

**Im/migration to Mexico: Identifying Compositional Shifts
within Mexico and at the Southern Border**

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Abstract

Transit migration through Mexico from Central and South America to the U.S. has grown over the past decades. However, increasingly stringent U.S. policies that have pushed border enforcement into Mexico have complicated the nature of these migrant flows. With insights from emerging work indicating the growth of a “temporary permanent” migrant population, this study asks whether Mexico is transitioning away from a nation of emigration to one of immigration. Specifically, we ask whether the composition of immigrants living in Mexico and long-term migrants arriving at the Mexican southern border have shifted since 2010. Second, among migrants arriving at Mexico’s southern border, what determines migrants’ “long-term” intentions, regardless of their final destination? We use data from the Mexican Census (2010, 2020) and the EMIF-SUR (2010-23) to address these questions. This study will provide insights that add to the growing call for more work on Mexico’s emergence as an im/migrant destination.

Background

The Mexico-U.S. migration corridor is the largest in the world, resulting from decades of Mexican emigration to the United States. This fact, however, obscures a significant shift in Mexico, where transit migration from Central and South America have grown over the past decades with consequences for the Mexican population (Alba, 2023). This shift reflects a tumultuous geopolitical landscape, with economic and political crises in Latin America, and increasingly stringent U.S. policies that have effectively pushed border enforcement into Mexico.

Much of the nascent research on migration to Mexico centers around transit migration, defined as migration in one country for the purpose of seeking the possibility to emigrate to another country as a final destination (Basok, 2019). This form of migration through Mexico has historically been associated with Central American, mostly Northern Triangle countries, including migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras who travel through Mexico to reach the U.S. southern border. These migration streams have unfolded in distinct stages since the 1990s (Rojas-Wiesner, 2023). In the past quarter-century alone, however, political arrangements between the U.S. and Mexico and U.S. funding aimed at fortifying Mexico’s borders in the aftermath of September 11 have made the nature of “transit migration” increasingly complex. In addition, the rise in unaccompanied minors and migrant caravans in the mid- to late-2010s have given rise to further enforcement policies that essentially “contain” migrants in Mexico (Rojas-Wiesner, 2023).

Here the need for new terminology arises that describes the protracted waiting period that many Central and South American migrants face within Mexico as they decide whether and how to further their journey north. This “temporary permanence” includes *stranded migrants* who find that their migration to the U.S. is blocked, *stuck migrants* who cannot move forward or return home, and *settled migrants*, who opt to stay in the transit country for the short or long-term (Basok, 2019). The fluidity between these categories suggests that some who are stranded or stuck will eventually choose to stay in Mexico. These decisions are likely contingent on

sociodemographic factors in addition to randomness and chance (Galemba, 2020). Thus, for many migrants from Latin America who aim to travel to the U.S., Mexico can be viewed as a site of “entrapment” (Menjivar, 2014) that complicates academic understandings of migration as a linear endeavor. Despite these developments, most research on Latin American im/migration to Mexico is based on rich qualitative work, but a demographic portrait that captures broader trends is needed.

Current Study

In this study, we ask whether Mexico is transitioning away from a nation of emigration to one of immigration. We do so by asking the following questions.

1. Did the share of foreign-born persons living in Mexico increase over the last decade?
2. Has the share of long-term migrants entering through Mexico’s southern border increased over time?
3. How has the composition of immigrants living in Mexico and long-term migrants arriving at the Mexican southern border shifted?
4. Among migrants arriving at Mexico’s southern border, what determines migrants “long-term” intentions?

Data

To address these questions, we use data from the Mexican Population and Housing Census (2010 and 2020) and the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México (EMIF-SUR) (2010-2023). The Mexican Census is a national count of the population, conducted every 10 years by the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI). The Census data are comprehensive of all Mexican households and thus allow us to examine whether and how the immigrant “stock” in Mexico has shifted within the past decade. We use data made available through IPUMS-International, which is a 10% sample of the national count (Ruggles et al., 2025).

Conversely, the EMIF-SUR captures individuals who recently crossed the Mexico-Guatemala border and is more representative of migrant “flows” into Mexico. The survey is headed by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (<https://www.colef.mx/emif/>). The EMIF-SUR is a probability sample of migrant flows during a period of interest (usually a quarter) that began in 2004, with multiple survey years collected since. The survey includes individuals aged 15 or older at the time of the survey, who did not live in the city of the interview, whose reason(s) for crossing the border is due to work, change of residence, or other reasons, with no committed return date to their usual place of residence.

Analytical Sample

To examine compositional differences over time, we use data from the 2010 and 2020 Mexican Census that are restricted to foreign-born persons aged 15 and older. Data from the EMIF-SUR

are limited to individuals who crossed the border with a stated final destination of Mexico (rather than the U.S.), *or* whose expected stay in Mexico is “long term”, a term which we define to include those who plan to stay for years, as long possible, or forever. We use the yearly EMIF-SUR data from 2010-2017, 2020, and 2022-2023. Data were not collected in 2018-2019 or 2021. We combine the data into two-year intervals where possible, to minimize noise. The exception is 2020, given that no survey data were collected in 2019 or 2021.

