

Why Immigrants Come to America: Braceros, Indocumentados, and the Migra

Robert Joe Stout

Praeger

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For the Kids;
Paul, Emily, Ingrid, Deirdre and Noah

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Preface

INDOCUMENTADOS, WHERE AND WHY

I suppose I started writing *Why Immigrants Come to America* when I first shared grammar school experiences with newly arrived Spanish-speaking immigrants who'd come to Wyoming to hoe and thin sugar beets and work in the sugar factory that employed my father. Growing up in that rural, agricultural community, I experienced some of what they did, being obliged to plant, weed and pull onions, dig potatoes, and scurry out during storms to cover tomato plants with tin cans to keep them from being beaten to pieces by hail. I bought my first car with money I earned in California almond orchards and made my way through college on the G. I. Bill and savings from sugar factory shifts.

In the fields, in the military, in the factories, I worked with Mexican immigrants. To some degree, they influenced my educational choices: a degree in creative writing and Latin American studies from Mexico City College (now the Universidad de las Americas). Both as a journalist and as an accountant, I lived and worked in areas with large Spanish-speaking populations. I wrote about their problems, misadventures, animosities, and successes for a variety of national and regional publications. *Why Immigrants Come to America* is an outgrowth of experiences, observations, and concerns that this vibrant and controversial shift of populations created for me both personally and professionally.

That I worked in the fields and factories, and speak a relatively fluent if noticeably accented Spanish, contributed to the collection of information included in this presentation. I have attempted to identify by name and

location as many of the persons I've interviewed and spoken to over the years. Some of the quotes and opinions expressed were included in newspaper and magazine pieces that I wrote during the 1970s and 1980s. (Other comments and conversations were not published but were included from notes that I made at the time.) Throughout this manuscript, I've focused on interviews, conversations, and current newspaper and media accounts in order to provide readers and researchers with an accurate, human view of the persons involved and the problems and challenges that they face.

Although there is some overlap, I've presented the material in the following manner:

First chapter—Where The Migrants Come From

Second chapter—Getting Across the Border

Third chapter—Living Conditions in the United States

Fourth chapter—Work Conditions

Fifth chapter—Law Enforcement

Sixth chapter—The Politics of Both Nations Involved

Seventh chapter—Recent Events

Undocumented—or “illegal”—immigration has been an increasingly controversial political issue throughout the last half of the twentieth century. Exacerbated by population growth in the sender countries (principally Mexico but also Central America and the Caribbean) and the impoverishment of their economies, millions of Spanish-speaking residents have moved into the United States. Thousands have died. Millions live in poverty but the majority—more than 90 percent—find employment and over 60 percent send portions of their earnings to their families south of the border. Their remittances provide nearly 70 percent of the incomes of thousands of towns and villages throughout northern and central Mexico and much of Central America.

These millions of workers are more than mathematical quantities to be juggled by politicians and academicians. They are real people, with real fears, and real aspirations. Many have become voting U.S. citizens; millions of others, despite their precarious living and working situations, make important contributions to the U.S. economy and to the country's well-being. Solving the problems that their continued and often desperate migration has triggered cannot be achieved without understanding how they live, why they come, and what choices they face. It is to help achieve these solutions that this book has been written.

Thanks are due to the many people who made *Why Immigrants Come to America* possible, particularly the encouragement and participation of those involved with editing and production on the part of Greenwood Publishing Group: Hilary Claggett, Robert Hutchinson, Brian Foster, and Saloni Jain. I am also indebted to Maureen Ryan for countless hours of interchanging ideas and criticisms and to the hundreds of citizens of both the United States and Mexico who openly and candidly discussed their ideas, situations, and beliefs with me as a reporter, a co-participant, and a friend.

