



Rush to the border? Market liberalization and urban- and rural-origin internal migration in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

In this study we examine the social and economic factors driving internal migration flows in Mexico. We pay particular attention to the effect that economic liberalization has had in encouraging migration to border cities. Our analysis of the origin and destination of migrants is carried out at a finer level of geographical detail than ever before. Microdata files from the 2000 population census allow us to distinguish urban- and rural-origin migrants to the largest 115 cities and metropolitan areas in the country. Our results indicate that economic liberalization, measured by the level of foreign investment and employment in the *maquiladora* export industry, strongly influences migrants' choice of destinations. However, economic liberalization fails to fully account for the attraction of the border, as do the higher emigration rates to the United States from border cities. Our analysis also reveals that migrants to the border region and to cities with high levels of foreign investment are younger, less educated and more likely to be men than migrants to other parts of Mexico. Rural migrants are significantly more likely to move to the border and to cities with high levels of foreign investment than urban migrants. The results of our study have important implications for other countries opening their economies to foreign investment and international trade.

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1. Introduction

International migration from Mexico to the United States has been a topic of enormous interest in the social sciences. Over the past several decades researchers have examined the individual and community-level factors that generate emigration from Mexico, as well as the process of immigrant adaptation in the United States (e.g., Massey et al., 1994; Massey and Espinosa, 1997; Loaeza Tovar et al., 1998). Considerably less research has been carried out on internal migration in Mexico. Existing studies are either descriptive in nature (Partida Bush, 1993; Chávez, 1999) or examine internal migration only in the context of questions about international migration (Massey et al., 1987; Fussell, 2004). As a result, we know comparatively little about the kinds of social and economic factors that are driving internal migration flows. Yet more individuals migrate within Mexico on an annual basis than from Mexico to the United States. Internal migration has contributed to the rapid growth of Mexican urban centers, particularly given rapidly declining urban fertility rates, and substantially altered the age and gender composition of Mexican cities (National Research Council, 2003). Nowhere is this more evident than in the cities along the border with the United States, which in the past three decades have received a disproportionate share of internal migrants.

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During the mid-20th century internal migration in Mexico was dominated by a massive flow of rural residents to the three largest urban centers in the country: Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey (Oliveira and Roberts, 1989; Partida Bush, 1993). Between 1965 and 1970, for example, the states containing these three cities received more than half of all inter-state migrants. However, the pattern of internal migration in Mexico has changed considerably over the past several decades. A larger proportion of migrants appears to be originating in urban rather than rural areas, and migrants are more often moving to midsized cities, particularly those along the border with the United States (Roberts, 1989; Escobar Latapí et al., 1998). Between 1995 and 2000, one third of all internal migrants in Mexico moved to a border state, compared to 15% who moved to the capital city, and 4% each to Guadalajara and Monterrey.

These changes in internal migration coincide with the opening of Mexico's economy to international trade and foreign investment (Portes and Roberts, 2005). Economic liberalization fostered the growth of new production centers along the northern border, including the proliferation of in-bond industries known as *maquiladoras*, which contributed to a decline of the manufacturing belt centered in Mexico City (Hanson, 1998a, 1998b).¹ The rapid industrialization of the border in turn appears to have encouraged an increase in migration towards that region, but no study has directly tested this hypothesis. In this article we examine the social and economic factors driving internal migration in Mexico. We pay particular attention first to the effect that economic liberalization has had in encouraging migration towards border cities by testing the effect of foreign ownership and *maquiladora* employment on internal migration patterns.

Second, because internal migration to the border may also be motivated by a desire to eventually move across the border to the United States, we consider the relation between internal migration and international out-migration to the United States. Mexican domestic migration and international emigration were separate flows for most of the twentieth century, one flow composed of temporary, agricultural labor movement to the United States and the other of permanent, non-agricultural labor movement to Mexican cities (Massey et al., 1987). Recently, scholars have speculated that domestic and US-bound Mexican migration have become increasingly interconnected (Fussell, 2004; Lozano-Ascencio et al., 1999). Our study examines this interconnection using nationally-representative data.

Finally, our analysis of internal migration flows in Mexico is carried out at a finer level of geographical detail than ever before. The primary data source used in this study, the 10-percent sample of the 2000 Mexican population census, distinguishes the movement of individuals at the municipality level nationwide.² This greater level of geographical detail allows us to overcome one of the most important limitations of previous studies, namely their inability to separate migrants according to the level of urbanization of the communities of origin and destination. Past research examining the origin and destination of internal migrants not only in Mexico but in other countries as well, has relied on information about individuals' movement across states or provinces (King, 1978; Greenwood and Ladman, 1978; Garrison, 1982; Liang and White, 1996, 1997; Dang et al., 1997; Herting et al., 1997; Aroca and Maloney, 2005; Rivero-Fuentes, 2005; Peeters, 2008). Yet states and provinces are units of aggregation that are typically too large to characterize as either urban or rural, as they encompass both urban and rural localities. An analysis of inter-state or inter-provincial migration patterns therefore obscures potential differences in rural-to-urban and urban-to-urban migration, a fact that has frequently been acknowledged in previous studies (King, 1978; Garrison, 1982; Lucas, 1997). Given their differences in education and skills, for example, we may expect rural and urban migrants to choose to migrate to cities with very different characteristics.

The article is organized as follows: In the next section we discuss the impact of market liberalization on internal migration in Mexico. We derive some specific hypotheses about the role of foreign investment and export production on migration to Mexican cities, about the relation between domestic and international migration, and about the differences in urban- and rural-origin migration. After describing the data and methods used, we test discrete choice models using inter-municipal migration data to compare the social and economic conditions driving rural and urban migrants to the largest 115 cities and metropolitan areas in the country. In the final section we discuss the implications of our findings for research on internal migration in developing countries in general, and for studies about the effects of market transitions in particular.

2. Market liberalization and internal migration

Research on China and other countries undergoing transitions from central planning to market-oriented economies has demonstrated the impact that economic reforms may have on internal migration flows (Liang and White, 1996, 1997; Dang et al., 1997; Liang, 2001). For example, Liang and White (1997) find that Chinese provinces that have benefitted from market reforms, most notably those with higher levels of foreign investment, have received a disproportionate share of migrants, and have lower rates of outmigration. Similarly, provinces with well-developed rural enterprises are more likely to retain peasants with higher levels of education. While economic liberalization in Mexico constitutes a less radical reorientation than the market transition in China, the policies initiated by the Mexican government since the 1980s nevertheless appear to have had a significant effect on internal migration.

¹ *Maquiladora* plants in Mexico assemble goods for export to foreign countries using materials that are imported temporarily for this purpose. Special legislation allows *maquiladoras* to import materials and machinery duty free so long as the assembled products are exported. *Maquiladoras* operate under similar conditions as firms in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) elsewhere in the world (INEGI, n.d.).

² Mexican municipalities are roughly equivalent to US counties, although they are somewhat smaller in size. In 2000 there were a total of 2443 municipalities nationwide with an average population of 39,903 residents.

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