage rates between sending and receiving countries (Harris & Todaro, 1970) and that individual immigrants calculate costs and benefits when making migration decisions (Sjaastad, 1962). This theory is insufficient to explain the contemporary international migration system. The new migration economics posits that migration is a family decision focused on risk diversification and predicts that migration will continue in the absence of differences in wage rates (Stark, 1991). Stark and Taylor (1991) examine the relative deprivation that links regions of origin and destination. Remittances from the US destabilize community economic equality in the region of origin and spur additional migration to improve a household's economic standing in the origin community.

Dual labor market theory focuses on labor demands in developed economies and asserts that industrialized countries have two labor forces: primary labor forces with high-skill, high-pay, and high-status occupations, and secondary labor forces with low-skill, low-pay, and low-status occupations (Piore, 1979). These receiving economies need workers to perform jobs considered unacceptable for native populations. According to dual labor market theory, wages of the lowest paid workers do not increase, as that would lead to increases in other wages and disrupt labor market equilibrium. In world systems theory, the growth of capitalism in developing countries results in a migration flow to advanced countries because the introduction of modern agricultural and industrial processes creates a labor surplus (Wallerstein, 1979). Massey et al. (1993, 1994) conclude that each of these theories is valid, but they find dual labor market theory and world systems theory to be the most important determinants of Latin American migration to North America. The US requires a substantial number of low-wage workers to compete in the international economy, and capitalism's penetration into developing countries supplies a mobile labor force driven by the demand for labor in developed countries. In each of these theories, immigration is sustained over time because early immigrants establish a network that lowers immigration costs for future immigrants.

Jennison (2007) revisits earlier attempts by Massey et al. (1993, 1994) to integrate migration theories by placing them in a migration systems approach. Neoclassical theories of migration, the new migration economics, world systems theory, and dual labor market theory are temporal processes. In these models, migration ends when economic incentives to migrate end. In contrast, network theory and institutional theory are ongoing processes, in which migration continues independent of the original need to migrate. While network theory is associated with both documented and undocumented migration, institutional theory is mainly associated with undocumented migration. This theory claims that the availability of false documents, the provision of labor contracts, and immigration smuggling operations will continue to perpetuate the immigration process, sustaining the immigration flow even after the original need to immigrate ceases. Each of the immigration flows is affected by and affects all the other flows in this systems approach.

These migration theories do not address the significance of gender. Some scholars believe that women act primarily as passive immigrants by joining male heads of household who immigrated previously (Donato, 1993). However, Kanaiaupuni (2000) finds that single females are more likely to immigrate than their married counterparts. Another misconception is that males immigrate largely in response to economic incentives. Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1994) examination of Mexican immigration to the US finds that the new migration economics is insufficient to explain immigration. She finds that males are often encouraged to immigrate as a source of adventure or a rite of passage to manhood. In contrast, decades of emigration by male relatives undermined male authority in Mexico, making it easier for females to migrate in response to economic incentives. Feliciano (2008) and Kanaiaupuni (2000) find that female immigrants are more educated than their female non-migrant counterparts in Mexico, suggesting a payoff for immigration to the US.

2.2. Return migration to Mexico

During the early 1990s, documented immigrants were more likely to return to Mexico than undocumented immigrants (Durand, Massey, & Zenteno, 2001; Public Policy Institute of California, 1997). Although counterintuitive, this reverse migration was a result of the low cost of migration for documented immigrants who would not have to incur the costs of a future clandestine border crossing. Reyes (2004) uses Mexican Migration Project (MMP) data to track return migration using distinct models for documented versus undocumented immigrants. Documented immigrants were more likely to return migrate after IRCA than their undocumented counterparts, suggesting the documented population had more freedom of movement. Reyes assumes that the reduced likelihood of undocumented return migration in the early 1990s was due to increased enforcement at the border.

Whether an immigrant is documented or undocumented, certain variables are related to the likelihood of return migration. Males are more likely to return than their female counterparts (Reyes, 2001; Ruiz-Tagle & Wong, 2009), and the longer that an immigrant remains in the US, the longer the immigrant is likely to remain (Reyes, 2001; Reyes & Mameesh, 2002). Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) finds that men intend to return and invest in their community of origin, while females find their new lifestyles in the US to be better than their lifestyles in Mexico. As a result, female immigrants are more likely to intend to stay in the US to provide their children with better lifestyles. Human capital, as measured by education level, reveals different trends. Carrion-Flores (2006) and Reinhold and Thom (2009) find that higher education levels lead to higher return migration probabilities because educated returning immigrants have an advantage in the Mexican labor market. In contrast, the Public Institute of California (1997) finds that less educated immigrants are more likely to return to Mexico, and Ruiz-Tagle and Wong (2009) find that those with intermediate education levels return to Mexico. Economic opportunities in immigrants' origin and destination communities are also important predictors of return migration. Both Reyes

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