Introduction

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents sweep through factories, farms, and construction sites from Maine to California herding handcuffed “illegals” into detention facilities. Immigrants and their supporters block highways, repudiating a House of Representatives proposal to make undocumented entry into the United States a felony. Six-thousand National Guardsmen head toward the U.S.-Mexico frontier where hundreds of men, women, and children die every year of heat stroke, dehydration, and starvation. No issues have provoked such national outrage since integration and opposition to the war in Vietnam crested in the 1960s as the debate over immigration currently is doing. Despite the clamor, the rhetoric, the accusations, and the arrests, few people really understand who the undocumented immigrants are, how they get into the United States and why they keep coming.

The United States and Mexico share a common border nearly 2,000 miles long, making entry and exit much easier and more common than is possible for Turkish workers in Germany or Brazilian workers in Japan. Unlike foreign workers in those countries, and Philippine laborers in the Islamic countries of the Mid-east, migrant Mexican workers have been able to go back and forth from jobs north of the border to their homes in Durango, Zacatecas, Michoacán, and other states where subsistence agriculture has been the norm for centuries. Until the 1970s, the majority of these workers followed a circular migratory pattern, many crossing legally as *braceros* and others without documentation but the majority returning to their homes during slack seasons. Most of them had jobs waiting for them in the United States and most of them returned to employers who had hired them in years past.

Most popular literature about “the illegal alien” problem (and much academic research) has focused on the migrant worker side of an equation. Very little quantitative study has provided details about employers or about U.S. government participation in the recruitment of farm laborers, even though this participation was a major stimulant to the twenty-three million persons of Mexican ancestry who now live in the United States. The U.S. government openly scoured northern and west central Mexico for workers during World War I and, under the so-called *bracero* program, during and after World War II. (*Bracero* derives from the Spanish noun *brazo*—arm; a *bracero* is a “strong arm.”) This recruitment, the “pull” side of the “push-pull” theory of migration popularly described by academics, brought as many as 400,000 workers a year into the United States between 1942 and 1965.

Braceros typically earned ten to fifteen times what they could earn in Mexico. Most were men between sixteen and thirty-five and came from large interconnected rural families. Relatives often helped finance their trips and the *braceros*, in turn, sent remittances back home. The traditional subsistence agriculture of western and central Mexico and the increasing demand for temporary labor in the United States combined to form a dynamic that expanded rapidly as the needs for both increased after World War II. An unplanned consequence was expansion of labor-intensive agriculture during a time of rapid technological advancement in other fields. As long as low-wage workers were available, employers continued to rely on them rather than develop more efficient systems of planting, thinning, weeding, harvesting, and packing.

“A temporary migration system rests on a structure of economic opportunities in the place of origin that, while insufficient for the full subsistence of a household, can maintain a family provided that one or more members of the household become labor migrants,” the authors of “Transnational Migrant Communities and Mexican Migration to the United States” concur.¹ The temporary employment offered *braceros* and non-*bracero* enrollees recruited by firms like Mills Orchards in California helped both employers and workers to resolve the economic situations in which they found themselves. The migrant workers earned in a day or two what they would have garnered in a month in Mexico and U.S. employers had at their disposal a flexible nonunionized workforce that they could manipulate according to seasonal demands. “Immigration scholars routinely note that the U.S. government recruited about five million farm workers from Mexico during a twenty-two year period” from 1944 through 1966.² Non-*braceros* responded to a similar or even larger number of private recruitments. The overwhelming majority of these

indocumentados worked in agriculture or agriculturally connected production facilities.

During the depression years of the 1930s, the federal government rounded up and deported hundreds of thousands of immigrants (some legal and many not). Twenty-some years later, during the post-World War II economic slump, the United States repeated a campaign of massive deportations. But hardly had "Operation Wetback" concluded when manpower demands during the Korean War increased the need for unskilled and semi-skilled workers, both in agriculture and in industry. Similar needs recurred during the war in Vietnam.

