

A Conversation with Agustín Escobar Latapí

You Can Go Home Again: Mexican Migrants Return in Record Numbers

Agustín Escobar Latapí is a research professor at the Center for Research and Higher Learning in Social Anthropology in Guadalajara, Mexico, and is a member of Mexico's National Academy of Sciences. A specialist in Mexican social policy and migration, he discusses the southward return of migrants and its implications.

Q. You recently led a large group of researchers on a binational study of Mexico–U.S. migration. What's behind your finding of unprecedented return migration to Mexico from the United States?

The U.S. tends to emphasize the total size of the Mexican immigrant population, which hasn't grown since 2007. The other side of the coin, of course, is what happens in Mexico. In a nutshell, the total size of the population moving to Mexico from the U.S. has grown remarkably. In the 2000 Mexican census, 230,000 Mexicans said that their country of residence had been the U.S. five years earlier. A decade later, 980,000 replied similarly. In addition to this fourfold increase, today's return migrants tend to stay in Mexico to a much larger extent than in previous periods.

The 2010 census also revealed that there were 739,000 U.S.-born individuals living in Mexico. Seven out of 10 in this group are under age 18. A significant portion were born to middle-class Mexican couples living along the border—holding U.S. visas and having the ability to pay for health care—who returned to Mexico with their newborn. But the rest are family members of return migrants living elsewhere in Mexico, not on the border. Most in this group have little experience in Mexico. Although their family helps with integration, they face many of the same issues with which international migrants elsewhere must deal. We consider them part of the larger phenomenon of return migration because their parents

were deported or they decided it was best to return to Mexico.

The 2008–10 economic downturn and slow recovery is the main reason for this large return flow to Mexico. Nevertheless, it is also clear to me that many of those returning would have remained open to a possible return to the U.S. had immigration policy not changed.

We tend to hear immigration policy hasn't changed, but it has. Widespread immigration enforcement is a new policy. Returns and removals have been at their highest levels since 2005, and many of these individuals face a mandatory prison sentence if they are caught again in the U.S. That, along with state and local enforcement, interagency cooperation regarding immigration, and a sluggish U.S. recovery in construction and other higher-paying, lower-skill industries has kept return migrants in Mexico.

A minor but positive trend is that the number of temporary work visas issued to Mexicans has increased. Workers prize these visas, which were not valued when crossing the border was low-risk and penalty-free.

Q. Who are the return migrants and how well do they do once they are back in Mexico? Does it matter whether the return was forcible or voluntary?

We have interviewed families who planned their return carefully, got all their papers in order, successfully enrolled their children in Mexican schools and signed up for Mexican free health

insurance and other social services. Mostly, these families delayed their return until they were sure they had jobs in Mexico.

But there are others. Many were deported and had no official Mexican identity papers. They needed the Mexican embassy in the U.S. to certify their children's birth certificates or school records. This is a lengthy process. Certifying U.S. school records in Mexico can be extremely complicated and expensive, and sometimes requires children and teenagers to pass Mexican proficiency tests that are neither widely available nor easily understood for someone coming from the U.S. education system.

And there are a large number of youth who were forcibly returned, some with no work experience and some after serving a jail sentence in the U.S. These individuals are at significant risk, and some carry out illegal activities in Mexico. Nevertheless, our study found that in Mexico, U.S.-born children of Mexicans is one of the groups with the highest high school enrollment rates. Meanwhile, the Mexican-born children of migrants who frequently cross the border are among those with the lowest enrollment rates. This illustrates the diversity of the return migrant group.

Two observations are worth additional study. First, the poverty rate in Mexico would be lower today if the return-migration population had not been so large, or if the potential migrant population had left Mexico. Second, farm employment in many of the areas from which migrants originated has expanded significantly in the last four or five years. But our fieldwork shows there is no simple relationship between returns and farm employment. For example, in Jalisco, many farm jobs traditionally performed by locals have already gone to migrants from poorer states in Mexico who have already settled in the agricultural export and tequila industries.

