

Humanities

Mexican Immigration to the United States

As you read each of the historical summaries on Mexican immigration, keep track of the push and pull factors during each set of years on the graphic organizer.

Years	Push Factors	Pull Factors
<p>1900-1941</p>		

<p>1942-1965</p>	<p>1966-1999</p>

Historical Summary Part One 1900 to 1941

Throughout the 19th century, much of Mexico's population lived and worked on communally owned lands called *ejidos*. But, when Porfirio Díaz became President of Mexico in 1880, he began confiscating the *ejidos* to sell the land to large land development companies. Without *ejidos*, the Mexican rural population, or *campesinos*, were forced into low wage work on ranches, railroads, and in mines. The devastating blow of the end of the *ejidos* to rural Mexican life was compounded by a population explosion between 1875 and 1910 that increased the Mexican population by 50 percent. The population boom created a labor surplus that depressed wages during a period of drastic inflation on basic foodstuffs. Therefore, at the turn of the century, removal from the land, a large labor surplus, low wages, and high prices on basic foods "pushed" many *campesinos* out of Mexico. In 1910, the Mexican Revolution ousted Porfirio Díaz from power but created chaos and violence until the political conditions of the country stabilized in 1920. Between 1910 and 1920, the revolution induced thousands more to leave Mexico. War refugees impoverished by the ensuing economic turmoil, many Mexicans migrated north to work in the rapidly developing agricultural regions of the southwestern United States.

Viable irrigation systems established in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California in the early 20th century helped to usher in a massive agricultural boom as land owners planted cotton, citrus, and beet crops. The resulting need for labor to harvest the fields was met by the thousands of *campesinos* fleeing poverty and war in Mexico. Higher wages and political stability drew *campesinos* north across the border. Throughout the 20th century, Mexicans composed over 80 percent of the "army" of migrant laborers that moved between harvests throughout the Southwest, making the immigrant labor pool indispensable.

Mexican immigration to the United States continued to grow until the 1929 when the Great Depression reversed the pattern of Mexican immigration. Although the "push" factor of poverty in Mexico did not end during the Great Depression, the "pull" factor of higher wages in the U.S. evaporated as large growers turned to poor American families instead of Mexicans to harvest their crops. Soon after the Great Depression began, Mexicans who had once been sought for their cheap labor became seen as economic competition. Mexicans quickly found themselves unwelcome in the United States and began to return home to Mexico. During the Great Depression, the annual flow of Mexican immigration to the United States contracted until more Mexicans were repatriated and deported out of the United States than those who immigrated into the United States. Therefore, the Great Depression marks an end in the first stage of Mexican immigration to the United States. Not until World War II sparked an upswing in the U.S. economy did Mexican immigration to the United States begin to increase again.

Vocabulary Words

campesinos

emigrate

deport

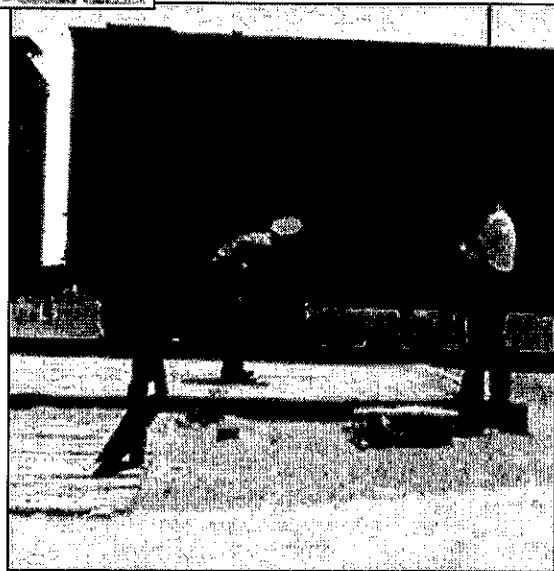
immigrate

ejidos

repatriate



Mexican emigrating to U.S.
Nuevo Laredo, Mexico
Library of Congress
LC-USZ62-97491 (ca. 1912)



