

Exploring the Relationship between NAFTA, US Policies, and the Influx of Undocumented Immigrants

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Abstract

While negative stigma is attached to illegal immigration of Mexican children, it creates tension with American born students which potentially leads to bullying or discrimination. As it is too common for mass media to capture the illegality of migration, this study examines the other side of the coin by delving into the sociopolitical factors that laid the ground work for the endless migration of the illegal immigrants to the US. While studies connecting the influx of migrants with NAFTA show equivocal results, this study shows that the effects of the cumulative causation theory with the inconsistent US immigration policies potentially induced the influx of undocumented students in the US. In the discussion section a bilateral educational US-Mexico treaty which intends to promote understanding and problem-solving by regional people from both sides of the borders is offered.

Keywords: undocumented immigrants, migration, US policies, social network

Introduction

Undocumented immigrants in the United States have been under heightened scrutiny in recent years, as evidenced by the recent passage of the SB 1070 or the racial profiling act of Arizona. This bill allows state officers to question and potentially arrest and detain an individual if suspected as a plausible undocumented immigrant. However, it is undeniable that immigrants long have been sustaining labor forces in the U.S. (Canales, 2003, Cardoso, 1980, Driscoll, 1999, Felsen, 2009, Massey, 2010). For instance, to offset for the shortage of labor force effected by WWII, the Bracero Accord allowed workers from Mexico to enter from 1950-1965 (Massey, 2010). Despite the efforts aimed at keeping them out and the negative stigma attached to the illegal immigration, the numbers that enter the US seem to be increasing. According to the US border patrol, routes used to cross the US-Mexico border by undocumented migrants overlap with routes used by the *maras*, or the Mexican drug cartel (Cieslik, 2009). It is not unusual for border regions turning into a smuggling operational field.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported a Taser-related death of a 42-year-old Mexican migrant at the US-Mexico border in June 2010 (Hernandez, 2010). Over five hundred deaths are reported annually in an attempt to the cross the US-Mexico border for a new opportunity (Eschbach, Hagan, and Rodriguez, 1999). This study will attempt to examine the reason undocumented migrants continue to enter the US despite the risk that often times may lead to the sacrifice of one's life. It will examine the phenomenon not only from a micro perspective but from a macro perspective on how policies between Mexico and the US may have contributed in the continuing influx of undocumented immigrants to the US. By focusing on the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and subsequently on immigration-related US policies, then examining their effects on the immigration of undocumented migrants, this article will scrutinize the causes of the continuing unauthorized migration of Mexicans to the US.

1. Basic facts about the US-Mexico border

As seen in Figure 1, the US-Mexico border extends 1,954 miles (3,126 km) in the southwestern region of the US, touching the southern borderline of four US states—California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas—and six Mexico states: Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Neuvo Leon, and Tamaulipas (International Boundary and Water Commission, n.d.). There are 33 permanent US checkpoints within the nine sectors along the US-Mexico border (US Government Accountability Office, 2005). The nine sectors are: San Diego, CA; El Centro, CA; Yuma, AZ; Tucson, AZ; El Paso, TX; Marta, TX; Del Rio, TX; Laredo, TX; and Mc Allen, TX (2005).

2. Is the North America Free Trade Agreement the culprit?

Initiated by the request of the Mexican government, NAFTA, a bilateral free trade agreement was signed by Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and U.S. President George H.W. Bush. It went into effect January 1, 1994 (Mayer, 1998).

The purpose of the agreement was to create a borderless economical operation that would benefit Canada, the US and Mexico. However, despite the intent, the three countries did not procure economical benefits through the implementation of NAFTA. NAFTA was intended to create economic liberation and deregulation to the three countries; however, in contrary to its attempt, more than 15 years after the NAFTA implementation, issues of undocumented migrants continue to resurface. In a report by the Department of Homeland Security and the Pew Hispanic Center, one million undocumented migrants continue to cross the US-Mexico border every year (Ciesk, 2009). One way the continuation of the entering of the undocumented migrants to the US has been looked at is through the lens of the Neoclassical Economics theory of migration (Massey, 1999). According to this theory, based on the supply and demand concept for labor, the migration of people from a nation with low wages or a labor surplus move to the high-wage or labor-scarce country. An analysis of the immigration phenomenon using the Neoclassical Economics theory results in this hypothesis: The influx of Mexican migrants to the US is due to the low wages and labor surplus of Mexico and the high wages and labor-scarce condition of the US.

