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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *International Migration Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Special Issue: Measuring International Migration: Theory and Practice (Winter, 1987), pp. 1245-1257

Published by: [The Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2546511>

Accessed: 17/04/2012 15:08

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Research Note

International Migration Statistics in Mexico

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During the past decade Mexico has experienced both large-scale emigration, directed mostly to the United States, and the mass immigration of Central American refugees. The implementation of the United States Immigration and Control Act of 1986 and the possible escalation of armed conflicts in Central America may result in expanded inflows either of returning citizens or of new refugee waves. To develop appropriate policy responses, Mexico would need reliable information on international migration flows. This note reviews available sources of that information and evaluates their strengths and limitations.

Arrival and Departure Statistics

The Dirección General de Servicios Migratorios (DGSM) is responsible for controlling and recording the entry and departure of both citizens and aliens to and from Mexican territory. The DGSM also reviews applications for changes of migration status, controls the entry of nationals expelled by a foreign country, expels deportable aliens from Mexican territory and is in charge of overseeing Central American refugees.

The arrival and departure data recorded by migration stations at the various ports of entry to the country have been published continuously since 1910. The different categories used in classifying the data correspond largely to those identified explicitly in Mexican legislation (Ley General de Población, 1974), though some categories lack definitions altogether. Table 1 presents the categories used and their meaning as established by law or as determined through interviews with personnel of the DGSM.

The data on the different categories of travellers are not gathered by a uniform procedure. Entry and departure information on foreigners whose stay in the country is expected to be short (foreign tourists and "transmigrantes", for instance) is obtained from the visa that they must return to

¹ The author would like to thank the numerous persons at the Dirección General de Servicios Migratorios, Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, and the Consejo Nacional de Población for their assistance and for providing unpublished data presented here.

migration authorities upon departure from the country. Information on nationals and on foreigners who are granted permission to reside in Mexican territory is collected through form FME, which records their age, sex, nationality, place of residence, occupation, destination, purpose of travel and, for aliens, migration status in Mexico. Form FME, however, need not be filled by travellers remaining within a 20 km. band of Mexican borders (that is, within the perimeter of most border cities). Thus, arrival and departure data fail to reflect the movement of "border crossers".

Another source of information is form FM1 which foreigners who are allowed to stay in Mexico for more than six months are required to fill when they present a petition for admission into the country. Information gathered in that form includes: date and place of birth, sex, nationality, place of residence, country of origin, marital status, literacy, schooling or profession, occupation, religion, native language and nationality of parents and spouse.

In contrast with most data on arrivals, information on Mexican citizens expelled from other countries is mostly collected at the border (except for the few persons expelled by air). However, the number of recorded entries of *deportados* is generally too low (See, Table 2) and its fluctuations through time are more representative of variations in recording procedures than of actual trends.

Given that a substantial proportion of all international movements is recorded using forms FME and FM1, demographic and socioeconomic information for certain categories of travellers is potentially available. However, it has rarely been exploited. With few exceptions, only two tables on arrival and departure data are published each year in the Statistical Yearbook of Mexico and they do not include classifications either by demographic or socio-economic variables. Hence, the possible use of the tabulated data for analytical purposes is limited.

Another drawback of the published data is that different categories of travellers are recorded with varying degrees of completeness. In many instances, that deficiency is closely associated with the procedures used to operationalize the definitions established by law, though vague definitions are also often at fault. Examples of some such problems will be discussed briefly below.

Consider the definition of "emigrant" established by law (See, Table 1). Though the definition is sufficiently general and well suited to match the definition of "immigrant" of the main receiver of Mexican emigrants, the United States, the number of emigrants published in Mexican sources is far too low (See, Table 3). The cause of the discrepancy is that Mexican authorities only classify as emigrants persons whose emigration is supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or by the Ministry of Labor and who, strictly speaking, are better described as "temporary migrant workers" than as emigrants. However, even when this idiosyncratic conceptualization of

TABLE 1
CATEGORIES OF NATIONALS AND ALIENS USED IN TABULATING
ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE STATISTICS

