

Mexican Immigrants: How Many Come? How Many Leave?

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Executive Summary

The flow of immigrants from Mexico to the United States has declined sharply since mid-decade, but there is no evidence of an increase during this period in the number of Mexican-born migrants returning home from the U.S., according to a new analysis by the Pew Hispanic Center of government data from both countries.

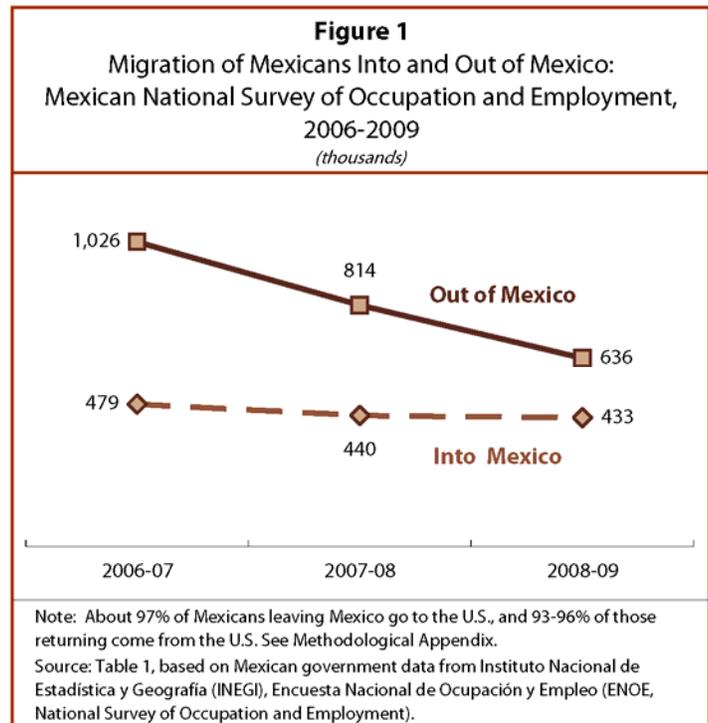
The Mexican-born population in the U.S., which had been growing earlier in the decade, was 11.5 million in early 2009. That figure is not significantly different from the 11.6 million Mexican immigrants in 2008 or the 11.2 million in 2007. (Figure A-1)

The current recession has had a harsh impact on [employment of Latino](#) immigrants, raising the question of whether an increased number of Mexican-born residents are choosing to return home. This new Hispanic Center analysis finds no support for that hypothesis in government data from the United States or Mexico.

Mexico is by far the [leading country of origin](#) for U.S. immigrants, accounting for a third (32%) of all foreign-born residents and two-thirds (66%) of Hispanic immigrants. The U.S. is the destination for nearly all people who leave Mexico, and about one-in-ten people born there currently lives in the U.S.

Patterns of migration between the U.S. and Mexico are varied. Many immigrants come from Mexico to settle permanently, but large numbers also move both ways across the U.S.-Mexico border throughout the year, sometimes staying for only a few months, a pattern known as circular migration. Mexican-U.S. migration also tends to be seasonal, with larger northbound flows in the spring and summer and larger southbound flows in the fall and winter.

This report examines whether the recent annual volume of movement between the U.S. and Mexico has gone up or down in either direction. It relies on major national population surveys from Mexico and the U.S., as well as on U.S. Border



Patrol apprehension figures. No single source presents the full picture of migration flows between the two countries, but the three sources examined here point to similar conclusions.

Data from population surveys taken in the U.S. and Mexico indicate that in recent years there has been a large flow of migrants back to Mexico, but the size of the annual return flow appears to be stable since 2006. Mexico’s National Survey of Employment and Occupation estimates that 433,000 Mexican migrants returned home from February 2008 to February 2009. For the same period in 2007-2008, 440,000 did, compared with an estimated 479,000 from February 2006 to February 2007.

As for immigration to the U.S. from Mexico, data from several sources attest to recent substantial decreases in the number of new arrivals.

