

How Los Angeles Deflected Mexican Immigrants To The American Heartland

by *Ivan Light*

Originally published on the Migration Information Source (www.migrationinformation.org), a project of the Migration Policy Institute.

Once in the United States, immigrants can settle wherever they choose, and they usually choose to settle where kin and friends already reside.

Because of this tendency, called network migration, Mexican immigrants, until quite recently, overwhelmingly selected just three states for settlement: California, Texas, and Illinois. As late as 1980, these three states were home to 83 percent of all Mexican immigrants in the United States (see Table 1). In 1980, Mexican immigrants represented approximately one-third of all immigrants in the United States.

Given this highly unequal settlement pattern, Mexican immigrants were highly visible in the three traditional states, and virtually invisible elsewhere in the United States. As a result, most Americans were neither aware of nor concerned about Mexican immigration. This inattention also meant that political pressure on Congress to reform immigration was relatively weak.

However, between 1980 and 2000, the Mexican immigrant population of the United States increased from about 2.1 million to nearly 9.2 million.

After 1980, but especially in the 1990s, Mexican immigrants began to leave the three traditional states and settle in so-called new settlement states, cities, and regions where Mexicans had not previously resided.

Mexican immigrants in the traditional states were more frequently female than in the new settlement states. They also resided in larger households and had more children. However, the educational levels and age of the Mexican immigrants was approximately the same in the new settlement and traditional states as of both 1990 and 2000 (see Table 2).

Table 1. Foreign-Born Mexicans by State and Year of Entry, 2000

States	Total	Entered 1990-2000	Entered 1980-1989	Entered before 1980
CA, TX, IL	6,425,898	2,714,727	1,934,108	1,777,063
(Percentage)	(70%)	(61%)	(75%)	(83%)
Other 47 states	2,754,288	1,730,338	655,321	368,629
(Percentage)	(30%)	(39%)	(25%)	(17%)

Total, USA	9,180,186	4,445,065	2,589,429	2,145,692
------------	-----------	-----------	-----------	-----------

Mexican immigrants inhabited 269 metropolitan areas of the United States in 2000 whereas, in 1980, they had inhabited only 215 (see Table 3).

Mexican immigrants also moved down the urban hierarchy between 1980 and 2000. In 1980, 49.2 percent of foreign-born Mexicans in metropolitan areas resided in one of the 10 largest metropolitan areas of the United States. By 2000, this percentage had declined to 37.3 percent.

This trend has changed the labor and housing economics of thousands of cities and towns, often drastically. Consequently, the people living in such areas have become more interested in the politics of immigration.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Mexican Foreign Born Age 18 or Older for Los Angeles County and States, 1990 and 2000					
	LA County	California	Three Traditional States	Eight New Resettlement States	Other States
Age					
1990	29.6	27.5	28.1	28.3	28.4
2000	29.6	29.5	29.7	28.5	28.5
Years of education					
1990	8.1	8.0	8.0	7.8	8.3
2000	8.2	8.2	8.3	8.5	8.6
Children in household					
1990	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6
2000	2	1.9	1.8	1.4	1.4
Persons in household					
1990	6.2	6.3	6.0	4.9	4.8
2000	6.1	6.2	5.7	5.3	5.3

Percentage male					
1990	58	59	58	62	63
2000	55	55	56	63	65
1990, N	12,200	27,373	36,199	3,828	4,093
2000, N	15,600	27,685	49,793	18,201	19,901

Some new-settlement cities have objected to the unexpected immigrant influx. Most notably, in an effort to deflect illegal immigration elsewhere, cities like Valley Park, Missouri, and Hazleton, Pennsylvania, introduced ordinances that required people to prove they were legally in the United States in order to rent housing or to obtain employment within the city limits.

However, these municipal ordinances are of dubious legality because the Constitution vests all authority to regulate immigration in Congress.

In July 2007, Hazleton's ordinances failed a preliminary test in federal district court. Should the Supreme Court agree with lower-court rulings, these cities and towns may seek another approach — quite possibly one that is based on the experience of Los Angeles. The reasons immigrants, in particular Mexicans, moved away from the country's second-largest city are both economic and political.

Table 3. Mexican Foreign Born in US Metropolitan Areas, 1980, 1990, and 2000			
	1980	1990	2000
Population in metro areas	1,821,440	3,479,620	7,194,560
Number of metro areas	215	238	265

Economic Causes of Dispersion

In immigration theory, a migration push is the "stick" and a migration pull the "carrot" that persuades people to cross international borders. Recent research shows that migrants also react to pushes and pulls when they decide where to settle within the United States.

An internal economic pull means Mexican immigrants increasingly select nontraditional states for settlement because they know they can find jobs in them. On the pull side, accumulating evidence shows that Mexican immigrants have connected with employers, especially in the eight so-called new-settlement states of Massachusetts, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington.