Category	Definition
NATIONALS	
Arrivals	
1. "Turistas residentes en México" (tourists residing in Mexico)	Mexican citizens who reside in Mexico and return from a short visit abroad.
2. "Turistas residentes en el extranjero" (tourists residing abroad)	Mexican citizens who reside abroad and enter Mexico for a short visit.
3. "Diplomáticos" (diplomats)	Mexican officials returning from posting abroad.
4. "Repatriados" (repatriates)	Former Mexican emigrants who return to the country after having resided at least two years abroad.
5. "Deportados" (expellees)	Mexican citizens expelled from a foreign country filing form FM II.
Departures	
1. "Turistas residentes en México" (tourists residing in Mexico)	Mexican citizens who reside in Mexico and leave for a short visit abroad.
2. "Turistas residentes en el extranjero" (tourists residing abroad)	Mexican citizens who reside abroad and leave Mexico after a short visit.
3. "Diplomáticos" (diplomats)	Mexican officials departing (presumably to be posted abroad).
4. "Emigrantes" (emigrants)	Persons leaving the country with the purpose of "establishing residence" abroad (Art. 77). According to the law, an emigrant should be able to show the documents allowing him/her to resettle in another country (Art. 78).
ALIENS	
Immigrants	
1. "Inmigrantes" (provisional immigrants)	Persons entering the country with the purpose of residing in it (Art. 44). Immigrants are granted five-year residence permits that must be validated annually (Art. 45). Statistics on arrivals present data on "inmigrantes por primera vez" (first-time immigrants) and "inmigrantes de regreso" (returning immigrants). Departures show different categories for immigrants leaving temporarily and those leaving permanently.
2. "Inmigrados" (permanent immigrants)	Persons who acquire the right of permanent residence in Mexico. Temporary immigrants may apply for permanent residence after five years of stay in Mexico (Art. 53). Arrival data show "inmigrados de regreso" (returning permanent immigrants), while those on departures distinguish permanent immigrants who leave temporarily from those who leave for good.

TABLE 1 (Continued)
CATEGORIES OF NATIONALS AND ALIENS USED IN TABULATING
ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE STATISTICS

Category	Definition
Non-Immigrants	
1. Tourists	Foreigners admitted for up to six months for recreational purposes (Art. 42.I). They are not permitted to work for a salary. This category is recorded in both arrivals and departures.
2. "Transmigrantes" (excursionists)	Persons in transit to another country. They may remain in Mexico for up to 30 days (Art. 42.II).
3. "Visitantes" (visitors)	Persons who will exercise some activity, whether lucrative or not, for up to six months — with a possible extension of another six or, in some cases, another year (Art. 42. III). Arrival data distinguish between visitors arriving for the first time and returning visitors. Departures show separately visitors departing permanently and visitors departing temporarily.
4. "Visitantes provisionales" (provisional visitors)	Persons whose entry is allowed for a stay not exceeding 30 days when their papers are not in perfect order (Art. 42.IX). Arrivals and departures of this type of travellers are presented separately.
5. "Consejeros" (counsellors)	Persons granted a permit valid for six months and good for multiple entries, provided no stay is longer than 30 days (Art. 42.IV). Arrival statistics distinguish counsellors entering for the first time from those returning. Permanent and temporary departures are distinguished also.
6. "Asilados políticos"	Persons allowed to stay for a limited time so as to protect their liberty and life from political persecution in their country of origin (Art. 42.V). Arrival data distinguish between first-time asylees and returning asylees. Departure data present separately asylees leaving temporarily and those departing permanently.
7. "Estudiantes" (students)	Persons allowed to study in Mexico under annual permits (Art. 42.VI). Arrivals distinguish students entering for the first time from those returning. Departures indicate whether students are leaving permanently or temporarily.
8. "Diplomáticos" (diplomats)	Foreign government personnel whose arrivals and departures are recorded.
9. "Deportados" (expellees)	Foreigners deported by Mexican authorities.
10. Other	A few other categories of aliens admitted for short periods under special conditions (which exclude the permission to work).

Sources: Ley General de Población, 1974 (specific articles are shown in parenthesis within the table) and interviews with personnel of the "Dirección General de Servicios Migratorios".

TABLE 2
ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES OF NATIONALS RECORDED BY MEXICAN
MIGRATION STATIONS BY CATEGORY, 1970-1985