Mexico, meanwhile, suffered severe economic crises in the early 1980s and again in 1994, exacerbating unemployment and triggering massive rural-to-urban and Mexico-to-U.S. moves. NAFTA, China's takeover of the *maquiladora* (assembly plant) market and politically motivated xenophobia in the United States altered the ways that the demand-push equation functioned. Although a majority of migrants continued to return home during non-employment periods, many others became permanent U.S. residents. The "push" they were experiencing emerged from what Manuel Ángel Castillo describes as an absence of opportunities and an option for breaking limiting barriers despite the fact that the migrants have to endure separation from their families and estrangement from their communities of origin as well as being forced to confront an often hostile or culturally difficult and alien environment.³

Worker migration, both from Mexico and Latin America to the United States and from Mid-East, Asian, and African countries to Europe, Japan, and Singapore, depends on two principal factors: that those involved have a reason to leave their communities of origin and that they have economic ability to do so.⁴ The absence of opportunities and financial hardships of those emigrating has been well documented but less attention has been paid to the economic influences. Few emigrants just "up and go." They need transportation, destinations, a means to survive. "It is no small irony, in light of recent migration control efforts," Cornelius and Rosenblum observe, "that many of today's strongest migratory systems were initiated through deliberate, government-sponsored recruitment of 'guestworkers' during the 1940-1970 period."⁵

As the "pull" from U.S. employers continued to act as a forceful magnet, deteriorating economic conditions south of the border continued to impel migrants northward. That more and more emigrants successfully found employment stimulated greater migration and strengthened both the reasons to leave and the ability to do so successfully. The majority of these emigrants "drawn by the combined pull of a labor market that promises

wealth and the push of local economies that promise little" occupied a middle world that transcended borders but lacked roots in either Mexico or the United States.⁶

As more and more immigrants broke the circular pattern of yearly temporary migration and settled semi-permanently or permanently in the United States, a year-round workforce developed that included an increasing number of women immigrants. Workers who decided to stop migrating back and forth to Mexico sought year-round jobs in service-type areas such as gardening, housekeeping, and childcare.⁷ As more jobs in construction, services, food- and meat-processing plants, and the garment industry opened up, particularly in areas that previously had hosted little undocumented immigration, urban and semi-urban residents joined the migratory tide in increasing numbers. The authors of "Transnational Migrant Communities and Mexican Migration to the United States" contend that the current economic situation in both rural and urban Mexico favors what they describe as a "permanent migration system."⁸ It includes rural residents who've found it impossible to make a living in their home communities and/or who've lost land they formerly owned. They no longer seek seasonal work, but join others in communal clusters that keep them physically and sentimentally linked to their places of origin.⁹

Ironically, U.S. governmental efforts to crack down on illegal immigration has contributed to the establishment of permanent migration systems. As long as migrants were able to cross the border easily, work and return home, they felt little impetus to remain in the United States. As border security tightened, more and more *indocumentados* decided not to risk leaving and reentering and sought non-agricultural jobs in urban areas. The Simpson-Rodino Act (U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act) passed in 1986, designed to legalize longer-term *indocumentados*, establish penalties for knowingly hiring those not legalized and beefing up border vigilance, unintentionally encouraged immigrants to remain in the country instead of migrating seasonally.¹⁰ That nearly three million Spanish-speaking immigrants gained legal status under Simpson-Rodino further stimulated permanent immigration as residents of poverty-stricken areas throughout Latin America surged northward hoping for employment and for a chance at legal residency. In addition, many immigrants eligible for green card renewals opted for naturalization instead of reapplying for the non-immigrant work permits.

The authors of "Factors That Influence Migration" trace the origins of Mexico-U.S. migration to employer needs for basic labor, particularly during stress times when high production was necessary and a shortage of manpower existed.¹¹ Immigrant workers responding to this "pull" paved

the way for family members, relatives, and neighbors to join them north of the border. As linkages between communities south of the border and migration grew, subcultures that encompassed a hierarchy of workers, agents, employers, smugglers, and remittances developed highly efficient communication systems that included knowing what jobs were available when, who one could trust to guide a group safely across the border, and who had been injured, who had given birth to twins, and where one could find the best places to buy everything from boots to hamburgers.