Reliable access to employment caused the immigrant population of the eight new-settlement states to increase fourfold between 1980 and 2000. Of all Mexican immigrants who arrived in the United States within five years of the 2000 census, these eight states' share increased from 4 percent in 1975-1980 to 16 percent in 1995-2000.

An internal economic push means that immigrants left the traditional states (or did not go to them at all) because they knew that economic conditions there had seriously deteriorated. Sociologists Rubén Hernandez-Léon and Victor Zúñiga have shown that Mexican immigrants have followed migration networks directly from Mexico to carpet factories in Dalton, Georgia, for example.

On the push side, the long-term, high-volume immigration of Mexicans and Central Americans to the three traditional states, and especially to metropolitan Los Angeles, did tend to deteriorate immigrants' economic circumstances.

To be sure, the impact of Mexican immigrants' economic competition on the wages of *nonimmigrants* has been slight. However, the impact of their competition *on other Mexicans* has been great.

In 1980, Mexican immigrants earned more in Los Angeles than in the three traditional states, and more in the three traditional states than they did outside this core. By 1990, that situation had been reversed (see Table 4).

The 1990 mean annual income of Mexican immigrant adults was lower in Los Angeles, lower in California, and lower in the three traditional settlement states than in the eight new-settlement states or the 39 other states. In addition, Mexican immigrants' rents were also lower outside the traditional settlement states (see Table 4).

These discrepancies increased between 1990 and 2000, which helped *push* Mexican immigrants out of Los Angeles and toward nontraditional cities and states.

Table 4. Mean Rents and Wages of Mexican Foreign Born Age 18 or Older by State, 1990 and 2000					
	LA County	California	Three Traditional States	Eight New Resettlement States	Other 39 States
1990					
Mean yearly income	\$5,805	\$5,998	\$5,843	\$6,183	\$7,099
Mean gross rent	\$529	\$507	\$445	\$271	\$366

2000					
Mean yearly income	\$8,469	\$8,898	\$9,337	\$10,090	\$10,919
Mean gross rent	\$618	\$634	\$562	\$498	\$540
1990, N	12,200	27,373	36,199	3,828	4,093
2000, N	15,600	27,685	49,793	18,201	19,901

Political Causes of Mexican Dispersion

Two political causes also have contributed to the dispersion of Mexican immigrants from California and from Los Angeles. First, as Mexican immigrants' economic condition worsened, local and state public officials became aware of their increasing poverty.

This distressing poverty was associated with the spread of slums and sweatshops in which Mexican immigrants lived and worked. In the 1980s, Los Angeles was home to the nation's largest and most prosperous garment industry, and many of its garment factories operated in sweatshop conditions.

Slums and sweatshops had long been illegal in Los Angeles, but the enforcement of anti-slum and anti-sweatshop ordinances, as well as the enforcement of minimum wage laws, had been lax. It is important to note that, between 1980 and 2000, California consistently raised the state's minimum wage above the federal level. By 2000, California's minimum wage was 12 percent higher than the federal level. In 1998, only eight states had set their minimum wage above the federal level.

To combat immigrant poverty, high-profile law enforcement of these ordinances sharply increased beginning in the late 1980s and continued through the 1990s. Although enforcement of ordinances and wage laws did not eliminate sweatshops and slums, enforcement did slow their growth below the rate of immigrant influx.

In addition, wages fell in the garment industry due to competition from abroad. Caught between intensified labor law enforcement at home and international competition, the garment industry began to leave Los Angeles for other US states (with lower minimum wages) and other countries. The industry's labor force in Los Angeles decreased one-third between 1997 and 2003.

In effect, the enforcement of anti-slum and anti-sweatshop laws helped push, or deflect, Mexican immigrants from Los Angeles to other parts of the United States. At the same time, enforcement succeeded in upgrading the living standards of the 63.3 percent of Mexican immigrants who were not deflected. If the bottom third of any income

distribution is removed by deflection, the average income of those remaining will increase.

Suburban housing activists in Los Angeles provided the second political source for deflection. Surrounding the immigrant-friendly central city are 87 independent suburbs, many zealously protective of their expensive, low-density, homeowner way of life. Called nimbies (an acronym for "not in my backyard"), suburban housing activists successfully resisted external political pressure to change local housing codes in order to accommodate low-income people.

In the 1980s, Mexican immigrants were a growing proportion of Southern California's low-income population, but nimbies also targeted poor whites and blacks, the elderly, and the homeless. Nimbies particularly objected to political efforts to authorize more higher-density residences (mainly rental housing) in suburbs than existing zoning laws permitted.

Facing concerned local voters, who opposed low-density housing, suburban mayors and city councils decided not to authorize higher-density residences. As a result, the suburban ring around central Los Angeles choked off market-driven expansion of low-income housing for poor immigrants.