Data from the EMIF-SUR capture some aspects of “flow” data, albeit only at one area of entry into Mexico. These survey data differ from the Census data given that the Census data captures immigrant “stock”, which is likely biased towards foreign-born persons who reside long enough in Mexico to be captured in a national census or regularized (vs. irregular) migrants. Both data sets offer a lens through which this demographic portrait of im/migration in Mexico can be examined.

Methods

We use descriptive statistics to first examine temporal variation in the share of im/migrants living in Mexico using Census data and the share of “long-term” migrants at the Southern border using data from the EMIF-SUR. Next, using data from the EMIF-SUR, we will use decomposition methods and multivariable analyses to understand why migrants at the Mexico-Guatemala border are increasingly choosing to stay in Mexico for the long term.

Measures

Our main variable of interest in the Census data is whether a resident is foreign-born vs. native-born. In the EMIF-SUR, we are interested in two questions. The first asks the respondent about their final destination, “On this trip, what is your final destination: Mexico or the U.S.?” A separate question is also asked of all respondents, regardless of their final destination, “How long do you plan to stay in Mexico on this occasion?” Possible responses range from: hours, days, weeks, months, years, as long as possible, or forever. We create a binary variable from these responses to differentiate between those with short-term (hours, days, weeks, or months) versus long-term (years, as long as possible, or forever) intentions. We define “long-term” migrants as those who state that Mexico is their final destination *or* who plan to remain in Mexico for years, as long as possible, or forever.

We are also interested in changes in the demographic composition of immigrants and migrants who intend to stay for long durations. Thus, we look at migrant age, gender, origin country, marital status, education, household head status, and indigenous status proxied by whether the respondent speaks an indigenous language.

Preliminary Results

Table 1 presents data from the Mexican Census (2010 and 2020) and the EMIF-SUR (2010-2023). In Panel A, we find that the share of foreign-born persons from Latin America increased

marginally from 0.09% of the population aged 15+ in Mexico in 2010 to 0.15% in 2020. Panel B presents data from the EMIF-SUR. We find that whereas almost all migrants before 2020 list Mexico as their destination (99%-97%), these years also consisted of virtually all short-term migrants (above 90%). Respondents in this early period were likely temporary migrants for work. Since 2020, a smaller share list their final destination as Mexico, which may signal the shift away from short-term migration. Meanwhile, the share of long-term migrants jumped from 6.5% in 2016-17 to 54.4% in 2022-23.

Table 2 takes a more in-depth look at the subset of Latin American immigrants aged 15 and older residing in Mexico. Information from the Census in 2010 and 2020 (the first and second columns) suggests that the composition of immigrants is shifting. In particular, we see that the share of Guatemalans remained largely the same within the 10-year period, but the percentage of those from Honduras rose and the share of Venezuelans more than doubled, from 5.2% to 10.5%. Immigrants from other Central and South American countries also declined between the years. At the same time, the educational distribution also shifted, with fewer college graduates in 2020 (28.5%) compared to 2010 (36.4%).

The latter columns in Table 2 show the distribution of sociodemographic characteristics of long-term migrants who arrived at Mexico's southern border using EMIF-SUR data. Unlike the Census data, data from the border show noticeable changes between 2010 and 2023. In the early 2010s, 1 in 5 persons who were surveyed were women. This dropped in subsequent years, but increased again in 2020 and reached well over one quarter (28%) in the most recent years. The country of origin of migrants also changed, as Guatemalans declined from 99.8% in 2010 to around two-thirds (67.6%) in 2022-23. Migrants from the other northern triangle countries of Honduras and El Salvador also grew slightly during this time period. Most notable is that 1 in 5 migrants in 2022-3 were from Venezuela, whereas these migrants did not appear in the data in prior periods. Also remarkable is that in the EMIF data, the share of college graduates is miniscule, unlike the Census data. However, we see a growing share of secondary and high school graduates in recent years compared to earlier periods. These differences could reflect irregular migrants detected in the EMIF-SUR data compared to regularized migrants captured in the census.

Discussion & Next Steps

These preliminary results paint a complicated and somewhat contradictory picture. First, according to the Census data, the share of foreign-born persons from Latin America living in Mexico increased only slightly between 2010 and 2020. However, using data on migrant flows from the EMIF-SUR, a greater share of migrants intend to stay in Mexico for the long-term, even as the share of persons stating that their final destination is Mexico has declined. This is especially notable since 2020 and may be one reason why the Census data have yet to detect this phenomenon.