Inspecting a freight train from
Mexico for smuggled immigrants.
El Paso, Texas

Library of Congress
LC-USF34-018222-E (June 1938)
Dorothea Lange, photographer

Student Handout 1

Vocabulary 1900-1941

campesino rural farmers

deport send out of the country

ejido a piece of land with communal ownership

emigrate leave one's country to live in another

immigrate enter a country of which one is not native in order to reside there

repatriate return to the country and/or citizenship of origin

Historical Summary Part Two 1942–1965

In 1941 the United States entered World War II, jumpstarting the American economy out of the Great Depression. Mobilization for the war touched every sector of the American economy and placed new demands upon American agriculture. The United States government asked growers to rapidly produce more fruits, vegetables, and cotton to support the war effort at home and abroad. With American men and women employed in the higher wage industrial sectors or serving in the Armed Services, southwestern growers argued that they required more immigrant labor from Mexico to fulfill the nation's production needs. To help growers secure steady labor from Mexico, officials of the United States government approached the Mexican government about the possibility of formally facilitating short-term Mexican immigration to the United States. After considerable debate about the pros and cons of reopening the pathways of Mexican labor migration to the United States, in August 1942 the Mexican government agreed to allow the U.S. government to contract Mexican laborers to work on southwestern farms and railroads on short-term contracts for the duration of the war. The government-to-government, or bilateral, agreement was called the Bracero Program.

U.S. and Mexican officials intended the Bracero Program to stimulate and regulate the immigration of Mexican laborers to the United States. For example, Mexican workers who entered the United States as members of the Bracero program (known as Braceros) were guaranteed a basic labor contract with benefits, such as a minimum wage, health insurance, and adequate housing. Also, Braceros were prohibited from working in any industries other than those where a significant labor need existed, specifically agriculture and railroads. The Bracero Program did successfully initiate a new phase of regulated Mexican immigration, but the program's poor implementation also sparked a dramatic increase in unregulated immigration, otherwise known as undocumented immigration.

Bracero contracts were limited in number and often difficult to obtain. For example, the number of Bracero contracts available varied from year to year and was determined by calculating how many additional non-domestic laborers were needed during any given harvest period. The number of Mexican laborers who desired to work in the United States consistently outnumbered the number of Bracero contracts available. Also, not all Mexican workers were eligible for the Bracero Program since the Mexican government required Braceros applicants to be from a region experiencing serious unemployment. Braceros also had to be at least 14 (there was no upper age limit though older workers and women could legally be paid lower wages), meet certain health requirements, and have previous experience as an agricultural laborer.

Even though many Mexican workers were eligible, the process of successfully securing a Bracero contract was difficult and expensive to undertake. For example, to secure a Bracero contract, prospective Braceros had to travel to official recruitment centers in Mexico. The recruitment centers were often far, and Mexican officials frequently demanded bribes for contracts. The significant number of Mexican workers who were either ineligible for the Bracero Program or unable to undertake the process of securing a Bracero contract began to bypass the program entirely and head north

outside of the control of and to the irritation of both the U.S. and Mexican governments. These workers soon found a loophole in the Bracero Program's implementation that worked to their advantage—if they were apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol after illegally entering the United States and while working on a U.S. farm, undocumented Mexican immigrants could simply secure a Bracero contract from U.S. officials. This loophole combined with the abundance of Mexican laborers seeking work in the U.S. created a situation in which U.S. Border Patrol apprehension statistics steadily climbed until Border Patrol officers were arresting more Mexicans for illegally entering the U.S. than Braceros were being contracted to work in the United States from Mexico.

Although the Bracero Program was intended to be a short-term wartime program, by 1945 when World War II ended, U.S. and Mexican officials decided to keep the Bracero Program in place, but dramatically reduced the number of Braceros contracts available to Mexican workers. Despite the reduction in Bracero contracts, Mexican workers continued to migrate north for work outside of the parameters of the Bracero Program and outside of the control of U.S. and Mexican officials. When the U.S. entered the Korean War in 1951, the U.S. and Mexican governments began to offer more



Waiting outside the soccer stadium in Mexico City. According to Farm Security Administration employee Hilda Mayer, many had been waiting for five days since hearing of the opportunity to work in the United States.

Howard R. Rosenberg, "Snapshots in a Farm Labor Tradition,"
Labor Management Decisions, Volume 3, No. 1 (Winter-Spring, 1993).

Available: < http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/snapshots.html >

Bracero contracts to Mexican workers because the United States was once again experiencing a need for agricultural laborers. The increase was greater than had been experienced during World War II. The numbers continued to rise through 1959; after that, the number of Bracero contracts offered to Mexican agricultural workers began to decline, in part due to the mechanization in cotton and sugar beet production, but also because significant political resistance to the program had developed in the United States and Mexico that would eventually lead to the program's demise in 1965.



Processing forms for the Bracero Program.

Howard R. Rosenberg,
 "Snapshots in a Farm Labor Tradition," *Labor Management
 Decisions*, Volume 3, No. 1 (Winter-Spring, 1993).