Zoning laws thus also helped deflect high-density renters, who included Mexicans, from homeowner suburbs. Written in the 1950s and 1960s, the zoning laws were not meant to deflect immigrants, but that was their unintended effect in the 1990s.

How Many Mexicans Were Deflected?

Using census data, we can calculate that the Los Angeles metropolitan area deflected a million immigrants to other metropolitan areas in the United States between 1980 and 2000. Deflection mostly affected Mexicans, but it also affected all foreign-born persons. Between 1980 and 2000, the foreign-born population of the United States increased from just over 14 million to 31.1 million, but the City of Los Angeles (not including the counties around it), with 1,512,720 foreign born in 2000, saw its share of the total national foreign-born population decline from 6.8 percent to 4.9 percent.

If the City of Los Angeles had maintained its share of the national foreign-born total in 2000, it would have been home to 2,114,800 foreign born instead of 1.5 million, a difference (or deflection) of about 600,000 immigrants.

The number deflected rises if we only consider Mexican immigrants, this time in the five-county Los Angeles metropolitan area. The metropolitan area's share of the Mexican foreign-born population of the United States declined from 32 percent in 1980 to 17 percent in 2000. Because of this decline, the five-county area had a foreign-born Mexican population of 1,530,280 in 2000 instead of the 2,491,068 it would have had, had it maintained its 1980 share of the total. The difference comes to 960,788 Mexican immigrants who did not live in the Los Angeles metropolitan area in 2000.

That is, the actual population of Mexican immigrants in the Los Angeles metropolitan area was nearly one million smaller in 2000 than it would have been without the relative reduction in the area's share of the national population of Mexican immigrants.

Policy Issues in Deflection

The economics of free labor and housing markets will continue to encourage Mexicans to disperse from traditional but saturated destinations to nontraditional but unsaturated destinations — and even to bypass the traditional destinations altogether in favor of new ones.

Now that the consequences of deflection have been identified, deflection may become a conscious element in political deliberation in cities and states that have experienced recent inflows.

Los Angeles' experience with deflection suggests that localities can slow the influx of immigrants.

The policy tools that can work, depending on the existing economic conditions of a given locality, include low-density residential zoning, a high minimum wage, and zealous local enforcement of occupational, industrial, and housing laws. States and cities have the prerogative to enforce these types of laws.

Based on the federal court decision in the Hazleton case, it seems likely that states and cities do not and will not have the right to enforce ordinances that mandate proof of legal status to work or reside in a given place.

Of course, the policies that enable deflection are neither free nor universally popular. Mexican immigrants will not be the only people offended or affected when localities expand enforcement of occupational, industrial, and housing laws.

Law enforcement costs money, and it imposes annoyance, delay, shortage, and aggravation upon the unoffending citizenry as well as upon the employers and slumlords at whom these laws are directed.

Similarly, a higher minimum wage can drive away jobs for low-wage immigrants, but it can also drive away low-wage jobs that native-born teenagers and minorities rely upon.

Low-density zoning inhibits the influx of low-income immigrants, but it also reduces population growth in localities, restricting the income opportunities for local property developers, building trades unions, and other members of the municipal growth machine.

It would not be surprising, though, if communities that have followed or considered the Hazleton model decide to take a Los Angeles-type approach instead.

Sources

Bean, Frank D. and Gillian Stevens. 2003. *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity*. New York: Russell Sage.

Durand, Jorge, Douglas Massey, and Fernando Charvet. 2000. "The Changing Geography of Mexican Immigration in the United States, 1910 – 1996." *Social Science Quarterly* 81:1-15.

Hernández-León, Ruben and Victor Zúñiga. 2005. "Appalachia meets Aztlán: Mexican Immigration and Intergroup relations in Dalton, Georgia," in Victor Zúñiga and Ruben Hernández-León, (eds), *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Light, Ivan. 2006. *Deflecting Immigration: Networks, Markets, and Regulation in Los Angeles*. New York: Russell Sage.

Light, Ivan and Michael Francis Johnston. Forthcoming 2008. "Metropolitan Dispersion of Mexican Immigrants in the United States, 1980 to 2000." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

Light, Matthew and Ivan Light. Forthcoming 2008. "The Geographic Expansion of Mexican Immigration in the United States and Its Implications for Local Law Enforcement." *Law Enforcement Executive FORUM* 8 (January).

Orrenius, Pia and Madeline Zavodny. 2007. "The Effect of Minimum Wages on Immigrants." Unpublished paper, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

*Originally published on the Migration Information Source
(www.migrationinformation.org), a project of the Migration Policy Institute.*

About The Author

Ivan Light is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. This article is based on his book **Deflecting Immigration: Networks, Markets, and Regulation in Los Angeles**. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.