Residents of rural Mexican communities frequently had better information about what jobs were available throughout the United States than either U.S. residents or state employment agencies. Migrations from those communities were well planned and paid for and those leaving knew they had jobs waiting for them once they arrived at their destinations. The networks set up in the United States not only made it easier and less expensive for *indocumentados* to find work and housing, they lowered the risks of apprehension during border crossings. Few emigrants left Mexico or other Latin American countries without having decided, singly or as family or community groups, that the entering the United States illegally was worth the effort. In many parts of northern and west central Mexico migration became so much a part of community life that from infancy both boys and girls assumed they would go to "The Other Side" to work. By the time they reached forty years of age most men from those areas had made at least one U.S. trip and many families had experienced four generations of migrating members.

Nevertheless, as Cohen points out, a large percentage of any Mexican community remains at home. These residents may choose to do so out of necessity, or fear, or obligation, or satisfaction with a lifestyle that though economically deprived provides social and personal satisfactions.¹² And they may or may not become involved with or benefit from the migration process but they recognize its existence and accept it as part of their social environment.

Escobar Latapí and his co-author affirm, "The U.S. need for flexible seasonal workers persisted after legal recruitment ended, and Mexican workers had become dependent on U.S. earnings, so the migration continued."¹³ The decision by one migrant, one *bracero*, to emigrate became multiplied first by ten, then by a hundred, then by a thousand, then by tens of thousands. The process became self-sustaining as immigrants built upon their own and previous experiences to set up social structures and support systems that encouraged more of their countrymen to emigrate.¹⁴ Not only does emigration become a means of economic advancement, it becomes a way of life. Residents of even the smallest

hamlets discuss which *coyotes* to trust and which to avoid, where to obtain counterfeit documents and which means of sending remittances are best.

For many employers the need for low-wage labor corresponded to immigrants' need for employment. Unlike businesses and industries that developed a stable work force through training, promotion, and responsibility, these employers required a constant flow of workers who would accept bare minimums and not expect advancement.¹⁵ Frequently they hired through immigrant field bosses and contractors and often did not know—or care—where their workers were coming from. Using immigrant intermediaries to hire and supervise workers not only lowered the cost of recruitment but guaranteed the employers efficient worker teams, many of whom were related to each other or who had come from the same communities in Mexico.¹⁶

Krissman, among others, complains that immigration literature does not sufficiently deal with employers and how they profit from migration networks, the glut of low-wage workers and the apprehension and deportation activities of the *migra*. Many of these employers are faceless corporations run by U.S. managers who in turn hire immigrant supervisors and recruiters. Since these employers do not actively engage in recruiting, hiring, or certification of legal documents they are not legally responsible for abetting undocumented immigration, even though they promote it through their employment policies and benefit from it financially. In recent cases, their companies have cooperated with law enforcement agencies by opening personnel records and allowing ICE agents to raid and deport workers. ICE charges the immigrant workers with possessing falsified documents but the employers go scot free whether or not they knew about the false documentation or, in fact, helped workers to obtain it.¹⁷ Krissman calls this “plausible denialability” and urges more research on how those who create the undocumented worker demand function and interact with the migration systems.

Once the pattern of dependency on flexible immigrant workers is set, employers find it virtually impossible to revert to native workers without massive changes in technology, wages, and job structure. A number of California employers have told me that they would increase pay, housing, and benefits but can't afford to do so unless their competition does likewise.

