



breadfortheworld
INSTITUTE



CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

Fact Sheet

Poverty in Mexico and Migration to the United States A Call for Integrated Development Policies

November 2011



Maisie Crow

Latin American development and unauthorized immigration to the United States are linked. Although the region has made progress in reducing poverty in the past decade, some countries in Latin America continue to suffer from poverty and hunger. According to the United Nations there were 53 million undernourished Latin Americans in 2010.¹

Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans—particularly from Mexico and Central America—immigrate to the United States every year to escape poverty in their own countries.

Lengthy waits of up to 23 years for visas and a generally dysfunctional immigration system results in many immigrants entering the United States without authorization in order to support their families at home.

The analysis for this factsheet was drawn from Bread for the World Institute's February 2011 Briefing Paper by Immigration Policy Analyst Andrew Wainer. For more information please visit: www.bread.org/institute/papers/briefing-paper-11.pdf

Although they play an important role in the U.S. economy and typically improve their earnings in the United States, lack of legal status is an obstacle to immigrants' economic prospects, psychological well-being, and ability to visit family members.²

The "root causes" that drive unauthorized immigration from Mexico to the United States are often missing from the discussion of U.S. immigration reform. One of these causes is poverty. U.S. development policies in Mexico and Latin America must be synchronized with our domestic immigration policy goals. In order to address immigration we must analyze and address the sources of unauthorized immigration in Latin America and the "push" factors that drive millions of impoverished

workers to leave their homes, taking dangerous journeys to the United States. This is particularly relevant for Mexico, the country of origin for more than half (58 percent) of all unauthorized immigrants to the U.S.³

Mexico and Rural Poverty

Although it's the 14th largest economy in the world, rural Mexico is still very unequal.⁴ Depending on the measure, between one-third and one-half of Mexicans live in poverty and up to 18 percent live in extreme poverty, unable to meet their basic food needs.⁵

- Poverty is concentrated in rural Mexico where small farmers during the 1990s and 2000s found it increasingly difficult to support their families, due in part to shifts in U.S. policies related to trade and agriculture. More than half of rural Mexicans live in poverty and 25 percent live in extreme poverty.⁶
- Experts recognize that poverty is one of the "push" factors in Mexican migration to the United States.⁷ Many Mexican small farmers end up migrating to the

United States and some of them work in U.S. agriculture after leaving Mexico. Although only about one-quarter of Mexicans live in rural areas, rural migrants comprise 44 percent of all Mexicans immigrating to the United States (see Figure 1).⁸

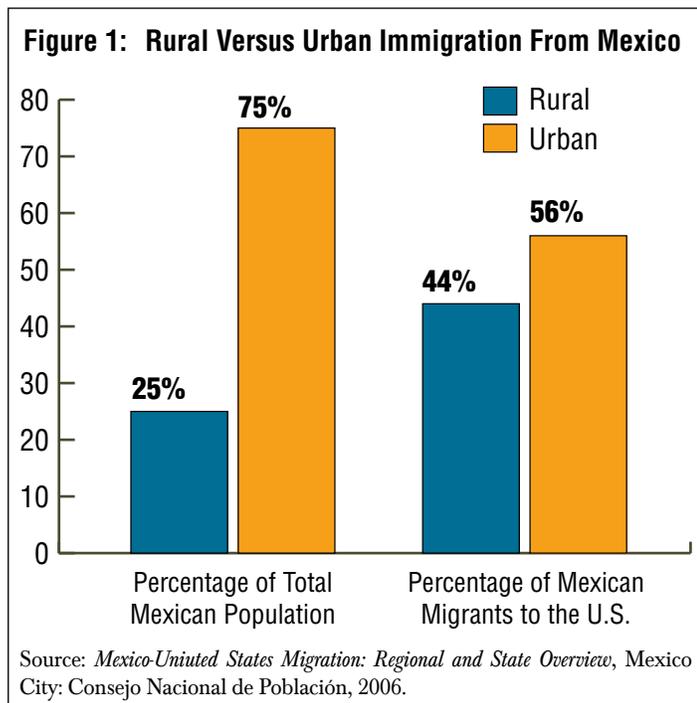
America between poverty, inequality, and migration, and work with migrant-sending countries to address the reasons why people migrate to the United States.

Recommendations

In order to have a balanced foreign assistance agenda with Mexico and other migrant-sending countries in Latin America, the U.S. must increase its focus on addressing poverty as one of the causes of migration. These efforts should include poverty reduction and job-creation projects targeted to migrant-sending communities—particularly in rural zones, where poverty is concentrated.¹³

Building sustainable livelihoods in rural migrant-sending communities has the potential to not only reduce a major cause of unauthorized immigration to the United States, but could also impact violence and lawlessness in Mexico. While the reasons for the violence are complex, poverty and a lack of economic opportunity for Mexican youth certainly facilitate involvement in illicit activity along with out-migration.¹⁴

- U.S. foreign assistance to Mexico is overwhelmingly focused on security, rather than development and poverty reduction. In 2009, 96 percent of the U.S. State Department assistance to Mexico was directed toward military and police assistance. Job-creation projects that reduce migration pressures totaled \$11.2 million or .01 percent of total U.S. assistance to Mexico, an overwhelming low percentage of U.S. assistance (see Table 1).¹⁵
- U.S. assistance to Mexico also pales in comparison to U.S. spending on border enforcement efforts, which in 2010 totaled more than \$17 billion,¹⁶ despite