Call-center jobs are staffed to a large extent by U.S.-born youth whose families brought them back to Mexico. Jobs requiring good English are now often in the hands of people who actually do speak good English, which wasn't the case until recently.



▶ *“In the 2000 Mexican census, 230,000 Mexicans said that their country of residence had been the U.S. five years earlier. A decade later, 980,000 replied similarly.”*

Q. What does the Mexican government do to help return migrants? Do children get back into school?

There are contradictory claims and pressures on the Mexican government, and local government incentives often run counter to migrants’ interests. Mexican identity papers were relatively easy to come by in the past. However, pressure from the U.S., the war on organized crime and a growing, often-undocumented immigrant population in Mexico have prompted tighter requirements for most official identity documents. This complicates entry into schools or the formal job market.

Unfortunately, the plight of return migrants has not impacted Mexican policy in a consistent way. We interviewed officials of the free public health program, who confidently stated that U.S.-born children of return migrants are ineligible. And school officials often have the last say regarding who qualifies or what papers are required. Often, schools require original documents, which is a problem for someone who only got one or two copies before leaving the U.S. Mexico’s main cash transfer program for poor families is more open, and enrollment is centralized, but U.S.-born children still need official documents certified by the U.S. government or by the Mexican embassy in the U.S.

Q. Are there data on attitudes toward return migrants among other Mexicans?

There are no national surveys on Mexicans’ attitudes toward the return migrants, although some are under way. There was, however, a 2009–10 national

survey commissioned by [the magazine] *Este País* showing that general attitudes toward international immigrants are not positive. Professional immigrants of European stock were seen as enjoying an unfair advantage among employers. Conversely, in Southern Mexico, poor Central Americans are the target of the same feelings and attitudes poor Mexicans encounter in the U.S. They are seen as competing with poor Mexicans for jobs.

Q. As migration has slowed from Mexico to the U.S., Central American migration appears to have picked up. Do some Central Americans stay in Mexico?

Some are staying, although official immigration figures still show few have acquired Mexican residence. For most would-be “transmigrants,” staying in Mexico is a relatively poor choice, but one that they are increasingly opting for because of the risks of traveling further north. The Mexican labor market and pay levels are better than in most Central American countries, and many migrants can’t go home because violence in their countries is much worse than in Mexico. They have to perform informal jobs since they cannot get residence permits, which require they have a job and an address.

The larger picture shows that Central American transmigration or immigration to Mexico is part of a regional migration movement that is not Mexico’s sole responsibility. The entire Central–North American labor market is being reconfigured.

Q. We have read accounts of more European and Asian migration to Mexico. How has migration to Mexico changed in recent years?

There are many kinds of flows. For example, Mexicans who married Central Americans in the U.S. are returning to Mexico with their families, not usually to Central America. Official immigration

figures show small Asian and European numbers. There are no sources allowing us to distinguish, for example, European professionals arriving on work visas from students who secure Mexican scholarships, tourists who decide to stay or Asian company workers and their families.

Q. What does your research suggest has been the impact of the violence in Mexico on migration to the U.S.?

Our research shows that higher homicide rates correlate with falling emigration. This seems to be because traveling long distances in unsecure regions became much riskier. In these regions, families tend to receive higher remittances, possibly reflecting deteriorating incomes due to crime.

Along the border, higher violence correlates with elevated emigration levels, as one would expect.

Violence seems to be abating, although we cannot expect it to fall rapidly. Criminal mafias have secured footholds in legal businesses and local government. Crime rates are falling in many of the previous hot spots, often dramatically. But this sometimes means those groups moved elsewhere. Most of Mexico is still safe, however, and violence is lower than is often perceived.

Q. If the Mexican president’s reform agenda is successful, how might that impact emigration?

We are currently experiencing the end of the Mexican honeymoon with the return of the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party]. The government, which for the first time could get congress to pass major reforms, still hasn’t been able to pass and implement them as planned. The new government will have to prove its reforms make sense, provide more growth and reduce inequality. If it does, of course, Mexican emigration will find a natural, market-led course.