Competition dictates keeping wages low in order to achieve a desired profit margin and competition among low-wage jobseekers prohibits pressuring for higher pay or benefits. No one involved wants to break the cycle, so it continues. Cornelius notes that invariably in receiver economies the least attractive jobs go to immigrants; consequently, entire sectors of

advanced industrial economies become dependent on immigrant labor. The flexibility of being able to hire and dismiss as work demands ebb and flow greatly benefits employers. They are not inclined to develop permanent work forces and “continue to recruit new immigrant workers in an effort to stave off meaningful labor market reform.”¹⁸ In fact, when low-wage workers are not available and employers have to pay more for the same work, a strong incentive to find laborsaving substitutions is created.¹⁹

When that happens, as happened with tomato producers in California in the 1960s, the industry involved undergoes drastic changes. California tomato producers who turned to mechanized harvesters could undersell their competitors, many of whom, unable to afford the expensive equipment, sold their interests or turned to other forms of agriculture. “This experience suggests that dependence on immigrant workers is a one-way street and that market force alone will increase the employment of migrants.”²⁰

As the United States attempted to close the border, making undocumented immigration more difficult, an increasing percentage of emigrants sought professional help from so-called *coyotes*, or *polleros*. Decried north of the border as vicious criminals who prey on susceptible would be immigrants, *coyotes* became an indispensable cog in the migration process for most undocumented aliens entering the United States after 1970.²¹ Many of these *coyotes* guaranteed door-to-door delivery from towns in Mexico to jobs in the U.S. and their fees generally were paid by receiving relatives in the United States.²² The authors of “Factors That Influence Migration” report that 71 percent of those attempting to cross the border in 1994–1995 employed *coyotes* compared to only 50 percent during 1990–1993 and that in 1994–1995 over 70 percent made it on their first attempt without being apprehended.

Despite anti-immigration rhetoric in the United States, immigration from Mexico and Latin America has had little negative impact on the salaries of already employed U.S. workers. Migration primarily affects the well-being of the immigrants themselves and, by extension, their families and communities. “Only on very rare occasions has it been demonstrated that immigrants deteriorate working conditions or social services.”²³ The September 11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon building in Washington, D.C. brought a new dimension—terrorism—into the immigration picture despite the fact that undocumented immigrants presented no apparent terrorist threats. As numerous *indocumentados* have told me, “They want the work we do, but want us to be invisible after doing it.”

The need for inexpensive labor has existed since the beginnings of recorded history. The Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans recruited or enslaved less technologically advanced populations in order to construct everything from tombs to highways to aqueducts. (And, as mercenaries, to man their armed forces and, as servants, to fulfill domestic roles.) By the late sixteenth century, Mexico was importing workers from the Philippines; a century later slave ships ferried captured peoples from Africa to the Western Hemisphere to work in agriculture, construction, and mining. Invariably these recruitments impacted local mores and altered demographic patterns, creating class distinctions and legal restrictions.

For the most part the governments of the countries that needed cheap labor fostered these forced or stimulated migrations. Employers within those countries took advantage of the influx to produce goods at reduced cost, often casting the workers aside when they were too old or feeble to be of further use. As political situations within the importing countries changed, governments ejected or absorbed those who had entered as immigrant workers. Where racial differences existed, as they did in the United States, governments often legislated against immigrants and their descendants, limiting citizenship, ownership of property, and education.

Generally speaking, the migration of low-wage workers increases during times of expansion and contracts during times of cutbacks or recessions. The governments of the countries concerned either stimulate or retard migration as the expansions and regressions occur. As most capitalistic governments embraced globalization in the 1970s and 1980s, creating a greater need for an abundance of low-wage labor, the U.S. government responded to internal pressure and tightened control of undocumented entry. Unlike most countries of western Europe, the Arabian states, Singapore, and Japan, the United States did not originate or develop a planned importation of workers. (The *bracero* program already had been terminated.) This created a totally paradoxical situation "in which, in a world more interconnected than it ever had been, where the flows of money and commerce had been liberalized, the flow of persons, by contrast, confronted barriers that actually seemed to exclude international migration from the globalization process."²⁴

This served many U.S. employers well. The restrictions served to reduce the cost of labor by putting the onus of illegality on the workers rather than on those who recruited and hired them. *Indocumentados* have few legal rights or privileges; as a result they accept low wages and substandard working conditions.²⁵ The system that has functioned in the United States during the past three or more decades has featured demand north of the