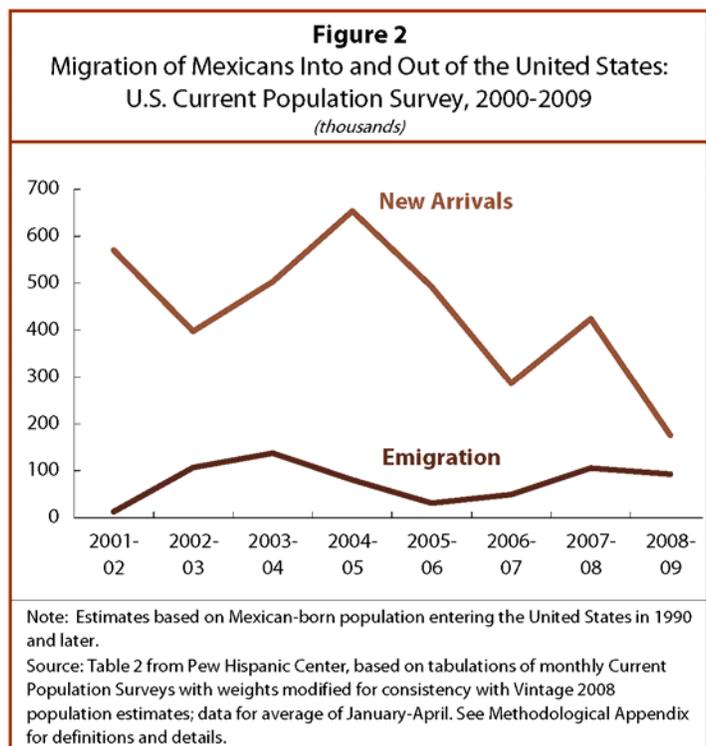
The inflow began to [diminish in mid-2006](#), and has continued to do so through early 2009, according to an analysis of the latest available population surveys from both countries. This finding is reinforced by data from the U.S. Border Patrol showing that apprehensions of Mexicans attempting to cross illegally into the United States decreased by a third between 2006 and 2008.

Immigration flows from Mexico, like those from other countries, surged in the late 1990s.

Immigration flows dropped by 2002 before beginning to grow again in 2004. But the slowdown in immigration after 2006 was such that by 2008, flows were down at

least 40% from mid-decade. The change was driven largely by unauthorized immigrants; flows of legal permanent residents have been steady this decade.

The recent downturn in immigration from Mexico has been steep—a conclusion based on data from multiple sources. The evidence on emigration is not as clear-cut, but appears to point to a stable outflow to Mexico. It remains to be seen whether either trend points to a fundamental change in U.S.-Mexico immigration



patterns or is a short-term response to heightened border enforcement, the weakened U.S. economy or other forces.

There is no single direct measure of immigrant arrivals. One particular challenge in measuring the influx of Mexicans is that [most Mexican immigrants](#) are unauthorized, including 80% to 85% of Mexicans who have been in the U.S. for less than a decade. As for departures, the U.S. does not track emigration, so any U.S. data can be obtained only indirectly. This analysis draws its conclusions from three data sources (for more information on methodology, see Appendix B):

- The Census Bureau's monthly Current Population Survey was used to extract estimates of the size and level of change of the Mexican-born population in the U.S. without regard to legal status. The analysis focused on arrivals since 1990 because this measure offers the most reliable sample for examining current immigration flows. This group has leveled off at 7.4 million in 2009 (Figure A-2).
- Mexico's National Survey of Employment and Occupation (ENOE, by its Spanish acronym), a household survey, has provided quarterly estimates of migration to and from Mexico since 2006. Nearly all Mexicans who leave the country go to the United States.
- The Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics reports trends in apprehensions by the U.S. Border Patrol. This analysis focuses on apprehensions of people born in Mexico crossing into the United States.

A Note on Terminology

The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably in this report, as are the terms “foreign born” and “immigrant.”

About the Authors

Jeffrey S. Passel is a senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center. He is a nationally known expert on immigration to the United States and on the demography of racial and ethnic groups. In 2005, Dr. Passel was made a fellow of the American Statistical Association, which cited his outstanding contributions to the measurement of population composition and change. He formerly served as principal research associate at the Urban Institute’s Labor, Human Services and Population Center. From 1987 to 1989, he was assistant chief for population estimates and projections in the Population Division of the U.S. Census Bureau.