The relationship between economic liberation as seen through the passing of NAFTA and immigration has been a long-lasting debate over the latter half of this century (Brown, 1997; Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007; Morales, 1997; Sanderson & Utz, 2009). Fernandez-Kelly and Massey argue that while the benefits of NAFTA were evident for both countries, that is gaining access to cheap Mexican labor and increasing capital mobility for the US and promoting free enterprise based on neoliberalism through privatization and deregulation for Mexico, undocumented Mexican immigrants entering the US increased due to the implementation of NAFTA (2007). The authors conclude that undocumented Mexican immigrants more likely chose to remain in the US as a result of the immigration policies that were in effect since 1986. The authors, however, do not draw conclusions from any quantitative measures in the causal correlation of before and after analysis of effects on migration due to the effects of NAFTA. A statistically significant causal relationship has not been established.

Sanderson and Utz (2009), on the other hand, using 119 Mexican communities residing in the Northern region and a secondary data from the Mexican Migration Project, conducted an empirical study to investigate the relationship between economic globalization and migration by examining communities that represent the Mexican population. While the results indicated that Mexicans were less likely to make an undocumented migration from areas where higher densities of manufacturing operations were employed, the authors did not look into Mexican migration from agricultural regions. Farmers were most affected by the implementation of NAFTA and by neglecting this group, the authors conclusions can only be partial. In another study conducted by Canales (2003), changes in economic structure of both countries had effects on the social, gender and geographical origins of undocumented migrants (2003). While Sanderson and Utz concludes that undocumented migration from areas where manufacturaing operations were more concentrated, migrant characteristics have become complex and diversified, and once restricted to the rural areas, in recent times the study showed that migrants come from all corners of Mexico. Again, looking at migration from manufacturing regions does not describe a full picture of the migratory phenomena. One of the purposes of NAFTA was to gain capital freedom for Mexico to repatriate US investment from Mexico (Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007).

Due to the national debt that caused a halt to the Mexican economy and thus, a freeze to the capital flow from Mexico to the US, NAFTA was orchestrated to allow privatization of various sectors of the economy including the land tenure system of the *Ejido* land. *Ejido* land, provided to the peasants from the Mexican government for six generations, provided agricultural output for the country. However, pressured by the US government, de Gortari negotiated to privatize the *Ejido* land for the intent to develop US-owned manufacturing operations to generate capital mobility. This proposition had the earmarks of the likelihood to generate bilateral gain. But the conversion of manual labor to mechanization of agriculture of these once peasant-owned *Ejido* lands created jobless agrarian workers (Massey, 1999; Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007).

Implementation of trade liberation and NAFTA played a role in lowering incomes and labor displacement of farmers (De Janvry, Sadoulet, & Gordillo De Anda, 1995). The notion that the implementation of NAFTA had any significant effect in increasing migration of undocumented migrants to the US is inconsistent. The complexity of sociodemographic trends and the arduousness of obtaining accurate migratory records make it a challenge to clearly define the relationship. Attempting to explain the relationship between NAFTA and migration merely based on the premise of supply and demand appears to be too naïve after all. Despite the fact research studies have been inconsistent to prove the causal relationship of NAFTA policy and immigration from Mexico, on the other hand, the causal relationship cannot be dismissed, as it has not been proven to be unrelated.

While studies on the effects of NAFTA on the continuing undocumented migrants to the US is inconsistent, in the next section, the effects of US policies will be elucidated by examining the cumulative causation theory of migration.

3. “Network effect” or the Cumulative Causation Theory of Migration

Interacting and relating with other human beings make individuals human beings (Greenwald; 1980, Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). In the process of interacting, individuals do not only understand about other individuals but gains a deeper understanding about oneself (Mead, 2001; Snyder & Haugen, 1995). *The Self in Social Psychology* by Baumesister, Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) states that humans are products of social interaction. Through interacting and relating with others, we become aware of who we are. The desire to be with another individual is a natural human instinct held by all people. We are people because we are linked with families and the loved ones (Smith, 2003). Relating, in other words, means to be human. Victor Frankl (1984) in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* notes this:

It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself - be it meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. (p. 115).

