Illegal Mexican workers: why they come

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The cumulative number of illegal Mexican aliens living today in the United States has been estimated by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service at between eight and twelve million. There may be as many as three million illegal border crossings to and from Mexico in a year. Because the entries are illegal, there is no way to obtain accurate data on the magnitude of the phenomenon, but Donald Cameron, the Border Patrol Chief in San Ysidro, California, calls the boundary there “the 16 hottest miles of border in the world.” In 1979, there were 998,761 illegal entrants returned to Mexico from the United States, a number that may be inflated by repeaters, who usually agree to return “voluntarily” and then try again.

In an interview published by the Los Angeles Times in December, 1979, Secretary of Labor F. R. Marshall claimed that, if two million jobs currently held by undocumented workers were available to Americans, our unemployment rate would drop to 3.7 percent. Others contend, however, that most jobs held by foreigners would not be desired by domestic workers.

Although concern has been expressed that the illegal visitor-workers will place a severe drain on our health, welfare, and educational systems, research has shown that 73 percent of a sample of apprehended aliens paid federal income taxes, 77 percent paid Social Security, but less than 2 percent received food stamps or welfare assistance, and less than 3 percent had children in school here. Furthermore, because undocumented Mexican aliens are mostly young adult males, they should make few demands on our health system.

There is no doubt that the estimated $2 billion sent or taken back to Mexico in a year is an important contribution to that nation’s economy. This income, together with dollars from tourism and from winter vegetable sales, has made up over 50 percent of Mexico’s gross national product ($70.9 billion in 1977). It is more difficult to ascertain the real impacts on the economy and on the employment scene in the United States. With only guesses, opinions, and counter-opinions to go on, the determination of consistent public policy regarding the problem has been nearly impossible. It is more than likely, however, that this group has promoted our economic growth just as most past immigrations have.

A number of theories have emerged about why these workers come north in such numbers. Each theory is a plausible partial explanation, but each has shortcomings, and no one theory can be taken as an explanation by itself. We propose, therefore, a synthesis of three theories using each as a contribution toward a fuller understanding of the immigration process. The first, the push-pull theory, may explain the forces behind the decision to immigrate. It can be called the motivational step. The second, institutionalized migration, describes the setting in this country that allows so much illegal migration to occur. This is the action step, the actual migration. The third, the dual labor market thesis, accounts for the assimilation process whereby newcomers are blended into our society.

The push-pull hypothesis

Behind the motivation to leave are the “push” of a surplus labor supply in Mexico and the “pull” of demand for cheap labor in the United States. Socioeconomic conditions in Mexico have produced a shortage of wage-earning opportunities, leaving 1.5 million unemployed and 40 percent of the workforce underemployed. The Mexican population growth rate is among the fastest in the world, outstripping the growth rate of the gross domestic product. (Between 1960 and 1974, the annual population growth rate was 3.4 percent; the growth of the gross domestic product 3.3 percent.) The population is expected to almost double in the next 20 years, if birth control measures are not adopted; 46 percent of the population is under 15 years of age. Immigration to the United States has been called by many “Mexico’s safety valve,” providing relief from the pressures of population surplus labor force, and unequal income distribution.

The pull, the demand for cheap labor in the United States, has drawn both legal and illegal aliens northward. Although jobs taken by aliens here may pay low wages (even below the minimum wage) by American standards, the pay may be three or four times what a comparable job would pay in Mexico.

Still, the push-pull theory is insufficient to explain Mexico’s loss of the most able, aggressive labor, the very persons who could be expected to compete most effectively for jobs at home. Furthermore, migration runs counter to deep feelings most Mexicans have for their language, culture, and family ties.

Institutionalized migration

Once the decision has been made to migrate, institutional factors in this country have facilitated the action. It can safely be said that illegal immigration is a problem at least somewhat of our own making. In the 1940s and 1950s, the active recruitment of Mexican farmworkers (braceros) firmly established the pattern. In the 1950s, the Border Patrol performed “drying out” services for illegal immigrants—that is, having them step across the border, touch Mexican soil, and then be readmitted as legal braceros.

Although this legalized farmworker program ended in 1965, half-hearted enforcement of immigration laws today means that the composition of the hired farm labor force actually has not changed much. Forty-eight percent of the workers in the California-Arizona-Nevada region in 1977 were Hispanic. Ninety-five percent of the aliens from Mexico apprehended by the Immigration and Naturalization Service are simply allowed to return home. Since there is no penalty, there is little discouragement from reimmigrating.

Another institutional support for illegal immigration is the relatively easy availability of Social Security cards. The U.S. Social Security Administration has resisted becoming part of the control system on aliens, and so no statement of citizenship is required when applying for a card. The card holder then has a seemingly legitimate access to the job market.

Similarly, in California, the Agricultural Labor Relations Board requires no proof of
The United States has never had a consistent policy with respect to illegal aliens...