Available:

< [http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/
 winterspring_93/snapshots.html](http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/snapshots.html) >

While many Mexican officials saw the Bracero Program as an important policy for reducing poverty in Mexico and maintaining strong foreign relations with the United States, others resented the exodus of Mexican laborers to the United States. In the United States, organized labor opposed the Bracero Program because they believed that Braceros lowered wages. Even southwestern growers disagreed over the usefulness of the program. Many supported the program because it filled their labor needs, while others resented having to agree to Bracero contracts that guaranteed workers such provisions as a minimum wage. Braceros themselves had mixed experiences with the program. Some experienced abuse and discrimination, particularly after 1954 when the United States failed to strictly enforce the provisions of the Bracero contract, while others were able to accomplish their goal of earning good wages.

Although the availability to Bracero contracts waxed and waned over time, throughout the period significant wage differentials between Mexico and the United States was a continuous enticement to migrate north for better wages. Therefore, a decreased availability of Bracero contracts often simply led to increased undocumented immigration.

This undocumented immigration disturbed both U.S. and Mexican officials both of whom had their own reasons for wanting to strictly regulate the movement of Mexican laborers to the United States. Daily undocumented entries of Mexican laborers reaffirmed the porous character of U.S. borders. American officials worried about border security during the World War II and, later, during the Cold War. For Mexico's part, many Mexican employers protested losing their sources of cheap labor to northern competitors and Mexican officials worried that Mexican laborers would be exploited in the United States if not protected by the Bracero contract. Neither the U.S nor Mexico wished to see the rate of undocumented immigration grow.

The Mexican government placed significant pressure on the United States to aggressively deport all undocumented Mexican immigrants living in the United States as a prerequisite for allowing the Bracero Program to continue after World War II. After the war, the United States Border Patrol experimented with new law enforcement tactics not only for patrolling the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent illegal entries, but also for detecting, arresting, and deporting undocumented Mexican immigrants who had successfully entered the country. The Border Patrol's aggressive deportation campaign climaxed in the summer of 1954 with the implementation of Operation Wetback. During Operation

Wetback, the Border Patrol assigned most of its officers to the U.S.-Mexico border region to apprehend undocumented Mexican immigrants living in the border states. By the end of 1954 they had apprehended and deported over 1,000,000 undocumented immigrants. Operation Wetback outraged many U.S. growers who believed that they depended upon informal and undocumented immigration. The Border Patrol and other Immigration officials helped, encouraged, and often intimidated growers into using Braceros rather than undocumented workers. U.S. officials had hoped that Operation Wetback would successfully discourage Mexicans from illegally entering the U.S. and encourage American employers to use legal sources of labor, but several years later, Border Patrol apprehension statistics began to rise again indicating that undocumented immigration from Mexico continued despite their efforts.

The Bracero Program and undocumented immigration were uneasy siblings. The Bracero Program was intended to be the centerpiece of Mexican immigration policy. In many ways, it was. It reignited the migration of Mexican workers north for short-term employment. However, the program's poor implementation, the tendency to prefer the ease of hiring undocumented workers rather than Braceros, and the surplus of Mexican workers migrating north eventually made undocumented labor the Bracero Program's constant companion. Even so, the Bracero Program survived longer than anyone had intended. It was designed as an emergency wartime effort; yet it did not end until 1965, two decades after the final battles of World War II were fought. Many students of Mexican immigration argue that today's flow of undocumented immigration can be traced back to the networks that the Bracero Program built between U.S. employers and Mexican laborers.

Vocabulary Words

bilateral

Bracero Program

United States Border Patrol

Vocabulary 1942-1965

bilateral

affecting two sides equally; two-sided

Bracero program

1942 federal program which filled wartime farm labor shortages by allowing growers to bring in Mexican nationals as "guest workers"

United States Border Patrol

the national police force assigned to prevent undocumented immigration

Historical Summary Part Three 1966–1999

The Immigration Act of 1965 ushered in a new era of Mexican immigration. Under the National Origins Act of 1924 no limits had been placed on annual immigration from the Western Hemisphere. The 1965 Act, however, imposed a numerical limit upon immigrants allowed to enter the United States from the western hemisphere (South America, Central America, Caribbean, Mexico, and Canada). Only 120,000 persons from the western hemisphere were allowed to legally immigrate to the United States per year. An important exception to the new numerical limits, the spouse, unmarried children and parents of United States citizens could immigrate to the United States regardless of the numerical limit.