Year	Tourists		Diplomats	Repatriates	Expellees
	Residing in Mexico	Residing Abroad			
Arrivals					
1970	246,487	264,234	4,720	12,564	97,451
1971	260,054	271,340	4,245	13,498	117,657
1972	302,263	308,045	5,018	13,925	157,711
1973	340,985	337,571	5,891	15,407	239,120
1974	410,431	344,653	6,706	4,754	31,361
1975	518,539	372,232	5,561	4,522	21,762
1976	566,934	397,893	5,566	5,997	80,530
1977	460,282	430,305	5,050	5,677	53,720
1978	614,511	456,560	5,078	4,962	199,465
1979	760,200	515,303	5,549	7,578	57,311
1980	1,025,895	529,221	6,055	9,274	123,422
1981	1,295,021	584,339	5,945	9,427	146,109
1982	915,164	529,818	3,961	9,827	64,925
1983	549,022	497,900	2,621	10,920	24,574
1984	769,452	513,319	3,610	10,946	21,056
1985	861,463	517,738	2,758	8,536	20,772
Departures					
1970	272,800	162,266	4,469	4,962	—
1971	288,386	166,791	4,626	6,504	—
1972	332,468	193,371	5,261	5,764	—
1973	375,408	210,015	5,872	10,226	—
1974	432,274	209,885	7,330	10,040	—
1975	526,198	228,070	7,217	6,380	—
1976	513,846	275,835	5,759	4,211	—
1977	466,101	269,771	5,269	3,462	—
1978	608,291	292,125	4,801	6,066	—
1979	685,548	391,032	5,620	1,769	—
1980	980,599	321,790	6,522	2,412	—
1981	1,283,191	304,867	5,972	2,649	—
1982	781,116	287,495	4,051	912	—
1983	494,589	293,309	2,820	869	—
1984	757,704	282,270	3,154	1,075	—
1985	806,833	267,221	2,883	1,536	—

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF EMIGRANT DATA AS PUBLISHED IN MEXICAN SOURCES AND
MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS RECORDED IN UNITED STATES SOURCES

Year	Mexican Sources		United States Sources
	Mexican Emigrants	Mexican Immigrants	Mexican Agricultural Workers
1960	8,771	32,684	427,240
1961	8,814	41,632	294,149
1962	15,944	55,291	282,556
1963	9,491	55,253	195,450
1964	7,293	32,967	181,738
1965	7,455	37,969	—
1966	6,263	45,163	—
1967	5,880	42,371	—
1968	6,528	43,563	—
1969	5,954	44,623	—
1970	4,962	44,469	—
1971	6,504	50,103	—
1972	5,764	64,040	—
1973	10,226	70,141	—
1974	10,040	71,586	—
1975	6,380	62,205	—
1976	4,211	57,863	—
1977	3,462	60,080	—
1978	6,066	92,367	—
1979	1,769	52,096	—
1980	2,412	56,680	—
1981	2,649	101,268	—
1982	912	56,106	—
1983	869	59,079	—
1984	1,075	57,557	—
1985	1,536	61,077	—

“emigrant” is discovered, it is not easy to account for the significant discrepancies existing between the recorded number of “emigrants” and the number of Mexican agricultural workers admitted by the United States during the early sixties under a bilateral agreement. That is, the series of

"emigrants" published in Mexican sources fails to reflect either *bona fide* emigrants or the departures of temporary workers migrating legally.

A similar problem arises with respect to the category of *asilados políticos*. The numbers of first entries presented in Table 4 are very small, only surpassing the 300 mark once since 1960. Yet, since 1979 Mexico has been at the receiving end of sizeable refugee flows originating in Central America, and according to UNHCR sources was hosting approximately 175,000 refugees early in 1985. The large discrepancy between the number of *asilados políticos* and that of refugees hosted by Mexico is due to the country's decision not to ratify international instruments on the status of refugees (United Nations, 1951 and 1964) thus, in effect, rejecting the internationally established definition of refugee. Consequently, without legal provisions granting refugee status to Central Americans fleeing persecution in their countries, the statistical recording system is blind to their existence. In this respect, Central American refugees are akin to illegal migrants.

The close association of refugees and illegal migrants is further exemplified by the data on departures of *deportados*, that is, aliens expelled from Mexican territory (See, Table 1). Table 4 shows that the number of expellees increased significantly towards the late seventies and it is known that, at least during the early 1980s, many of those expelled were persons who might have qualified as refugees according to United Nations definitions and who had crossed the border between Guatemala and the border state of Chiapas without papers. Unpublished DGSM data indicate that most foreigners expelled from Mexico during 1986 were Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Hondurans (8,976 out of 10,669 *deportados*).

Under Mexico's population law, the category most closely approximating temporary workers is that of visitor. Foreigners admitted under that category usually possess special skills or have higher education. With few exceptions, unskilled workers are generally not admitted because of Mexico's policy to protect the domestic labor force from unfair competition. Although seasonal workers from Guatemala are known to be admitted legally to work in the border state of Chiapas, it was not possible to establish the statistical category to which they were allocated. It is estimated that about 70,000 such workers are admitted annually.

These examples illustrate the problems faced in interpreting or using the Mexican data on arrivals and departures: not only are the names given to the different categories misleading, their definitions as established by law are often operationalized in such a manner that data collected are virtually useless as an indicator of actual trends.