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No Evidence Mexican Immigrants Are Leaving

Recent data from U.S. and Mexican population surveys provide no evidence that an increased number of immigrants have left the United States to return to Mexico since 2006.

Mexico’s National Survey of Employment and Occupation, which began in 2006, has released data through the first three months of 2009. It offers data on flows into and out of Mexico. Estimates from the survey are released quarterly.¹

The survey asks each household in the survey whether any members returned from abroad since the previous quarter. Because migration flow is both seasonal and circular, some of the same people might be counted as outflow in one quarter and inflow in another.

Although there is variation from quarter to quarter, on an annual basis, the number of arrivals home has not increased for any year-to-year period since the Mexican survey began in 2006. From February 2006 to February 2007, an estimated 479,000 Mexicans returned home from other countries, mainly the U.S. For the same period in 2007-2008, 440,000 did. For the 2008-2009 period, 433,000 did.

The Current Population Survey, conducted monthly by the U.S. Census Bureau, includes data on the foreign-born population. While not an ideal vehicle for measuring immigration or

Table 1
International Migration to and from Mexico,
by Quarter: February 2006-February 2009

Period	Migration from Mexico	Migration to Mexico	Net Flow from Mexico
Annual Totals – February to February			
2006-2007	1,026,000	479,000	547,000
2007-2008	814,000	440,000	374,000
2008-2009	636,000	433,000	203,000
1st Quarter -- February to May			
2006	369,000	87,000	282,000
2007	276,000	86,000	191,000
2008	217,000	96,000	121,000
2nd Quarter -- May to August			
2006	266,000	112,000	153,000
2007	234,000	83,000	151,000
2008	155,000	83,000	72,000
3rd Quarter -- August to November			
2006	202,000	138,000	64,000
2007	145,000	150,000	-6,000
2008	127,000	115,000	11,000
4th Quarter -- November to February			
2006-2007	189,000	141,000	48,000
2007-2008	159,000	121,000	38,000
2008-2009	137,000	139,000	-1,000

Note: Figures rounded independently to nearest 1,000.
Source: Mexican government, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo (ENOE, National Survey of Occupation and Employment). Press release, "Información Sobre el Flujo Migratorio Internacional de México," June 2, 2009, at <http://www.inegi.org.mx/inegi/contenidos/espanol/prensa/comunicados/flujomigratorio.asp>.

¹ In the Mexican survey, the first quarter is defined as February to May; the second quarter is May to August; the third quarter is August to November; and the fourth quarter is November to February of the subsequent year. In this analysis, quarterly flow sometimes is abbreviated as the last month of that quarter – e.g., February 2009 for the fourth quarter of 2008.

emigration, the CPS includes data about an immigrant’s year of arrival in the U.S. After adjusting the estimates to ensure that all years were consistently weighted, data were extracted for Mexicans who arrived since 1990 to examine changes in the number moving to and from the U.S.

Emigration is estimated by subtracting new arrivals and deaths during the year from the change in the Mexican-born population for that year.² These estimates of annual migration flows from the Current Population Survey average slightly less than 100,000 per year for 2001-2008. There is no indication of substantially higher outflows in 2007 or 2008; estimates for these years are close to average.

Another approach to assessing emigration flows is to examine changes over time in the size of arrival-year groups. It is to be expected that the size of each group would decline slowly over time as some immigrants return home and some die (although mortality is relatively low for recently arrived immigrants because they are younger than the overall U.S. population).

Detection of trends is complicated by the random nature of sampling variability in the CPS, but in general, the Pew Hispanic Center analysis finds that there has not been a greater-than-expected decline in the size of arrival-year classes. The one exception is the 2004-2005 entry group, which shows a statistically significant decline between 2008 and 2009.