Thus, for the first time in U.S. history, limits were placed on the annual number of Mexicans who could legally immigrate to the United States. Shortly after the Immigration Act was fully implemented in 1968, a series of crises struck the Mexican economy that pressured many Mexican families to continue migrating north despite the new immigration restrictions. Hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants disregarded the new limits placed on legal Mexican immigration and continued the pattern of seeking short-term employment in the U.S. They waded across the Rio Grande into Texas, jumped border fences in California, braved the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico, or falsified immigration papers.

The Mexican economy grew steadily between 1970 and 1974—but by 1976 substantial inflation and devaluation of the Mexican peso thrust many families into uncertain financial conditions. Beginning in the early 1980s and steadily worsening over the decade, an expanding foreign debt and dropping oil prices further crippled the Mexican economy anew. Finally, in 1994, a series of political assassinations and an armed insurrection in Chiapas, Mexico caused additional deflation of the peso. In December of that year, the Mexican economy plunged when Mexican investors removed \$11 billion dollars from Mexican banks in just a few days.

While the Mexican economy was faltering in the mid-1990s, the U.S. economy was experiencing a period of rapid expansion. The resulting low unemployment in the United States was a factor in enticing a larger number of Mexican laborers to migrate north in order to flee the deplorable economic conditions in Mexico. However, in this new era of numerical limits, most were crossing the border without documentation.

Scholars debate the number of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States. For example, in the 1970s, scholars' estimations of undocumented immigrants ranged from 600,000 to 6,000,000 undocumented immigrants. Whatever the actual number of undocumented immigrants living in the United States, the issue of undocumented immigration became a political hot button beginning in the 1970s. In 1986, Congress hoped to gain control over illegal immigration by passing the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). IRCA had four major points. First, significant new appropriations were made for the United States Border Patrol. Second, penalties were enacted against employers who willfully hired undocumented immigrants. Third, long-term undocumented immigrants were granted amnesty. Fourth, many undocumented agricultural workers were legalized.

IRCA did not end illegal immigration; rather, it drastically changed the pattern of Mexican immigration to the United States. With additional funding from IRCA, the U.S. Border Patrol increased the number of border guards and patrols in an attempt to close the border to undocumented workers. These new efforts, commonly known as Operation Hold the Line and Operation Gatekeeper, forced undocumented immigrants to cross the border through arid deserts to evade detection. Operation Hold the Line has had two major effects. First, the number of immigrants who die each year while trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border through the desert has increased. Second, successful undocumented immigrants tend to stay within the U.S. for longer periods of time rather than risking apprehension by migrating back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico.

With the failure of IRCA to stem the tide of undocumented immigration, voters in California attempted to end illegal immigration by passing Proposition 187 in 1994. Proposition 187 was designed to deny undocumented immigrants and their children access to public services and public education. Although the voters of California passed Proposition 187, most of its provisions were later found to be unconstitutional by the 9th District Court. The new era of Mexican immigration to the United States begun by the Immigration Act of 1965 is still unfolding and the primary sources for this period are still being drafted, painted, published, and sung. You too are witnesses of and participants in this era of Mexican immigration to the United States.

Vocabulary Words

Immigration Act of 1965

Immigration Reform and Control Act

Operation Hold the Line

peso devaluation

Proposition 187

undocumented immigration



Photo by James R. Tourtellotte, U.S. Customs

A Customs Inspector at the Nogales, Arizona border crossing interviews an individual as he enters the United States from Mexico.

Vocabulary

Student Handout Three

Student Handout Three

Immigration Act of 1965

National law that abolished the national origins quota system for granting immigrant visas. Under national origins, the number of people from a given country already living in the United States determined the number of future immigrants. The new law established allocation of immigrant visas on a first come, first served basis, subject to certain exceptions. As a result, the U.S. immigrant population since 1965 has been much more diverse than it was previously.

Immigration Reform and Control Act

1986 law which was passed in order to control and deter undocumented immigration to the United States. Its major provisions stipulate legalization of undocumented aliens who had been continuously unlawfully present since 1982, legalization of certain agricultural workers, sanctions for employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers, and increased enforcement at U.S. borders.

Operation Hold the Line

an action initially performed by U.S. Border Patrol in 1993 during which agents formed a human blockade—more than 400 agents and vehicles, posted every 100 yards from one end of El Paso to the other—that would discourage people from attempting to cross.

peso devaluation

lowering the value of the peso (the Mexican dollar)

Proposition 187

a law passed by California voters on November 8, 1994 which denied public benefits to undocumented aliens in that state.

undocumented immigration

entering a country without documents representing permission to enter such as travel, work, or student visas