Probably the most accurate data published by the DGSM are those referring to foreign immigrants, since their movements into and out of the country are closely monitored by migration authorities. In fact, the DGSM maintains a National Register of Aliens ("Registro Nacional de Extranjeros" or RNE)

TABLE 4
ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES OF FOREIGNERS RECORDED BY MEXICAN
MIGRATION STATIONS BY CATEGORY, 1970-1985

Year	Arrivals		Departures	
	First Time	Re-entries	Temporary	Definitive
Provisional Immigrants				
1970	2,286	14,939	16,327	1,219
1971	2,085	15,616	16,905	1,214
1972	2,140	16,579	17,822	1,453
1973	2,135	17,865	19,464	1,291
1974	2,058	18,877	20,301	1,379
1975	1,708	21,530	22,850	887
1976	1,568	22,470	22,255	701
1977	1,303	20,525	21,576	728
1978	1,270	20,273	21,514	592
1979	894	21,035	21,728	709
1980	1,396	22,463	23,230	512
1981	1,303	28,285	29,342	708
1982	1,599	27,023	28,948	819
1983	894	25,075	26,367	1,083
1984	770	26,849	29,216	1,609
1985	681	24,281	26,426	800
Permanent Immigrants				
1970	—	30,672	31,380	76
1971	—	31,186	31,976	77
1972	—	34,499	35,874	67
1973	—	36,532	37,573	65
1974	—	37,778	39,807	83
1975	—	41,140	41,513	68
1976	—	42,106	42,051	59
1977	—	40,494	41,365	108
1978	—	42,299	43,409	38
1979	—	46,176	45,996	208
1980	—	48,562	49,272	55
1981	—	52,682	54,500	16
1982	—	48,358	46,890	57
1983	—	40,206	41,232	21
1984	—	43,425	46,902	8,461
1985	—	42,561	43,966	117

TABLE 4 (Continued)
ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES OF FOREIGNERS RECORDED BY MEXICAN
MIGRATION STATIONS BY CATEGORY, 1970-1985

Year	Arrivals		Departures	
	First Time	Re-entries	Temporary	Definitive
Visitors				
1970	17,818	—	—	12,540
1971	14,763	—	—	9,962
1972	15,700	—	—	9,541
1973	17,233	—	—	9,993
1974	16,817	—	—	9,944
1975	20,688	—	—	15,295
1976	17,848	8,826	13,186	11,150
1977	17,414	8,695	12,755	10,070
1978	21,217	10,216	14,493	10,872
1979	25,924	10,560	14,080	12,250
1980	30,465	16,218	23,238	13,329
1981	34,789	18,291	28,594	14,061
1982	26,603	15,370	24,441	11,808
1983	16,902	12,341	16,413	7,845
1984	17,469	11,030	18,109	7,819
1985	18,558	11,486	17,662	8,249
Students				
1970	2,617	5,934	7,384	974
1971	2,892	6,748	8,524	938
1972	3,562	10,501	10,581	874
1973	3,888	10,208	11,605	1,018
1974	3,874	11,854	14,066	1,080
1975	4,077	14,786	18,551	1,043
1976	3,477	14,675	16,521	1,260
1977	3,159	13,279	15,319	891
1978	3,160	14,262	16,205	991
1979	3,419	16,205	18,446	1,165
1980	4,121	16,210	19,660	1,020
1981	3,356	17,960	20,811	1,110
1982	2,311	15,878	17,793	811
1983	2,012	14,653	17,023	742
1984	1,695	15,547	18,136	1,271
1985	1,259	14,668	15,792	802

TABLE 4 (Continued)
ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES OF FOREIGNERS RECORDED BY MEXICAN
MIGRATION STATIONS BY CATEGORY, 1970-1985

Year	Arrivals		Departures	
	First Time	Re-entries	Temporary	Definitive
Asylees				
1970	66	0	0	65
1971	30	1	6	19
1972	19	0	3	14
1973	309	14	21	77
1974	273	24	66	152
1975	151	34	4	10
1976	227	58	4	23
1977	47	68	53	12
1978	99	88	5	78
1979	294	64	21	183
1980	294	60	15	38
1981	86	208	12	116
1982	118	78	998	97
1983	39	168	88	48
1984	40	181	317	143
1985	28	132	23	135
Expellees				
1970	—	—	—	1,472
1971	—	—	—	1,755
1972	—	—	—	1,959
1973	—	—	—	2,026
1974	—	—	—	3,012
1975	—	—	—	2,225
1976	—	—	—	3,829
1977	—	—	—	3,906
1978	—	—	—	6,023
1979	—	—	—	7,761
1980	—	—	—	13,184
1981	—	—	—	13,056
1982	—	—	—	10,571
1983	—	—	—	6,365
1984	—	—	—	5,711
1985	—	—	—	7,262

Note: For definitions, consult Table 1.

