

Return Migration to Mexico: Who Goes? Who Stays?

The public cost of immigration is a matter of ongoing and sometimes intense political debate in California. One of the least understood issues in the debate is whether many of those who come to the United States return home and, if so, whether they differ from those who remain.

Return migration has important ramifications for a number of policy concerns, including the composition of the immigrant population, the use of social services, and the potential for assimilation. If return migration is large and selective (that is, if those who return are different from those who stay), policymakers who do not take this into consideration run the risk of making decisions based on faulty assumptions or inaccurate data.

To shed light on this issue, Belinda Reyes analyzed a sample of more than 42,000 people from western Mexico, documenting her study in *Dynamics of Immigration: Return Migration to Western Mexico*. She found substantial return migration as well as significant differences between those who return to Mexico and those who remain in the United States. Those who choose to stay have the best employment experiences, the highest wages, and the most education—precisely the kind of selection that has been a key feature of U.S. immigration for many generations. This selectivity suggests that the driving force behind immigration from western Mexico is well-paying jobs, not plentiful benefits from social service programs.

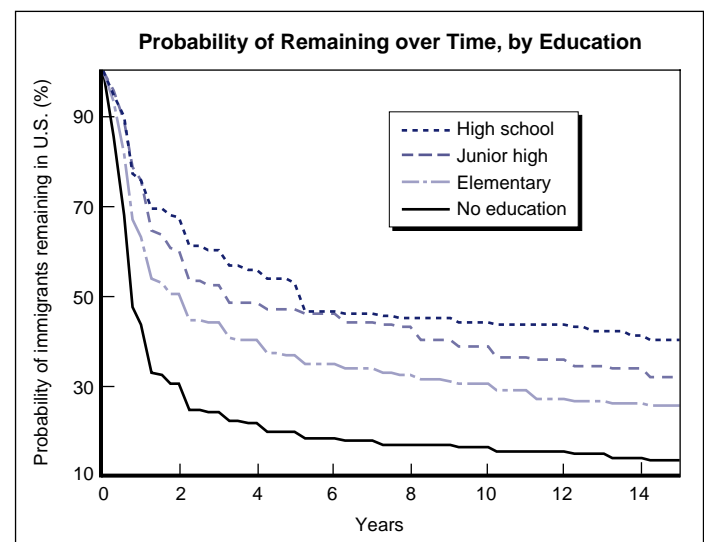
Characteristics of Those Who Return and Those Who Remain

About 50 percent of the immigrants in the study sample returned to Mexico within two years; almost 70 percent returned within 10 years. In general, the rate of return was higher for the poorly educated, for low-wage earners, and for undocumented immigrants: Within two years, more than half of those with less than an elementary school education,

70 percent of those employed as agricultural workers, and half of the undocumented immigrants returned to Mexico. Immigrants who were unemployed also returned home quickly: Nearly 70 percent went home within the first year after migration.

Most of the immigrants in the sample were male (70 percent) and had low levels of education. Most men were of working age, and more than 30 percent of them were employed as agricultural workers. Most (83 percent) traveled without other family members and were undocumented (57 percent).

The women in the sample had slightly more education than the men, and a greater percentage of them worked in higher-paying occupations. Like the men, most women (64 percent) traveled without family, but fewer than half (47 percent) were undocumented. The women were also more likely to remain in the United States for longer periods of time.



The less education immigrants have, the less time they are likely to stay.

About 40 percent stayed for longer than 15 years, whereas only about 20 percent of the men remained that long.

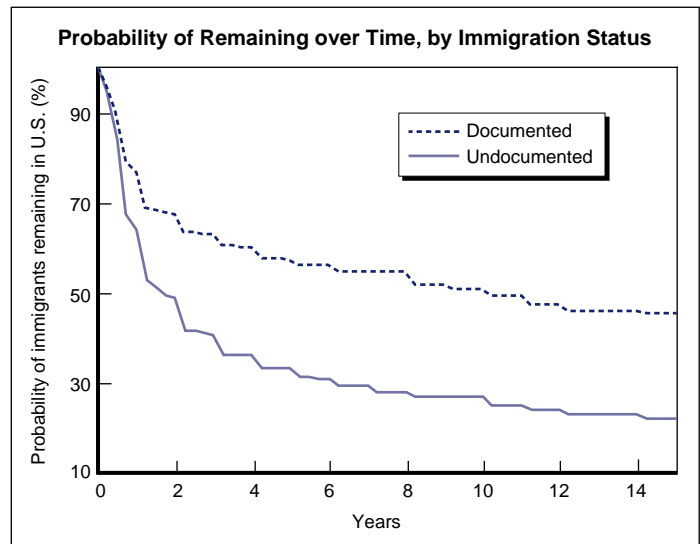
A fairly high percentage of the immigrants moved more than once (51 percent of the men, 26 percent of the women). However, the study's findings seem to indicate that circular migration is not a prelude to settling down for long periods of time in the United States. Most of those who were in the United States for a long time moved only once, and most multiple movers (82 percent) stayed only a couple of years.

The decision to remain or return to Mexico appears strongly related to immigrants' access to social networks and to their economic experience in the United States.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings show that return migration, the length of time immigrants stay in the United States, and the differences between those who return and those who stay are critically important when considering immigration's social and economic effects.

Western Mexico is the source of three-fifths of Mexican immigration to the United States. Given the high rates of return migration, it is clear that a relatively small percentage of immigrants stay in the United States long enough to qual-



Undocumented immigrants stay for much less time than documented immigrants.

ify for social services under current eligibility rules. Only long-term settlers or immigrants who gain early citizenship could legally put demands on the social service systems of California and other states. Those who remain the longest in the United States have more education and stronger ties to the labor market—they may be the least likely to require public services.

This research brief summarizes a report by Belinda Reyes, Dynamics of Immigration: Return Migration to Western Mexico. The report may be ordered by calling (800) 232-5343 [mainland U.S.] or (415) 291-4415 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues that affect the lives of Californians.