Table 2
Estimated Annual Components of Change for Mexican-Born Population Entering the U.S. 1990 and Later: Current Population Surveys, 2001-2009, Average of January-April Surveys
(thousands)

SURVEY DATE#	ENTERED 1990 & LATER	COMPONENTS OF CHANGE		
		Population Change	New Arrivals	Emigration
2009	7,369	69	175	93
2008	7,300	307	424	106
2007	6,993	227	287	50
2006	6,767	452	492	31
2005	6,315	564	653	80
2004	5,751	358	503	137
2003	5,393	283	397	107
2002	5,109	550	570	13
2001	4,559	n/a	n/a	n/a

The Annual Components are for the year ending with the first four months of the year. So, "2009" begins with the first quarter of 2008 and ends with the first quarter of 2009.
n/a Not applicable.
Note: The component estimates for 2008-2009 based on additional assumptions. See Methodological Appendix for details.
Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations from monthly CPS files. Survey weights adjusted to be consistent with Vintage 2008 population controls. Data for 1996-1997, 2004-2005 and 2006-2009 entry groups are modified to account for response anomalies. See Methodological Appendix for details.

² Because emigration is estimated as the difference of two components that are themselves estimated as differences, its variance is a function of the variances of all four components. The resulting standard error can be quite large—in excess of 150,000—compared with the estimate of emigration, meaning that changes in emigration must be even larger to be statistically detectable.

Fewer Mexican Immigrants Are Arriving

Immigration from Mexico to the U.S., especially unauthorized immigration, began to drop off in mid-2006, and that pattern has continued into 2009, according to population surveys in both countries and U.S. enforcement data.

By the period spanning March 2008 to March 2009³, the estimated annual inflow of immigrants from Mexico—about 175,000 as estimated from the Current Population Survey—was lower than at any point during the decade and only about half of the average for the previous two years (Table 2).

Annual immigration from Mexico has risen and fallen several times during the decade, according to CPS estimates. For example, immigration dropped by about one-third, from 570,000 for March 2000-March 2001 to an estimated 397,000 for March 2002-March 2003. For the three-year period of March 2003-March 2006, Mexican inflows nearly regained their previous levels and averaged about 550,000.⁴ Since then, immigration from Mexico has decreased substantially, dropping almost 40% to an annual average of about 350,000 for March 2006-March 2008 and continuing with the sharp decline noted for the most recent year.

Mexico's National Survey of Employment and Occupation (ENOE), which asks questions of each household in its sample about people who departed for other countries, shows a similar pattern. The flow out of Mexico, more than a million for February 2006-February 2007, declined by more than 20% to about 814,000 for the same period in 2007-2008. It decreased by another 20% to about 636,000 for the same period in 2008-2009 (Table 1).

Although the changes over time are similar to those shown in the CPS, the flow levels reported by the Mexican survey are quite a bit higher because the two surveys are not measuring the same group of migrants. The CPS is designed to measure people whose principal residence is in the U.S. and who are settled on a long-term or permanent basis. The Mexican survey, meanwhile, provides estimates for a broader group of migrants. They include Mexicans who come to the U.S. for short periods and may return home within weeks or months. Some

³ Measures reported here are based on differences in recent arrivals from Mexico as measured by CPS averages of January-April from one year to the next. So the results from January-April 2009 CPS measure immigration from roughly March 1, 2008, to March 1, 2009.

⁴ Because of the range of error for individual flow estimates calculated from population differences, the three annual flow estimates for 2003-2004, 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 are not significantly different from one another. Thus, we report based on their average.

people counted as leaving Mexico in one quarter may be included in the count of returnees in a subsequent quarter. Those “circular” migrants may not appear in the CPS.

