

# Managing International Migration in the Americas

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The number of international migrants, defined as persons outside their country of birth at least a year, reached 232 million in 2013, making 3.2% of the world's people international migrants. The United States is debating what to do about 11–12 million unauthorized foreigners, Canada is modifying its point-selection system to reduce brain waste, and some Latin American countries are attracting home citizens who emigrated.

The number of international migrants more than doubled between 1980 and 2010, from 103 million to 214 million, and the stock is projected to continue rising faster than population, doubling to over 400 million in 2050. Each international migrant is unique, and each migration corridor has unique features, but there are four major migration flows, often summarized as S-S, S-N, N-N, and N-S (Table 1):

- South-South: The largest flow of migrants, 74 million or 34% in 2010, moved from one developing country to another, as from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia or Nicaragua to Costa Rica.
- South-North: The second-largest flow, 73 million or 34%, moved from a developing to an industrial or more-developed country, as from Morocco to Spain, Mexico to the U.S., or the Philippines to South Korea; one-third of international migration involves south-north movement.
- North-North: Some 55 million people, or 26% of international migrants, moved from one industrial country to another, as from Canada to the U.S.
- North-South: Over 13 million people, or 6% of migrants, moved from industrial to developing countries, as with Japanese who work or retire in Thailand.

Most of the world's countries participate in the international migration system as countries of origin, transit, or destination, and many participate in all three phases of international migration.

This article explains why people cross national borders, the effects of international migration on sending and receiving countries, and the struggle to improve migration management in North America, Europe, and Asia.

## Migration, Inequalities, and Revolutions

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another. Migration is as old as humankind wandering in search of food, but international migration across defined and policed national borders is a relatively recent development. It was only in the early 20th century that nation-states developed passports and visas to regulate the flow of people across their borders.

International migration is the exception, not the rule. The number-one form of migration control is inertia—most people do not want to move away from family and friends. Second, governments have significant capacity to regulate migration, and they do, as evidenced by long lines of people outside consulates seeking visas and large agencies that patrol borders and check on foreigners inside countries.

International migration is likely to increase with globalization and the creation of new nation-states. There were 193 generally recognized nation-states in 2000, four times more than the 43 in 1900.

The major reasons to expect more international migration are two inequalities coupled with three revolutions. The demographic inequality is simple: almost all population growth occurs in the world's 170 poorer countries, while the population of the 30 richer countries is expected to remain at 1.2 billion through 2050. The economic inequality is also straightforward. Worldwide GDP was \$62 trillion in 2010, an average \$9,000 per person a year. The 30 high-income countries had a sixth of the world's people but two-thirds of the world's economic output—an average \$39,000 per person per year—ten times more than the \$3,800 average in the poorer 170 countries. Many young people are motivated to try to cross national borders to earn ten times more.

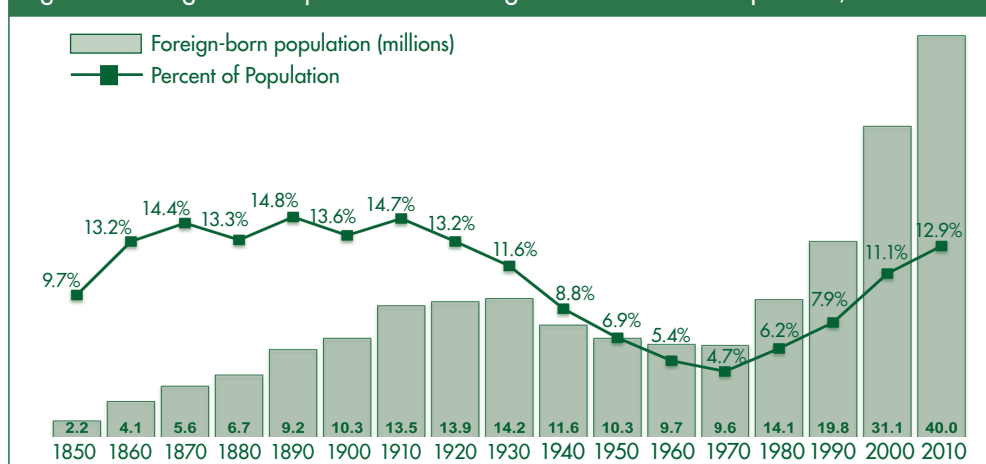
Demographic and economic inequalities are like battery poles, providing the potential for migration but not necessarily laying out a path for people to cross borders. Migration bridges or networks connect the demand-pull factors that attract migrants with the supply-push factors that motivate migration, and they have been

