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MEXICAN MIGRATION PATTERNS SIGNAL A NEW IMMIGRATION REALITY:

*Fewer Mexicans are Entering the U.S., Fewer Are Leaving,
and Mexican American Births Now Outpace Immigration from Mexico*

Much of what we thought we knew about immigration is changing, and the new reality means we need to think differently about how we approach immigrants and immigration reform in the United States. Unauthorized immigration has clearly paused, and [three-fifths](#) of unauthorized immigrants have been in the United States for more than a decade. Immigrants are becoming more integrated into U.S. communities. Given these trends, now is the time to seriously consider comprehensive immigration reform.

New data from the Pew Hispanic Center, the RAND Corporation, and other sources provide useful information about the state of immigration today. Although most of this data deals with Mexican immigrants as a whole and not just the unauthorized, it is a useful indicator of what is taking place in the unauthorized population. [More than half](#) (55 percent) of Mexican immigrants in the United States are unauthorized, and roughly three-fifths (59 percent) of all unauthorized immigrants are from Mexico.¹

The new data indicate that fewer Mexican immigrants are arriving in the United States due to the poor condition of the U.S. economy, greater economic opportunities in Mexico, and increased challenges and risks when crossing the border. However, despite years of [increased spending](#) on immigration enforcement,² including [record-setting](#) numbers of deportations under the Obama Administration³—and despite the impact of a recession and persistently stagnant labor market in the United States—*fewer* Mexican immigrants are leaving the country now than in years past. Plus, the Mexican American population continues to increase, and Mexican immigrants in the United States have become the parents of a new generation of Mexican Americans. In other words, Mexican immigrants are staying and they are becoming more and more integrated into U.S. society.

Fewer immigrants are coming to the United States from Mexico.

- According to Princeton University sociologist Douglas Massey, [data](#) collected by the Mexican Migration Project indicate that “the rate of new undocumented migration from Mexico dropped to zero in 2008 for the first time in 50 years.”⁴
- An August 2011 [report](#) from Mexico’s National Statistics Institute says that migrant outflows from Mexico have fallen to “almost nothing.” Only 0.09 percent of Mexico’s population

migrated between March 2010 and March 2011—which is 83 percent less than the outflow of 0.53 percent of the population in 2006 and 2007.⁵

- According to a July 2011 [report](#) by the Pew Hispanic Center, “the number of Mexicans annually leaving Mexico for the U.S. declined from more than one million in 2006 to 404,000 in 2010—a 60% reduction.”⁶
- This decline is due to a number of factors: the grim U.S. job market since the recession of 2008, increased U.S. border enforcement, strong [economic growth](#) and increasing job opportunities in Mexico, and the dangers involved in being [smuggled](#) into the United States by violent criminal cartels.⁷
- Declining fertility rates in Mexico are likely to mean a continuation of this trend. According to the [Pew Hispanic Center](#), in 1960, the fertility rate for women in Mexico who were in their child-bearing years was 7.3 children per woman. By 2009, the fertility rate in Mexico had fallen to 2.4. According to Pew, “The sharp decline in fertility rates in Mexico in the past half-century is consistent with the demographic changes that often occur when countries undergo periods of rapid economic growth and modernization.”

Fewer Mexican immigrants already living in the United States are returning to Mexico.

- A July 2011 [study](#) from the RAND Corporation found that, despite improved economic conditions in Mexico and worsened conditions in the United States, *fewer* Mexican immigrants returned to Mexico in 2008 and 2009 than in the two years before the recession.⁸
- RAND found declines in return migration among “male migrants and all 18- to 40-year-old migrants with less than a college education,” as well as a decline in total return migration in the fourth quarter of 2008 (the beginning of the global financial crisis). The study found that return migration to Mexico during the fourth quarters of 2006 and 2007 totaled 117,120 and 133,490, and the numbers dropped to 95,238 and 79,959 during the fourth quarters of 2008 and 2009.⁹
- This reinforces the conclusion of a 2009 Pew [study](#) that “data from U.S. and Mexican population surveys provide no evidence that an increased number of immigrants have left the United States to return to Mexico since 2006.”¹⁰
- The RAND study suggests that the drop in returns may be due to the fact that many immigrants do not return home until they have accumulated some predetermined level of savings—even in the midst of an economic downturn.¹¹
- According to [estimates](#) by the Department of Homeland Security, three-fifths of unauthorized immigrants have been in the United States for more than a decade. Roughly 42 percent of unauthorized immigrants in the country as of 2010 had arrived during the 1990s, and another 19 percent during the 1980s.¹²