Source: DGE, CGSNI, INEG I, Anuario Estadístico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 1970-1971; 1977-1978; 1983; 1984; 1986.

indicating, for each migrant, the date and category of admission, changes of migration status and changes of residence (aliens must report any change of address within 30 days). Since the register includes information on all aliens admitted for a stay of at least six months, it is potentially a useful source of information. However, the data contained in the register are not published.

Thus, although Mexico possesses a working system of data collection that, in principle, captures all the arrivals and departures processed by migration authorities, the full exploitation of its potential for the statistical accounting of migration flows has not been achieved. In addition, lack of readily available information on the true meaning of the categories used for recording purposes make the interpretation and use of available data difficult.

The Population Censuses

Given the limitations of arrival and departure data, attempts have been made to use census information as the basis of migration estimates. The censuses of Mexico are conducted on a *de jure* basis, so that both the 1970 and 1980 censuses excluded all persons who had been absent from a household for at least six months. Both censuses recorded place of birth and place of previous residence, though they included no question on nationality. Thus, although it is possible to identify the foreign-born, the distinction between foreign-born Mexicans and aliens cannot be made.

The censuses are known to have achieved different degrees of coverage. Although the 1980 census has been sharply criticized for having a high level of non-response in certain questions, its level of coverage appears to have been better than that attained by the 1970 census (4% undercount *vs.* 6.3-6.7% in 1970). However, the level of differential coverage is sufficiently large to have foiled most attempts at estimating migration via residual methods (See, for example, Bean, *et al.*, 1983; Tuirán Gutiérrez, 1984, and Hill, 1985). In fact, the estimation of differential census coverage by using independent estimates of international migration has been a more promising avenue of research (See, Gómez de León and Partida, 1986).

Refugee Census

The agency responsible for the administration of refugee camps in southern Mexico, COMAR ("Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados"), conducts periodic censuses of the population in those camps. The most recent data available, obtained in March 1987, shows a total of 38,677 Guatemalan refugees, 20,400 in Chiapas, 21,315 in Campeche and 5,894 in Quintana Roo.

Survey Data

Surveys have been an important source of detailed information on migration in Mexico. Three different surveys are described briefly below.

ENEFNEU 1978-1979: The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare carried out this survey on a national stratified probabilistic sample of 62,500 households in 115 localities. The questionnaire recorded information about absent household members aged fifteen and over who worked elsewhere (including the United States) and about household members who were present but had worked in the United States since January 1974. On the basis of the data gathered it was estimated that there were 519,300 absent household members working in the United States and 471,400 household members who had worked there since January 1974 and had already returned to Mexico (CENIET, 1982a). Ninety-one percent of the latter had made an illegal entry to the United States during their last stay there.

Since the survey was designed to obtain information on usual household members, it yielded information on persons who had been absent for more than six months (about half of the absentees were in that category). The combined sample of absentees and returnees shows that 84 percent were male, 86 percent were aged 15-44, 42 percent were single and 69 percent came from rural areas.

ENINTRACE, 1982: This survey of Central Americans in the Federal District — the site of Mexico's capital — covered 717 persons aged twelve and over who were selected using a network or "snowball" sampling procedure. The majority of persons interviewed were Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans (77%), male (67%) and young (90% were aged 12-39). In addition, 79 percent of them had first entered Mexico in 1979 or later.

1986 Survey of Agricultural Workers: 591 Guatemalans working in the coffee harvest of the state of Chiapas were interviewed in November 1986. Preliminary results show that male workers were accompanied by wives and children who also participated in the harvest.

Conclusion

This brief survey of the main sources of information on international migration in Mexico has shown that most of them are relatively weak. Currently, the published data on entries and departures provide little information on the demographic impact of legal migration, although they suggest that the inflow of foreigners is small. The census corroborates such finding, but it, too, yields inadequate demographic detail. The movement of Mexican nationals, on the other hand, is poorly reflected by both sources. The void they leave has been palliated somewhat by surveys, but the only nationally representative survey on emigration was carried out in the late seventies and might be a less than ideal basis for current policy formulation.

Despite this negative assessment, however, it must be recognized that Mexico has a statistical infrastructure with the potential of yielding valuable data for the monitoring of population movements. It is hoped that, as the

relevance of international migration becomes more evident, steps towards the improvement of existing statistical systems may be undertaken. In the absence of such measures, policy-makers and researchers will have to continue relying on *ad hoc* surveys to answer the most pressing questions on the subject.

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