By next Spring, we plan multivariable analyses to address our research questions. First, using the subset of EMIF-SUR respondents who choose Mexico as their final destination, we will examine long-term (vs. short-term) intentions as an outcome, and demographic characteristics as covariates in the model. We are especially interested in how gender, education, marital status, and country of origin shape migrant duration intentions. Next, among the subset of respondents who state that the U.S. is their final destination, what sociodemographic characteristics are associated with a long- versus- short-term intention to stay in Mexico? These results will be compared against one another.

We note that it is possible that the INEGI intercensal survey, conducted in 2025, will release preliminary data by next year. If the release occurs prior to EPC, we may be able to include those data in our descriptive analysis. This will help provide yet another year in which we can compare the EMIF-SUR data with the immigrant stock data that appear in the intercensal survey.

To conclude, increasingly restrictive U.S. immigration policy has spillover effects for Mexico. More attention should be paid to the rising number of long-term migrants in Mexico who, not being able to reach the U.S., choose to remain in Mexico. This study will provide preliminary insight into these processes and add to the growing call for more work on Mexico's emergence as an im/migrant destination.

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Table 1. Share of Im/migrants in Mexico from Latin America, aged 15+

	CENSUS 2010	CENSUS 2020	EMIF 2010-11	EMIF 2012-13	EMIF 2014-15	EMIF 2016-17	EMIF 2020	EMIF 2022-23
	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%
Panel A								
Foreign Born	0.09%	0.15%						
Panel B								
Final Destination								
Mexico			99.76%	95.12%	97.42%	96.95%	91.00%	64.22%
U.S.			0.10%	4.88%	2.58%	3.05%	9.00%	35.78%
Total			100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Expected length of stay in								
Mexico								
Long term			4.90%	3.77%	3.56%	6.47%	32.91%	54.36%
Short term			95.10%	96.23%	96.44%	93.53%	67.00%	45.64%
Total			100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
N	8,094,023	10,739,396	16,198	22,882	21,283	14,610	4,890	12,691

Note: Percentages are unweighted.

Table 2. Latin American Immigrants and Long-Term Migrants in Mexico, aged 15+

	CENSO 2010	CENSO 2020	EMIF 2010-11	EMIF 2012-13	EMIF 2014-15	EMIF 2016-17	EMIF 2020	EMIF 2022-23
Variable	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%
Age	38.70	39.26	31.38	32.42	33.40	35.44	34.11	32.43
Female	52.88%	51.58%	21.04%	11.69%	6.51%	7.37%	16.93%	27.75%
Country of birth								
Guatemala	33.49%	35.57%	99.82%	98.45%	99.23%	99.15%	95.11%	67.59%
El Salvador	7.43%	8.14%	0.04%	0.14%	0.09%	0.20%	1.43%	1.53%
Honduras	9.16%	13.63%	0.09%	1.37%	0.64%	0.63%	3.35%	3.73%
Other Central America	5.98%	3.79%	0.01%	0.02%	0.03%	0.02%	0.08%	1.40%
Venezuela	5.17%	10.53%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	21.15%
Other South America	29.38%	20.66%	0.00%	0.01%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.54%
Caribbean	9.39%	7.69%	0.05%	0.01%	0.00%	0.00%	0.02%	1.04%
Missing								0.02%
Marital Status								
Married or partnered	71.42%	69.91%	59.00%	61.68%	75.03%	74.58%	72.94%	63.43%
Sep/Divorced/Widow	9.20%	10.71%	2.73%	1.96%	1.58%	1.63%	5.67%	3.20%
Single, never married	19.38%	19.38%	38.27%	36.35%	23.39%	23.79%	21.39%	33.38%
Education								
None	12.47%	13.00%	22.32%	20.19%	46.73%	35.36%	15.20%	11.33%
Some primary	13.73%	13.63%						
Primary complete	14.44%	16.81%	65.77%	64.44%	47.59%	56.46%	63.62%	42.46%
Secondary	10.84%	13.89%	9.44%	13.65%	4.60%	6.50%	17.17%	24.77%
High school	11.71%	14.04%	2.36%	1.64%	0.97%	1.61%	3.71%	19.71%
College or more	36.40%	28.53%	0.10%	0.08%	0.05%	0.05%	0.17%	1.13%
Missing	0.40%	0.10%			0.05%	0.02%	0.13%	0.60%
Head of Household								
Self	42.99%	42.48%	49.16%	57.91%	68.73%	63.89%	72.42%	59.34%
Spouse	32.79%	32.87%	12.86%	6.40%	4.24%	5.22%	8.61%	13.37%
Other	24.21%	24.65%	37.98%	35.69%	27.04%	30.89%	18.97%	27.29%
	10.13%	8.28%	100.00%	100.00%	100.01%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Speaks Indigenous Language			20.89%	33.82%	54.10%	51.98%	37.68%	25.02%
N	8,094,023	10,739,396	16,162	21,840	20,854	14,218	4,742	12,398

Note: Percentages are unweighted.