

Selection and Assimilation of Mexican Migrants to the U.S.

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September, 2012

Mexican migration to the U.S. and the return of Mexican-born migrants to their country of origin are of substantial interest from both a policy and scientific point of view. Mexican-origin migrants are the largest Hispanic population in the U.S., accounting for nearly two-thirds of all Hispanic migrants. Moreover, Mexican migrants have traditionally followed two distinct patterns of migration; one fraction migrates to settle permanently in the U.S. while others are cyclical migrants moving frequently between the two countries. Recent evidence suggests that these patterns may be changing as migration from Mexico to the U.S. has declined sharply since the onset of the Great Recession and many of the migrants who were living in the U.S. have returned to Mexico. It is estimated that in the last few years, net migration from Mexico to the U.S. is zero.

This paper uses new data to provide new evidence on the characteristics that predict which Mexicans have chosen to migrate to the U.S. over the last decade and, second, among those migrants, the attributes that predict whether they settle in the U.S. for the longer term or return to Mexico. Further, evidence is presented that sheds light on differences in the nature of assimilation of Mexican-origin migrants.

A large and active literature examines the process of migration by Mexicans. See, for example, Donato, Durand, and Massey (1992), Durand, Kandel, Parrado and Massey (1996), Durand, Massey and Zenteno (2001), Fernández-Huertas Moraga (2011), Hanson, (2006), Hoefer, Rytina and Campbell (2006), Ibarra and Lubotsky (2007), McKenzie and Rapoport. (2004), and Rendall, Brownell and Kups. (2011). However, evidence on recent changes in the selection process that underlies migration decisions is limited. Moreover, most of the evidence focuses on migration from Mexico to the U.S. with return

migration to Mexico being less well understood. This project sheds new light on these changing dynamics.

To provide scientific evidence on the selectivity of migrants, it is necessary to compare characteristics of migrants with non-migrants in Mexico before the migration takes place. However, the absence of pre-migration information has been a challenge for empirical research in this field. One line of inquiry uses data collected by the U.S. government, such as the American Community Survey in combination with census data from the Mexican government. This necessarily involves a comparison of movers after the migration event with non-movers. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the roles of time-varying characteristics in migration decisions with these kinds of data. Moreover, studies based on surveys like the ACS are limited by the fact that such surveys are known to undercount the undocumented and most mobile migrants including those who cycle often between the U.S. and Mexico. The selectivity of those included in the ACS and similar samples raises important questions about the inferences drawn regarding the selection of migrants relative to the selection of those included in the sample. The ideal source of data for a study of migrant selectivity would be a sample that is representative of the Mexican population prior to migration and which proceeds to follow all migrants to the U.S. including those who stay for a short period and those who remain in the U.S. over the longer haul. This project uses such a sample.

A second line of inquiry has relied only on Mexican census or survey data. An important limitation of those data is that they only include migrants that have returned to Mexico or have at least one household member still living in Mexico and information about migrants is obtained by proxy. By design, those surveys exclude complete households that have migrated to the U.S. who make up an increasing and by now substantial fraction of migrants to the U.S. from Mexico. Both the selection and assimilation process of complete households that decided to migrate to the U.S. and never return to Mexico are likely to be quite different from the rest of the migrants and so studies based on these data are prone to biases due to the selection of those included in the study. An important, related source of data is the Mexican Migration Project (MMP) which is based on a sample of respondents in Mexico who have family in the U.S. While these data are supplemented by U.S. based snowball samples, the samples are also selected on having at least one family member remaining in Mexico and so these samples are also prone to concerns that longer-term movers are likely to be under-represented.

This project uses unique data that have been specifically designed to address these short-comings of existing data sources. The Mexican Family Life Survey (MxFLS) is an ongoing longitudinal data set that is representative of the Mexican population at baseline (in 2002) when we interviewed 35,600 individuals living in 8,440 households in 150 communities throughout Mexico. The first follow up was completed in 2005 and the second follow-up will be completed in early 2013. In both follow-ups, movers to the U.S. have been tracked and interviewed in the U.S. In the first follow-up, over 90% of the baseline respondents who are thought to have moved to the U.S. were found and interviewed. The sample includes 800 adults (age ≥ 15) Mexicans who migrated to the U.S. during the hiatus between the baseline and first follow-up. The second follow-up is in the field. We have re-interviewed over 1,000 of those baseline respondents who have moved to the U.S. since 2002 and are still in the U.S. We have also interviewed 500 respondents who migrated to the U.S. after 2002 and have returned to Mexico.