Table 1. International Migrants in 2010

Origin	Destination		Total
	Industrial	Developing	
-----millions-----			
Industrial	55	13	68
Developing	73	74	147
Total	128	87	215
-----percent of total-----			
Industrial	26%	6%	32%
Developing	34%	34%	68%
Total	60%	40%	100%

Source: UN Population Division. 2010. *International Migration Report*. <http://esa.un.org/migration/>

Figure 1. Foreign-born Population and Immigrant Share of U.S. Population, 1850–2010



enlarged by revolutions in communications, transportation, and rights.

The communications revolution highlights the ease with which information flows over national borders. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when literacy rates in rural areas were often low, the so-called American letters sent to friends and relatives in Europe describing opportunities took weeks or months to arrive, and then the recipient would have to find someone literate to read the letter and draft a response. Today, mobile phones and the internet transfer information much faster and cheaper over national borders.

The transportation revolution refers to the ever-lower cost of travel. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, many migrants to what became the U.S. could not afford the one-way fare, so they signed indentured-servant contracts that obliged them to work four to six years for whoever met the ship and paid the captain. Today, the one-way cost of traveling legally to almost anywhere in the world is less than \$3,000, and even migrants who pay smugglers \$20,000 or more to get into higher-wage countries can usually repay this cost in less than two years.

The rights revolution refers to the expansion of political, social, and economic rights in most countries over the past half-century. UN human rights conventions grant basic civic rights to all persons, labor conventions call for all workers to be

treated equally in the workplace, and national laws often grant at least some political, social, and other rights to all residents. Once inside a country, governments may have difficulty removing foreigners who want to stay.

Policy makers grappling with unwanted migration can do little in the short-term to reduce demographic and economic inequalities, and they do not want to roll back communications and transportation revolutions. The instrument most readily available to alter migration flows quickly is rights, and adjusting migrant rights is the policy tool often used to deal with migration crises.

For example, as welfare rolls climbed alongside federal budget deficits, President Bill Clinton pledged to “end welfare as we know it.” Immigrants loomed large in the 1990s welfare reform debate as some wealthy U.S. residents sponsored their elderly parents for immigrant visas and, after their arrival, enrolled them in welfare programs. Children born to unauthorized foreigners in the United States are U.S. citizens, and some were enrolled in cash assistance and health-care programs—one factor in California voter approval of Proposition 187 in 1994.

Congress debated two broad options to deal with immigrants and welfare: admit fewer needy immigrants and maintain their access to the welfare system under the theory that first,

reduce welfare costs by admitting fewer needy immigrants and second, continue admitting the same number and type of immigrant but restrict their access to welfare benefits. Congress elected the second option, and denied federal welfare benefits to most immigrants who arrived after August 22, 1996, until they became naturalized U.S. citizens or worked in the United States 10 years. As a result, 45% of the expected savings from welfare reforms came from denying benefits to the immigrants who were 11% of U.S. residents.

Adjusting migrant rights to manage migration generates heated reactions from those who advocate a rights-based approach to migration. Under this theory, all persons in a country have fundamental rights by their presence, and those employed have the right to equal wages and benefits and the other entitlements granted to local workers. Many advocates of a rights-based approach to managing migration want both more international migration and more rights for migrants, and do not acknowledge any trade-off between migrant numbers and migrant rights.

## United States

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Under the motto “e pluribus unum” (from many one), U.S. presidents frequently remind Americans that they share the experience of themselves or their forebearers beginning anew in the land of opportunity. Immigration is widely considered to be in the national interest, since it permits immigrants to better themselves as it strengthens the United States.

For its first 100 years, the United States facilitated immigration, welcoming foreigners to settle a vast country. Beginning in the 1880s, certain types of immigrants were barred, including prostitutes, workers who arrived with contracts that tied them to a particular employer for several years, and Chinese—beginning an era of qualitative

immigration restrictions. In the 1920s, quantitative restrictions or quotas were added that set a ceiling on the number of immigrants accepted each year.