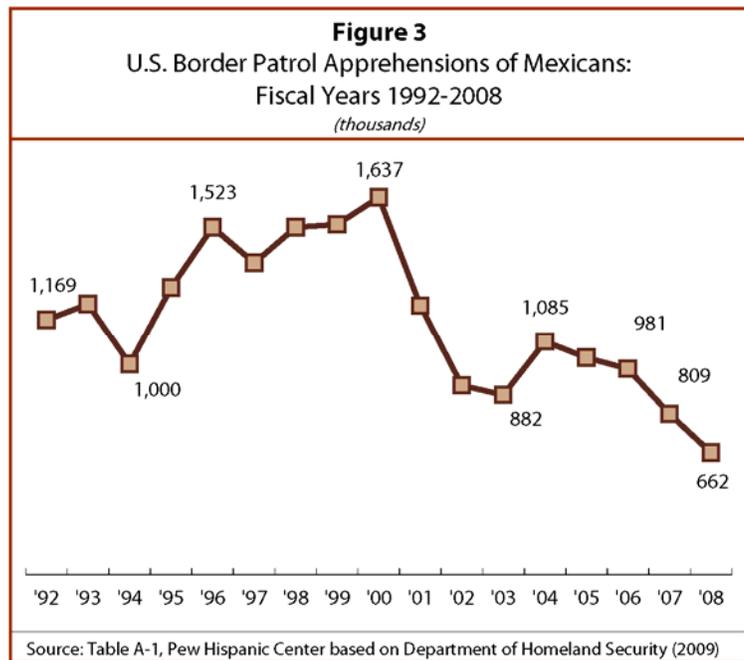
ENOE, the Mexican survey, measures migration flows on a quarterly basis, but because migration to and from the U.S. is highly seasonal, it is not appropriate to track quarter-to-quarter changes in the number of Mexicans leaving for the U.S. However, annual data show that number of people leaving Mexico has declined each quarter on a year-to-year basis.

Apprehensions by the U.S. Border Patrol of Mexicans attempting to enter the United States illegally show a pattern very similar to that in the CPS and ENOE data. The number of apprehensions declined by about one-sixth from fiscal 2006 to fiscal 2007 followed by a similar percentage decline in 2008. By fiscal 2008, the number of Mexicans apprehended by the Border Patrol—662,000—was 40% below the mid-decade peak of 1.1 million in 2004.

The total number of apprehensions in 2008—724,000—was at the lowest level since 1973. More than 90% of people detained by the Border Patrol are Mexican.

Apprehensions by the Border Patrol are not a direct measure of immigration for a number of reasons. First, apprehensions include an unknown number of people detained more than once. Second, they represent only the people prevented from entering and not those who are successful. Finally, to some degree the number of apprehensions is a function of how many agents the Border Patrol places at the border and how successful they are at apprehending clandestine border crossers. The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Border Patrol, cautions that “the relationship between the number of border apprehensions to either the number of attempted illegal entries or the number of successful illegal entries is not known.”

The Border Patrol attempts to stop illegal entries to the U.S. and does not generally apprehend unauthorized immigrants who are leaving the country, so the



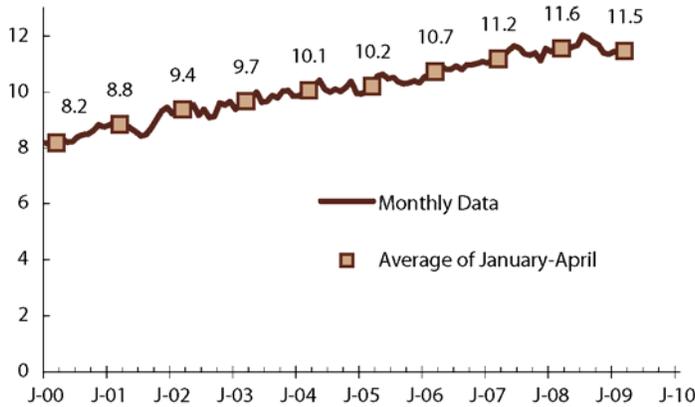
data address only inflows to the U.S. Nonetheless, the apprehensions data provide an indicator of the magnitude of the flow across the border that tends to rise and fall with the number of successful entries and with immigration levels. The record year for apprehensions was 1986, just before enactment of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which allowed several million unauthorized immigrants to legalize their status and instituted stricter enforcement.

These data do not address the reasons for the drop in apprehensions. A Department of Homeland Security fact sheet suggests that the decrease could be due to factors including the weakening U.S. economic growth as well as stepped-up border enforcement. The threat of being caught could discourage some would-be immigrants from attempting to enter the U.S. Some scholars suggest that stepped-up enforcement also could discourage unauthorized migrants from leaving the U.S. for home visits, because they would risk capture when they tried to re-enter.