Poverty and Unauthorized Migration

The immigration debate, while focused on domestic issues, largely overlooks the principal causes of unauthorized migration to the United States including poverty in Latin America. The U.S. government identifies Latin America as the primary source (more than 80 percent) of unauthorized immigration, but its responses—internally and at the border—focus on enforcement, neglecting the underlying causes of immigration.⁹

- U.S. spending on immigration enforcement increased from \$1 billion to \$15 billion between 1990 and 2009. During this time the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population increased from 3 million to almost 12 million.¹⁰ It is clear that enforcement-focused funding alone cannot address unauthorized immigration from and through Mexico.¹¹
- In a 2010 case study of an immigrant-sending community in Mexico, 61 percent of male migrants reported that economic opportunities—higher wages and more jobs—were the primary motivating factor for migration to the United States.¹²
- To comprehensively reform immigration policy, the United States must acknowledge the links in Latin

Table 1: U.S. Assistance to Mexico by Account, FY2009 Total, U.S. \$ millions

Account	FY2009
Child Survival & Health	2.9
Development Assistance	11.2
Economic Support Fund	15.0
Foreign Military Financing	299.0
International Military Education & Training	0.8
International Narcotics Control & Law Enforcement	454.0
Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism & Related Programs	3.9
Total	786.8

Sources: U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations FY2008-FY2011, FY2009 Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-32).



Marvin Garcia Salas, a farmer in Chiapas, Mexico, twice migrated to the United States to do farm work before returning home for good.

having proved statistically insignificant in deterring or apprehending unauthorized immigrants.¹⁷

- U.S. foreign assistance agencies working in migrant-sending regions should integrate analysis of migration issues into development projects. Projects that seek to reduce migration through job-creation and poverty reduction deserve increased attention from U.S. policymakers, including support for pilot projects and evaluations in order to grow such programs.
- Since a disproportionate percentage of unauthorized immigrants come from rural Mexico, assistance aimed at providing would-be migrants with options other than migration should be directed toward small-scale farmers. Mexican small-scale farmers' greatest needs include assistance with agricultural production and marketing. Increasing access to credit can also help farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs in rural areas.

Bread for the World Institute & Church World Service

For more information on Bread for the World Institute's research on development and migration, please contact Immigration Policy Analyst Andrew Wainer at awainer@bread.org or (202) 688-1074. For more information on Church World Service's development and protection programs and immigration reform advocacy, contact Jen Smyers at jsmyers@churchworldservice.org or (202) 481-6935.

Endnotes

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. April 10, 2010. Accessed April 25, 2011. <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/41867/icode/>.

² Lutheran Immigration and Refugees Services. "Family Unity." http://www.lirs.org/site/c.nhLPJ0PMKuG/b.5609103/k.8CB9/Family_Unity.htm

³ Passel, Jeffrey and Cohn, D'Vera. February 2011. "Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010." Pew Hispanic Center. <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/133.pdf>.

⁴ USAID. January 2010. "USAID Mexico Country Profile." www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/country/mexico/Mexico_Country_Profile.pdf.

⁵ Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL). 2009. "Panorama Social de América Latina 2009." <http://is.gd/iand5>. World Bank Country Brief, Mexico. <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/MEXICOEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22252113~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:338397,00.html#economy>.

⁶ Burstein, John. 2007. U.S.-Mexico Agricultural Trade and rural Poverty in Mexico. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/Mexico_Agriculture_rpt_English1.pdf.

⁷ Zepeda, Eduardo. December 2009. "Rethinking Trade Policy for Development: Lessons From Mexico Under NAFTA." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/nafta_trade_development.pdf.

⁸ Burstein, John. 2007. U.S.-Mexico Agricultural Trade and rural Poverty in Mexico. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/Mexico_Agriculture_rpt_English1.pdf.

ture_rpt_English1.pdf.

⁹ Jiménez, Maria. October 2009. "Humanitarian Crisis: Migrant Deaths at the U.S.-Mexico Border." <http://ccis.ucsd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Humanitarian-Crisis-Report-web-version.pdf>.

¹⁰ Rosenblum, Marc. June 2010. "Testimony Before the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform." <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/RosenblumtestimonyDeficitCommission-June2010.pdf>

¹¹ Cornelius, Wayne. Interview with 60 Minutes broadcast January 2021. <http://ccis.ucsd.edu/2010/01/wayne-cornelius-featured-on-60-minutes>.

¹² Cornelius, Wayne. et. al. 2010.

¹³ Burstein, John. April 2007. "U.S. Mexico Agricultural Trade and Rural Poverty in Mexico." Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. http://wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/Mexico_Agriculture_rpt_English1.pdf.

World Bank. 2007. World Bank Report 2008: Agriculture for Development.

¹⁴ Weintraub, Sidney and Duncan Wood. August 2010. "Cooperative Mexican-U.S. Antinarcotics Efforts." Center for Strategic and International Studies. http://csis.org/files/publication/100812_Weintraub_MexicanUSAntinarc_Web.pdf.

Brands, Hal. May 2009. "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy." Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College. <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubid=918>.

¹⁵ Seelke, Clare, et. al. June 2010. "Mexico-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress." Congressional Research Service. <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/145101.pdf>.

¹⁶ Batalova, Jeanne and Aaron Terrazas, December 2010. "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States." Accessed August 29, 2011. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=818>.

¹⁷ Olson, Eric and David Shirk, 2011. "Is More Getting Us Less? Real Solutions for Security on our Border." Accessed August 29, 2011. <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/more-getting-us-less-real-solutions-security-our-border>.



breadfortheworld
INSTITUTE

425 3rd Street SW, Ste. 1200
Washington, DC 20024
www.bread.org



CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

475 Riverside Drive, Ste. 700
New York, NY 10115
www.churchworldservice.org