Through the process of migrating to the US, migrants gain knowledge and experience in the course of migration, which enables migrants to interact with other migrants and settlers, developing social connections or social capital that overall lower the risk and cost of making subsequent migrations. This social phenomenon is referred to as “network effect” or the cumulative causation theory of migration (Massey, 1999, Sanderson & Utz, 2009). In addition, Massey (1999) points out that the cost and risk of crossing the border diminishes on every subsequent migration by friends and relatives. This lowering of the risk further induces people to migrate. Once a critical threshold of the number of network connections is reached, the migration becomes self-perpetuating. Massey indicates that a certain number of network connections make this theory work. It is not about tens or hundreds of people; social network is describing a phenomena that is in the millions. According to the report by the U.S. Department of Education (Au & Kewal Ramani, 2010), of the total U.S. population of an approximate 310 million in 2010, 49.7 million were foreign born Hispanics.

In sum, where there are humans, there are relationships and interactions. Where there are relationships and interactions, there is networking, and where there is networking, there is sharing and exchanging of information to improve one’s lifestyle. This is an intrinsic, natural phenomenon that applies to all human beings regardless of ethnic and racial background. However, the premise of the cumulative causation theory lies on the fact that a critical threshold of people must develop in order for migration to self-perpetuate. The theory does not provide answers to the initial stages of the development of social connection and social capital. In order for the cumulative causation theory come into effect, there must have been a reason for the development of the accumulation of people that lead to the transpiring of a critical threshold. This will be examined in the next section.

4. Effects of inconsistent US policies in immigration

It is inarguably a fact that the relationship between Mexico and the US has been a relationship of migratory issues. In 2005, there were 2 million undocumented children in the US, and in 2008, 15% of the US population was Hispanics (Holdaway & Alba, 2009). In a study conducted in 2007, there was an estimation of 12 million unauthorized immigrants from Mexico living in the US (Massey, 2007). While undocumented immigrants in the US have been consistently increasing over the last century (Felsen, 2009), a recent study indicates that the numbers entering the US have been stable in the past decade (Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007). This is partly due to the tightening of immigration policies, diminishing the cyclical pattern of immigrant movement from Mexico. The risk and cost of crossing the border has increased, and therefore, more unauthorized immigrants are choosing to remain in the US.

While the number of undocumented immigrants increased in the last century, US policies affecting the migratory phenomena will be examined here. As seen in Table 1, implementation of immigration policies in the course of the US history has been indisputably erratic, to say the least. It has not been uncommon for the US government to eradicate and overturn its immigration policies to accommodate national interests. In 1848, when US took over Mexico property, known as the Mexican Cession (US Department of Labor, n.d.) which at the time was half of the property occupied by Mexico (Massey, 2007), Mexican citizens became US citizens; however, they maintained social connections with friends and families in Mexico. In 1929, during the Great Depression, a campaign was launched by the US government to deport almost a half a million Mexicans to their country of origin.

The 1942 *Bracero* Program, also known as the Emergency Labor Program, recruited labor force from Mexico to make up for the shortfall during World War II. The Immigration and National Act in 1965 applied numerical limits to immigration. However, the Immigration Reform Act of 1986, or IRCA, divided the nation, instigating a debate over race issues and simultaneously the debate over the impact of the amnesty offered to the illegal immigrants that were residing in the US. The Immigration Act of 1990 accepted immigrants with special skills in the field of science, engineering, computer science, or systems analysis. On the contrary, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 was a curtailment of federal benefits to undocumented immigrants. It also mandated the construction of more border fences along the U.S.-Mexican border at San Diego (Felsen, 2009).

Through self-serving alterations of the US immigration policies that allowed immigrants from Mexico to enter the US when deemed necessary, and then were deported or placed under limitations when perceived as a threat, this vacillation of US policies has provided in the course of US and Mexican history mixed messages. In the meanwhile, the past and the present Mexican immigrants have placed a social networking system as described by the cumulative causation theory of migration that allows undocumented immigrants to readily cross the U.S.-Mexican border. In the course of such inconsistencies in the US policies, the number of Mexicans residing in the US as permanent residents increased and the cycle of entry, exit and reentry of undocumented immigrants created an immigration dynamics in which Mexicans developed a social network connection system that made crossing of the border easier. The number of network connections may have reached a threshold in the US and in Mexico, and consequently, making US migration a fact of life for millions of Mexicans.

