

# Immigration Trends After 20 Years of NAFTA

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## ABSTRACT

The twentieth anniversary of NAFTA is an opportunity to reflect on what has happened to migration flows. In this essay, the author gives an overview of the trends of Mexican legal high- and low-skilled migration flows as well as of unauthorized flows to the United States, which have increased significantly during the last 20 years, contrary to original expectations. She takes Mexican migration to Canada as a reference for comparison since the flows are less dynamic. Finally, she also analyzes the significant increase of foreigners entering Mexico and the new phenomenon of “return migration.”

**Key words:** NAFTA, legal migration, migration flows, return migration.

## RESUMEN

El vigésimo aniversario del TLCAN es una oportunidad para reflexionar acerca de lo que ha ocurrido con respecto a los flujos migratorios. En este artículo la autora ofrece un panorama sobre las tendencias migratorias a Estados Unidos de mexicanos con alta y baja calificación, así como acerca de los flujos de migración no autorizada que se han incrementado significativamente en los últimos veinte años, en sentido contrario a la expectativa original. La autora toma en cuenta la migración de mexicanos a Canadá como referencia comparativa ya que estos flujos son menos dinámicos. Finalmente, analiza el significativo aumento de extranjeros que entran a México, así como el nuevo fenómeno denominado “migración de retorno”.

**Palabras clave:** TLCAN, migración legal, flujos migratorios, migración de retorno.

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## INTRODUCTION

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has no provisions for migration among the three countries, despite the strong pressure Mexico's negotiators brought to bear during the Salinas administration (1988-1994) to include articles about the free movement of persons across borders. One of the benefits of NAFTA was supposed to be that the dynamic exchange of goods would foster greater economic development in Mexico, creating an important number of jobs with significant increases in wages and, as a result, reducing the pressures to emigrate north.<sup>1</sup> As an incentive to trade, NAFTA allowed investment and transfers between companies, as well as temporary moves of professionals and their families. It established a specific non-immigrant TN visa (Trade NAFTA) exclusively for several categories of professionals.

During the 20 years since NAFTA came into effect, it has indeed brought broad regional economic interaction among many sectors, greater dynamism in foreign investment, and myriad trade transactions that have led to diverse businesses opening in Mexico. However, the predicted growth of the Mexican economy due to the implementation of NAFTA, which was supposed to be enough to create a lot of jobs in Mexico and eventually diminish the flow of Mexican migrants to the United States, did not materialize. Not only that, but the flow actually increased, mainly during the first 15 years, since the push-pull factors of Mexican migration to the United States have persisted, mainly in periods of economic growth during the NAFTA era.

In this essay, I will present an overview of the trends of Mexican legal migration flows (high- and low-skilled), as well as of unauthorized flows to the United States over the last 20 years. For that purpose, I begin by describing a very broad perspective of the main economic trends during this period. Secondly, I analyze the legal entries or visas issued to Mexicans as immigrants or temporary workers in the U.S., as well as the trends in the naturalization process by our citizens. In the third place, I explore the trends of unauthorized flows, which increased significantly during the NAFTA era. It is important to mention that Mexican migration to Canada is always taken as a reference point for comparison, looking at different types of visas or entries of migrant flows to the U.S., since they are less dynamic than those between México and the United States. In the last section, I give a broad overview of the flow

<sup>1</sup> Since the end of the nineteenth century, there was an intention to establish a free trade agreement with the United States. In 1877, José Yves Limantour was appointed secretary of a commission to explore the possibility of proposing a trade agreement with the U.S. Before becoming minister of finance in 1892 under the Porfirio Díaz administration, he thought it was not the right time to propose it. His point of view clashed with that of Ignacio L. Vallarta, the foreign minister at the time, who believed an agreement would be very important for Mexico's economic development. The two men were my children's great-great-grandfathers (Limantour, 1965).

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