Appendix A: Additional Figures and Table

Figure A-1

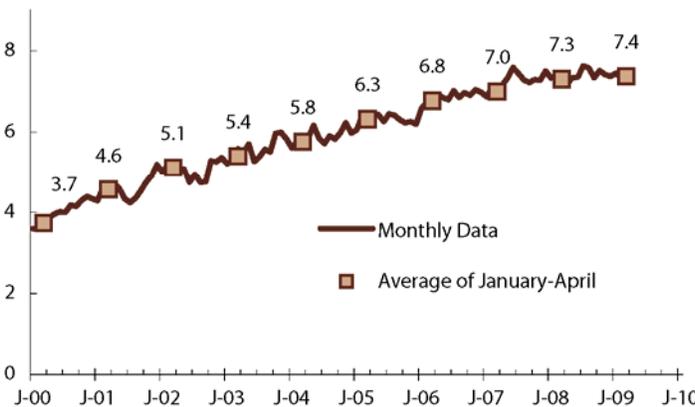
Mexican-Born Population of the United States:
Current Population Survey, 2000-2009
(millions)



Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations from monthly CPS, January 2000-April 2009. Weights for 2000-2008 adjusted for consistency with Vintage 2008 population estimates. See Methodological Appendix for details.

Figure A-2

Mexican-Born Population Entering the U.S. 1990 and Later:
Current Population Survey, 2000-2009
(millions)



Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations from monthly CPS, January 2000-April 2009. Weights for 2000-2008 adjusted for consistency with Vintage 2008 population estimates. See Methodological Appendix for details.

Table A-1

U.S. Border Patrol Apprehensions by Nationality:
Fiscal Years 1992 to 2008

Fiscal Year	Total Apprehensions	Mexican
1992	1,200,000	1,169,000
1993	1,263,000	1,230,000
1994	1,032,000	1,000,000
1995	1,324,000	1,294,000
1996	1,550,000	1,523,000
1997	1,413,000	1,388,000
1998	1,556,000	1,523,000
1999	1,579,000	1,535,000
2000	1,676,000	1,637,000
2001	1,266,000	1,224,000
2002	955,000	918,000
2003	932,000	882,000
2004	1,160,000	1,085,000
2005	1,189,000	1,024,000
2006	1,089,000	981,000
2007	877,000	809,000
2008	724,000	662,000

Note: Fiscal years end Sept. 30. Data for 1992-2004 are current as of Oct. 31, 2007. Data for 2005-2007 as of Nov.-Dec. 2008. Figures rounded to nearest 1,000.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Data for 2005-2008 from Nancy Rytina and John Simanski, *Apprehensions by the U.S. Border Patrol: 2005-2008*, June 2009, http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_apprehensions_fs_2005-2008.pdf. Unpublished data for 1992-2004 supplied by Rytina and Simanski.

Appendix B: Methodology (Forthcoming)

Period of Entry	Survey Year								
	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001
All periods	11,464	11,560	11,183	10,733	10,209	10,057	9,668	9,374	8,844
1990 & Later	7,369	7,300	6,993	6,767	6,315	5,751	5,393	5,109	4,559
2009									
2008	952								
2007		874							
2006			1,339						
2005	699	890		1,053					
2004					1,428		774		
2003	805	811	815	867					
2002							1,410		
2001	1,121	1,104	1,235	1,198	1,229	1,138		1,012	
2000									1,506
1999	1,055	893	987	889	948	1,074	1,155	1,064	
1998									
1990-1997	2,737	2,728	2,617	2,760	2,710	2,764	2,828	3,033	3,053
Before 1990	4,095	4,260	4,190	3,966	3,894	4,307	4,276	4,265	4,284

* The CPS reports periods of entry in two-year groups except for the most recent period of arrival, which varies from year to year as either a three-year or four-year period. The boxes in the table show periods covered by the CPS data; for example, in the 2009 CPS, 805,000 Mexicans are estimated to have entered the U.S. in 2002-2003. Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations from monthly CPS files. Survey weights adjusted to be consistent with Vintage 2008 population controls. Data for 1996-1997, 2004-0505 and 2006-2009 entry groups are modified to account for response anomalies. See Methodological Appendix for details.