The combination of successfully tracking and interviewing movers, including international movers, with detailed information on their labor market and migration experiences, families and resources of each respondent yields an extremely rich set of data for investigating the nature of selectivity of migrants to the U.S. and the selectivity of those who remain in the U.S. over the longer haul. With these data, we will draw comparisons between those people who have migrated to the U.S. since 2002, and stayed, those who have migrated to the U.S. since 2002 and returned to Mexico and those who have not migrated to the U.S. since 2002. Moreover, drawing on detailed migration histories provided by each respondent that reach back to when the respondent was age 12, it is possible to separate those people who have moved to the U.S. prior to 2002 from those who have not.

Selection of migrants to the U.S. who stay and those who return to Mexico

The first goal of this paper is to explore the selectivity of both migration to the U.S. and return migration to Mexico. Four features of the data are key for these analyses.

First, we have detailed information about the lives of all the movers – and those who do not move – prior to the index international move (which occurred after 2002). Because of the design of MxFLS, these analyses are not contaminated by undercounts of the most mobile migrants from Mexico in U.S. surveys or by the loss of complete households that move. The latter is an increasingly common phenomenon among Mexican-origin migrants and is clearly documented in MxFLS. (Farfan et al, 2012.)

Second, we follow respondents who return to Mexico and know about their experiences in Mexico before the move to the US, their experiences in the U.S. and their experiences in Mexico when they return. We will compare the lives of these people with those who moved to the U.S. and stayed.

Third, detailed information about migration experiences, labor market outcomes and human capital are recorded in every wave of MxFLS. It is, therefore, possible to provide a rich description of the nature of selection of migrants to the U.S. relative to those who stay in Mexico, separating those who have lived in the U.S. prior to 2002 with those who have not. Similarly, focusing on those respondents who moved to the U.S. during the hiatus between the baseline and first re-survey, we will describe the characteristics that distinguish those who subsequently return to Mexico with those who stay.

Fourth, whereas much of the information described above is recorded in surveys that have been used for analyses of selectivity of migrants, MxFLS contains a far richer array of information on the lives of respondents than has been used in prior analyses. This included information about resource availability such as own wealth and wealth of household and family members prior to the move, expectations about future economic opportunities including future labor market outcomes, and detailed information about networks in locations other than the baseline community.

Assimilation

The second goal of this research is to identify the characteristics of migrants who assimilate more successfully in the U.S. Assimilation is measured with four different markers: knowledge of English, the

extent to which the migrant speaks English with family, friends and those at work, the living arrangements of the migrant and the earnings of the migrant.

For each of these outcomes, we assess whether socio-economic and demographic characteristics measured at baseline are predictive of the extent of assimilation. By drawing on the same models that are used in the analyses of selectivity of migrants, we provide a comprehensive picture of those characteristics that are predictive of both selection into migration and success in the new destination. In addition to characteristics such as human capital and work experience, the analyses include measures of networks in potential destination, financial resources and expectations about the future. Further, comparing the extent of assimilation in these dimensions of those who continue to stay in the U.S. with those who return to Mexico provides insights into the likely mechanisms that underlie decisions to set down roots for the longer haul.

In sum, the analyses presented in this research will provide new insights into the relationships between mechanisms that underlie the selectivity of migrants to the U.S. – and those who stay for the long haul – and the characteristics that are associated with assimilation in the U.S. These contrasts, drawing on the same data source and comparable models, will shed new light on the dynamics underlying decisions by Mexicans to move to the U.S. and return to Mexico. Drawing on recently collected data that span the last decade, this research will provide important evidence on the changing structure of international migration between Mexico and the U.S. during a time of dramatic decline in relative earnings opportunities in the U.S. and an increasingly hostile environment for the undocumented in many parts of the U.S.

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