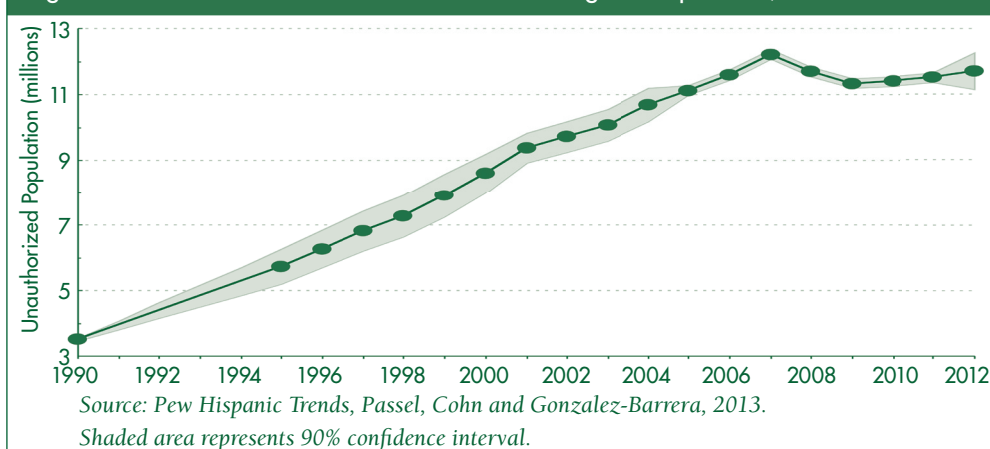
Immigration law changed in 1965. Qualitative and quantitative restrictions were maintained, but national origin preferences that favored the entry of Europeans with U.S. relatives were replaced by a selection system that favored the admission of foreigners who had U.S. relatives or were requested by U.S. employers. During the 1970s, the origins of most immigrants changed from Europe to Latin America and Asia.

U.S. immigration has occurred in waves, meaning peaks and troughs (Figure 1). The first wave arrived before records were kept beginning in 1820, when most of the newcomers were English-speakers from the British Isles. The second wave was dominated by Irish and German Catholic immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s, and the third between 1880 and 1914 brought over 20 million immigrants to the United States, an average 650,000 a year at a time when the United States had 75 million residents. Third-wave European immigration was slowed first by World War I, and then by numerical quotas in the 1920s.

The fourth wave began after 1965, and has been marked by rising numbers of immigrants, mostly from Latin America and Asia. The United States admitted an average 250,000 immigrants a year in the 1950s, 330,000 in the 1960s, 450,000 in the 1970s, 735,000 a year in the 1980s, and over a million a year since the 1990s.

The major immigration debate today is what to do about the 11–12 million unauthorized foreigners in the United States (Figure 2). The Senate approved a comprehensive immigration reform bill (S 744) in June 2013 that increases enforcement to prevent illegal migration, provides a path to legal immigrant status and U.S. citizenship for most of the unauthorized foreigners, and expands and creates new guest worker

Figure 2. Estimates of the U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population, 1990–2012



programs. The House is expected to debate bills that would increase enforcement, provide a path for some unauthorized foreigners to immigrant status but not U.S. citizenship, and expand and create new guest worker programs.

### Canada

Canada is an immigration exception among industrial countries, with high levels of immigration, generous social welfare programs, and significant public satisfaction with immigration policies. Many analysts trace this satisfaction to Canada's point selection system that favors the entry of young and well-educated foreigners who know English or French and have Canadian work experience.

Canada differs from the United States because over half of the legal immigrants include a family member who achieved enough points to obtain an immigrant visa. The point selection system ensures that the average educational level of adult immigrants arriving in Canada exceeds the average educational level of Canadian-born adults.

Many adult immigrants have college degrees, but some cannot find Canadian jobs that use their education, resulting in brain waste, as when an immigrant doctor drives a taxi because he cannot obtain a Canadian medical license.

Canadian immigration patterns mirror those of the United States, and its policy changes were similar until the

1970s. For example, the United States barred Chinese immigrants in 1882, and Canada limited Chinese immigration in 1885. Immigration to Canada peaked between 1895 and 1913, when 2.5 million newcomers arrived in a country that had a 1913 population of 7 million.

Canada is a bilingual and multicultural society. The goal of achieving unity between English and French speakers has been the focus of Canadian politics for much of the past half-century, and many of the policies that make Canada a bilingual and bicultural society also affect immigration. For example, the provinces play a role in selecting immigrants, so the Quebec government selects immigrants to bolster the number of French speakers.

