

PREVIOUS MIGRATION EXPERIENCE AND LEGAL IMMIGRATION STATUS AMONG INTENDING MEXICAN MIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES

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Introduction

The employment of immigrants provides benefits to the Social Security trust funds to the extent that immigrants (and their employers) make contributions, but do not collect benefits. This may occur in the case of aliens without valid work authorization working under Social Security numbers and names which do not match a valid record. It may also occur in the case of immigrants who do not earn sufficient qualifying credits in US employment to gain eligibility for retirement benefits. Thus research on re-immigration rates and the prior US migration history of arriving immigrants can improve understanding of the likelihood that immigrants will earn sufficient credits to qualify for Social Security retirement benefits through a series of trips to the US. Similarly, such an analysis disaggregated by legal immigration status and work authorization can improve understanding of the extent to which immigrants will be ineligible for benefits due to their lack of legal status.

Data and Methods

The present study uses data from the Survey of Migration on the Northern Border of Mexico (EMIF-Norte). The EMIF-Norte is a continuous survey of migratory flows through Mexico's northern border region. The survey uses time-location sampling methods to generate probability samples of intending migrants at airports, bus depots and train stations in Mexican border cities and towns chosen to maximize coverage of cross-border migrants.

EMIF-Norte is specifically designed to measure flows of labor migration. Importantly for the present study, EMIF-Norte collects data on whether US-bound migrants have documents permitting them to enter and/or work legally in the US, and also collects information regarding the number of previous trips to the US. Our analysis focuses on observations of northbound migrants entering border cities and towns from the Mexican interior in the 2005 to 2011 period who report intending to cross the border into the US within the next 30 days.

Results

Our analysis finds steep declines in the flow of immigrants into the US from Mexico. As the overall flow decreased, its composition shifted toward an increased share of migrants legally authorized to be present and work in the US. Comparing 2007 to 2011, the large decline in the share without any legal documents was driven by an absolute decline in the number without documents, while the number with documents to both enter and work has changed relatively little.

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Since 2007, the migrants crossing the land border to the US from Mexico have become less likely to be first time migrants and more likely to have made 11 or more previous US trips. The absolute number of migrants with 11 or more previous trips actually increased since the onset of the Great Recession in 2007.

Comparing pre-recession years (2005–2006) and post-financial crisis years (2010–2011), among those with legal documents authorizing work in the US, the share with 11 or more prior trips increased from 35% to 57% and the share with no prior trips increased from 8% to 15%. Interestingly, despite the large overall decline in the number of migrants without legal documents, we found no evidence of significant changes in these migrants' distribution of prior US trips.

For intending migrants with legal documents, the share indicating a primary reason for migration of “to work” or “to look for work” declined between the pre-recession years of 2005–2006 and the post-financial crisis years of 2010–2011. For these legal migrants, the decline in the share of work-related migration was accompanied by a shift primarily toward family reunification. Among migrants without any legal documents, the share of migrants migrating “to work” or “to look for work” changed little. For both work-authorized and undocumented immigrants, among those reporting a work-related reason for migration, the share that reported “to work” increased relative to the share reporting “to look for work.”

Discussion

Our analysis of the EMIF-Norte data indicates that the steep decline in the magnitude of migration flows from Mexico to the US during and after the Great Recession has been driven entirely by declines in immigration of undocumented immigrants. We expect that the number and value of Social Security contributions that cannot be attributed to a valid identity (the Earnings Suspense file) are also likely to have declined sharply since 2007. The direction of future changes in the size of unauthorized immigrant flows depends significantly on the extent to which the decline in such migration has been due to the economic downturn and the lack of employment opportunities, to increased enforcement, or other factors such as shifting demographics and labor market conditions in source countries such as Mexico. If the economic downturn is the primary factor, then we might reasonably expect unauthorized migration to increase significantly as the US economy improves and creates more employment opportunities.

With regards to levels of prior migration experience, re-immigrations constituted a quarter of migrants in the most recent years available (2010 and 2011) up from a fifth in the immediately pre-recession years. We found a considerable decrease in the number of first time migrants. However, this was primarily driven by the declining share of unauthorized migrants, who were overwhelmingly first-time migrants. The share and absolute number of migrants with 11 or more previous trips increased from pre-recession levels.

Among migrants legally authorized to work in the US and potentially eligible for Social Security retirement benefits with sufficient qualifying credits of covered US employment, the share of migrants with 11 or more prior trips increased from one third to one half. While the absolute number of such experienced migrants has fluctuated year-to-year, it has increased relative to pre-recession levels, including in the most recent year (2011) analyzed here. The increasing share and absolute number of work-authorized Mexican immigrants with 11 or more past trips to the US seems likely to affect the share of Mexican immigrants qualifying for Social Security retirement benefits in the future.

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