

# Central American Population Soars in Texas, U.S.; Migrant Profiles Evolve

By Emily Gutierrez and Pia Orrenius

Immigration from Central America is on the rise at a time when migration from Mexico is declining (*Chart 1*).

The Central American population in the U.S. grew 61 percent from 2000 to 2014, reaching nearly 3.3 million.<sup>1</sup>

In Texas, the Central American population more than doubled, rising from 185,000 in 2000 to about 400,000 in 2014. By comparison, while the Mexican population is much larger—11.7 million in the U.S. and 2.5 million in Texas—it has grown far more slowly since 2000, rising 28 percent in the U.S. and 35 percent in Texas.

Central American and Mexican immigrants are similar in many aspects but differ in their motivation for migrating. Drug-related violence and widespread insecurity has played a much larger role in immigration from Central America, as evidenced by the large shares of those who seek asylum upon arrival in the U.S.

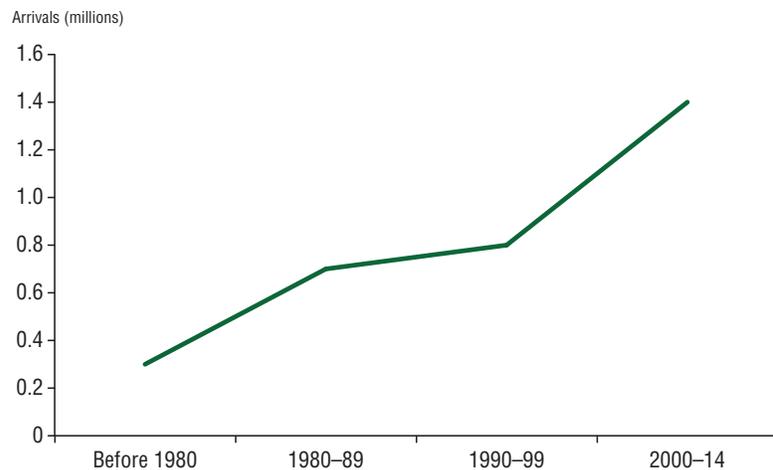
Mexican immigrants, on the other hand, typically migrate for economic reasons and have arrived in much smaller numbers since the 2008–09 recession.

The desperate circumstances for recent Central American migrants are apparent in the data. Women and children make up an increasing share of new arrivals. Border Patrol data indicate there was a 103 percent increase in the number of Central American migrants who arrived either in family units or as unaccompanied minors from October 2015 to March 2016, compared with the year-earlier period.<sup>2</sup>

## Less-Educated Migrants

Recent Central American migrants are very different from earlier groups. They are much less likely to have legal status than prior arrivals, many of whom received asylum or temporary protected status due to the 1980s civil wars. They also tend to be less fluent in English.<sup>3</sup>

**Chart 1** Central American Immigration Picks Up After 2000



SOURCE: 2011, 2014 American Community Survey.

Relative to the population of Central American immigrants in 2000, current arrivals are less likely to have a high school diploma or college education; in fact, 17 percent of recent Central American migrants have any college education versus 26 percent of all Central American immigrants in 2000.

While employment rates have risen among recent Central American migrants compared with their 2000 counterparts, their occupational distribution remains skewed toward low-wage work in sectors such as construction and food services. The median wage among Central American immigrants fell over this time period, likely as a result of the 2008–09 recession, and remains below 2000 levels in inflation-adjusted terms.

As Central American migrants have become less skilled than those who arrived earlier, they also compare less favorably to Mexican migrants, who reached or surpassed their Central American counterparts in wages and English proficiency between 2000 and 2013.

The proportion of Central American migrants in the U.S. proficient in English declined in 2013 to 56 percent, while the corresponding share among Mexicans rose to 58 percent.

Given deteriorating home-country conditions, more Central American migrants are applying for asylum as they reach the U.S. border. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras ranked in the top 10 countries for asylum grants in 2014. Of the 8,775 asylum applications approved, citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras made up nearly 6 percent.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Comparing October–March 2016 to the same period in 2015. U.S. Border Patrol data available at: [www.cbp.gov/newsroom/media-resources/stats?title=Border+Patrol](http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/media-resources/stats?title=Border+Patrol).

<sup>3</sup> See “Central Americans in the U.S. Labor Market: Recent Trends and Policy Impacts,” by Pia M. Orrenius and Madeline Zavodny, CANAMID, Policy Brief Series, PB03, October 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Justice: FY 2014 Statistics Yearbook.