### Mexico

Until recently, Mexico was Latin America's major emigration country, sending up to 500,000 people to the United States each year. Mexico-U.S. migration slowed during the 2008–09 recession, and Mexico also became a destination for migrants from poorer Central American countries. Some Americans, often Mexicans who have lived in the United States, retire to Mexico.

Mexico-U.S. migration, both legal and illegal, remained low until the 1970s, when the Mexican peso was devalued, making higher U.S. wages more attractive. Ex-Mexican guest workers, known as Braceros, crossed the

border illegally with their relatives and friends in the 1970s, and there were no penalties on U.S. employers who hired them. The stream of Mexican migrants turned into a flood in the 1980s, and the United States responded with the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which legalized 2.7 million unauthorized foreigners—85% Mexicans. IRCA had the unintended consequence of encouraging more Mexicans to move illegally to the U.S. in anticipation of another amnesty and to spread Mexicans throughout the United States.

Mexico in 1990 proposed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA lowered trade and investment barriers between Canada, Mexico, and the United States after 1994, and was expected to reduce Mexico-U.S. migration as Mexico sent tomatoes rather than tomato pickers to the United States. Instead, there was a Mexico-U.S. migration hump, as increased free trade eliminated jobs in Mexican agriculture faster than investment could create new nonfarm jobs. During the late 1990s, as Mexico recovered from another peso devaluation and the United States was creating 10,000 net new jobs every work day, Mexico-U.S. migration peaked at over 700,000 a year.

Mexico fared better than the U.S. during the 2008–09 recession. The combination of improving economic conditions in Mexico and stepped up border and interior enforcement in the United States slowed net Mexico-U.S. migration to almost zero, meaning that as many Mexicans returned to Mexico as arrived in the United States. The unknown questions include whether Mexico-U.S. migration will increase again with U.S. economic recovery and what effects a new U.S. legalization program would have on Mexico-U.S. migration patterns.

## Central America, Caribbean, and South America

The seven countries of Central America, with 44 million residents, sent few

migrants to the United States until civil wars erupted in the mid-1980s. Fighting displaced tens of thousands of Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans, some of whom migrated to the United States. The U.S. government initially granted asylum to Nicaraguans, who were fleeing a government the United States opposed, but not to Guatemalans and Salvadorans fleeing governments the United States supported.

Most Central Americans in the United States became immigrants, and family unification and unauthorized migration followed. Natural disasters allowed unauthorized Central Americans in the United States to receive “Temporary Protected Status” (TPS) so they could work legally and send home remittances to help in rebuilding. TPS has been renewed since, and there are there are now large communities of Guatemalans, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans in the United States.

The 15 independent Caribbean nations and dependencies have 42 million residents and some of the world’s highest emigration rates, as over 10% of persons born in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica have left—usually for the United States. Immigration to the U.S. from the Caribbean averages 100,000 a year, including one-third from the Dominican Republic and one-sixth each from Haiti, Cuba, and Jamaica.

South America’s 400 million residents are two-thirds of the 600 million people in Latin America. A century ago, Italians and Spaniards migrated to Argentina and Brazil and Japanese to Brazil and Peru. During the 1990s, some of their descendants of these immigrants returned to Italy, Spain, and Japan in search of better economic opportunities, but migration from South America to Europe and Japan reversed in recent years, as some South Americans abroad returned.

## Conclusions

The number of international migrants, people living outside their country of birth or citizenship, reached an all-time high of 232 million in 2013. The number of migrants is likely to continue increasing because of demographic and economic inequalities between countries, and revolutions in communications and transportation that enable migrants to learn about opportunities abroad and travel to take advantage of them. Policy makers often react to migration crises by restricting the rights of migrants, drawing protests from advocates who urge a rights-based approach to managing migration.

Every one of the world’s 200 countries participates in the international migration system as a source or destination for migrants or a country through which migrants transit. Many countries participate in all three ways. Most migrants do not move far from home, and each of the world’s continents has a migration system with unique characteristics, including the large number of unauthorized migrants in the United States, the point selection system of Canada, and high emigration rates in many Latin American countries.

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### For additional information, the author recommends:

Hollifield, J., P. Martin, and P. Orrenius, Eds. 2014. *Controlling Immigration. A Global Perspective*. Stanford University Press. [www.sup.org/book.cgi?id=22520](http://www.sup.org/book.cgi?id=22520)

*Migration News*. <http://migration.ucdavis.edu>