Mexican immigrants are the parents of the next generation of Mexican Americans.

- The 2011 Pew [report](#) finds that there has been a “surge in births among Mexican Americans” over the past decade, and that this surge “is largely attributable to the immigration wave that has brought more than 10 million immigrants to the United States from Mexico since 1970.”¹³
- Immigrants are more likely to be of child-bearing age, and tend to have more children, than native-born Americans. As a result, between 2006 and 2010, more than half (53%) of Mexican American births were to parents who had migrated from Mexico.¹⁴
- Due to the increase in births and decline in new immigration, “births have surpassed immigration as the main driver” of population growth among Mexican Americans.¹⁵
- The Pew report found that “in the decade from 2000 to 2010, the Mexican American population grew by 7.2 million as a result of births and 4.2 million as a result of new immigrant arrivals.” This fundamentally alters the pattern of the previous two decades, in which immigration outweighed or equaled births in the growth of the Mexican American population.¹⁶

Conclusion

The most recent data on Mexican migration to and from the United States is an important reminder that migration patterns change over time—and that immigration policies must change as well. Fewer Mexicans are migrating to the United States, fewer Mexican immigrants in the United States are returning home, and immigrants from Mexico are parents to a new generation of Mexican Americans who are U.S. citizens. These trends suggest that our immigration policies must transition away from the current enforcement-only efforts to drive out unauthorized immigrants. We need a more nuanced set of policies that help immigrants who are already living here to fully integrate into U.S. society.

Endnotes

¹ Pew Hispanic Center, [Mexican Immigrants in the United States, 2008](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, April 15, 2009), p. 1.

² Immigration Policy Center, [Immigration Enforcement in a Time of Recession: Explaining the Recent Decline in Unauthorized Migration](#) (Washington, DC: American Immigration Council, September 9, 2010).

³ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, [Immigration Enforcement Actions: 2010](#), June 2011.

⁴ Douglas S. Massey, “[It’s time for immigration reform](#),” CNN.com – Global Public Square, July 7, 2011.

⁵ Associated Press, “[Mexico says immigration outflow drops to ‘almost nothing.’](#)” August 8, 2011.

⁶ Pew Hispanic Center, [The Mexican-American Boom: Births Overtake Immigration](#) (Washington, DC: July 14, 2011), p. 3.

⁷ Damien Cave, “[Better Lives for Mexicans Cut Allure of Going North](#),” *New York Times*, July 6, 2011; Philip E. Wolgin and Ann Garcia, “[What Changes in Mexico Mean for U.S. Immigration Policy](#),” Center for American Progress, August 8, 2011.

⁸ Michael S. Rendall, Peter Brownell, and Sarah Kups, [Declining Return Migration From the United States to Mexico in the Late-2000s Recession: A Research Note](#) (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, July 9, 2011).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn, [*Mexican Immigrants: How Many Come? How Many Leave?*](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, July 22, 2009), p. 1.

¹¹ Michael S. Rendall, Peter Brownell, and Sarah Kups, [*Declining Return Migration From the United States to Mexico in the Late-2000s Recession: A Research Note*](#) (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, July 9, 2011).

¹² Michael Hoefer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, [*Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2010*](#) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, February 2011), p. 2.

¹³ Pew Hispanic Center, [*The Mexican-American Boom: Births Overtake Immigration*](#) (Washington, DC: July 14, 2011), p. 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.