5. Discussion and recommendations

Based on this study, the likelihood that migration of Mexican immigrants will come to a halt in the near future appears quite low. Since the completion of the territorial acquisition from Mexico in 1848, migration to the US has been performed continuously every year. The answer to the migration is not found only in the neoclassical economic theory of migration, which suggests that Mexican migrants are crossing over the border to have a better life. The phenomena cannot be explained merely in terms of supply and demand. According to the cumulative causation theory, the reason migration self-perpetuates itself is because the social networking of the Mexican people that develops lowers the cost and risk of subsequent migrations. And through the social networking beyond the financial leverage migrant people may obtain by coming to the US, it is about sustaining a relationship with those who have been through the same challenges and have overcome such obstacles. Mexican migration is about sharing and supporting for the hopes of salvaging a normal life that is the right of any human being. It is worth noting here that a crucial ingredient to making the cumulative causation theory work is the existence of people, interaction of people, and communities.

The theory itself will not be able to explain the continuing migration of the undocumented migrants from Mexico. It is indisputable that the inconsistent US policies in the course of the history of the relationship between the US and Mexico framed the grounds for migration to be perpetuated. If Mexicans had not given the opportunity to establish communities in the US to begin with, the chances for building networks would have not been instituted according to the cumulative causation theory of migration. Tightening the borders is not the answer to this predicament. As long as the quagmire of influx of undocumented migrants is directed to the migrants with certainty this exigency will take a long time before any resolution can be witnessed. The transformation of the economical and political structure of both countries is vital in order to neutralize the economic disparities. When policies and economic ideology transform for the betterment of all people regardless of citizenship and nationality that is when we will see the end of undocumented immigrants.

5.1 Proposing a US-Mexico educational coalition with emphasis in learning Spanish and developing community-vested policies

The development of the European Union (EU) community became a reality because it was not about sustaining economic strength as it was the agenda for NAFTA. It was based on years of careful planning that allowed equity for all countries involved (Massey, 2007). The current US-Mexico border ordeal appears to be a battle in which all concerned are losing. The fact that the U.S. will perennially develop slick policies that will again hide under the guise of rhetorics of efficacies and not to mention, short-sighted resolutions, hopeful thinking at its best becomes a delusion. As long as pointless administrative decisions are repeated over and over, as a captured fly repeatedly bumps into the glass window, we might as well submerge our heads into the ground and blind fold us from the realities as if it were not happening.

Racial profiling will not terminate the influx of undocumented immigrants, nor will the tightening up of the border, albeit passing new laws. It is about developing a constructive relationship to prosper from relating with each nation. It is about US *and* Mexico.

For the hopes of even envisioning a constructive and cooperative problem-solving for the two countries, two thoughts will be proposed here. First, the majority of the undocumented migrants crossing the border are expected to have no English skills or minimal English skills. To facilitate cooperation between the countries, the countries should instate a long-term US-Mexican policy supporting a “bilateral educational treaty” in which all Mexican people will be provided with educational opportunities to learn English while all US citizens, or at least the people living in the border states, will be required to learn Spanish. Learning Spanish will be incorporated in the K-12 curriculum.

The second component of the proposal is localizing the problem solving tasks. As the world is getting more diverse and complex, a one-fits-all policy will not withstand in our current times anymore. Local people at the local level must be vested with the accountability and policy making in order to prosper its community. However, this is based upon the understanding and commitment that problem solving is to be performed from a bilateral, cooperative standpoint.

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Figure 1. US-Mexico Continental Boundary



Figure 1. Map of US-Mexico border by the International Boundary and Water Commission (International Boundary, n.d.)

Table 1. Main policies effecting US entry and deportation of Mexicans

<i>Year</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Allow entry to the US</i>	<i>Deportation from the US or limitations to entry/status</i>
1848	Mexican-American War	Residents of Mexico converted to US citizens (Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007)	
1929	Great Depression: Deportation campaign launched by the US government		469,000 Mexicans
1942	WWII Program (Emergency Program)	Bracero Labor Program Make up for shortfall of labor force during WWII (Felsen, 2009)	
1965	Immigration and National Act		Applied numerical limits to immigration (Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007)
1986	Immigration Reform and Control Act	Gave legal status to people entering the US illegally before 1982.	Increased funding for border enforcement. (Kalaitzidis, 2009)
1990	Immigration Act of 1990	Accepted immigrants with special skills and from underrepresented countries (Melchor Del Rio & Thorwarth, 2009)	
1996	Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act		“Curtailement of federal benefits to undocumented immigrants, denial of welfare, Medicaid, social service grants as well as penalties for fraudulent production and use of U.S. documents, in addition to more border patrol agents and the construction of a border fence along the U.S. - Mexican border at San Diego.” (Felsen, 2009, p.183).