

# *Mexican Data Show Migration to U.S. in Decline*

By JULIA PRESTON MAY 14, 2009

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The border near Campo, Calif. Mexican data show that emigration from Mexico to other countries declined by 25 percent in the year that ended in August 2008 from the preceding year. Eros Hoagland for The New York Times

MEXICALI, Mexico — Census data from the Mexican government indicate an extraordinary decline in the number of Mexican immigrants going to the United States.

The recently released data show that about 226,000 fewer people emigrated from Mexico to other countries during the year that ended in August 2008 than during the previous year, a decline of 25 percent. All but a very small fraction of emigration, both legal and illegal, from Mexico is to the United States.

Because of surging [immigration](#), the Mexican-born population in the United States has grown steeply year after year since the early 1990s, dipping briefly only after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, census data in both countries show.

Mexican and American researchers say that the current decline, which has also been manifested in a decrease in arrests along the border, is largely a result of Mexicans' deciding to delay illegal crossings because of the lack of jobs in the ailing American economy.

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The trend emerged clearly with the onset of the recession and, demographers say, provides new evidence that illegal immigrants from Mexico, by far the biggest source of unauthorized migration to the United States, are drawn by jobs and respond to a sinking labor market by staying away.

“If jobs are available, people come,” said Jeffrey S. Passel, senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan research group in Washington. “If jobs are not available, people don’t come.”

The net outflow of migrants from Mexico — those who left minus those who returned — fell by about half in the year that ended in August 2008 from the preceding year. The figures are based on detailed household interviews conducted quarterly by the census agency in Mexico, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography.

Along the border, the signs of the drop-off are subtle but ubiquitous. Only two beds are filled in a shelter here that houses migrants hoping to sneak into the United States. On the American side, near Calexico, Calif., Border Patrol vans return empty to their base after agents comb the desert for illegal crossers.

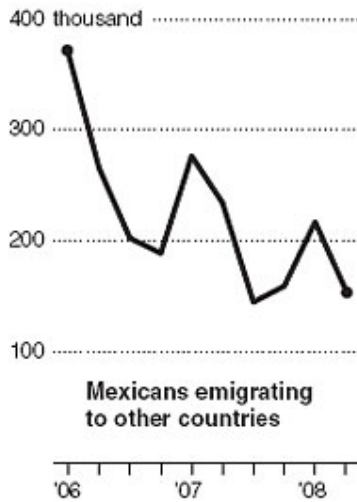
In recent weeks, the spread of [swine flu](#) in Mexico and the government's response of shutting down schools and canceling public gatherings brought migration here and elsewhere nearly to a halt. But demographers expect the deep flu-related decline to be temporary.

With so many Mexicans remaining in their home villages, the population of illegal immigrants in the United States stopped growing and might have slightly decreased in the last year, an abrupt shift after a decade of yearly influxes, research by demographers in the United States shows. Mexicans account for 32 percent of immigrants in the United States, and more than half of them lack legal status, the Pew center has reported.

Still, at least 11 million illegal immigrants remain in the United States, the demographers say. Despite collapsing job markets in construction and other low-wage work, there has been no exodus among Mexicans living in the United States, the Mexican census figures show. About the same number of migrants — 450,000 — returned to Mexico in 2008 as in 2007.

Some researchers argue that the drop in crossings from Mexico proves that tough law enforcement at the border and in American workplaces can reduce illegal immigration in times of rising unemployment in the United States. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

### A Drop in Emigration



Sources: Mexico's National Statistics, Geography and Information Institute; Jeffrey S. Passel, Pew Hispanic Center

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officials stepped up factory and community raids last year, and the Border Patrol expanded its force by 17 percent in one year, to nearly 17,500 agents.

“The latest evidence suggests that you can reverse the flow,” said Steven A. Camarota, a demographer at the Center for Immigration Studies, a research group in Washington that calls for reduced immigration. “It is not set in stone, so with some mix of enforcement and the economy, fewer will come and more will go home.”

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But Wayne Cornelius, the director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego, predicted that if the United States job market revived, border enforcement would become much less of a deterrent.

The center has documented the causes of the decrease in Mexican migration through interviews this year with more than 1,000 Mexicans in California and in a Yucatán village that has been a source of migrants. In the interviews, all of the Mexicans who did set out from Yucatán for the United States reported that they eventually succeeded in crossing.

Mexicans are “not forgoing migration forever,” Professor Cornelius said. “They are hoping that the economy in the United States will improve.”

For now, though, Mexicans like José Luis Z., 16, of the state of Michoacán, are setting the trend. José Luis went to the Albergue del Desierto, a migrant shelter in Mexicali for minor boys, after setting out from home without telling his parents.

But when a job planting trees in Washington State fell through and he heard from migrants of increased patrolling along the border, he decided to head back home.

“I thought it would be easy, but now I see how people suffer,” said José Luis, who asked that his last name be withheld because he was a minor. He said he would go back to picking strawberries in Michoacán, if his furious father did not banish him.

“There is work back home,” José Luis said, “but it doesn’t pay anything.”

The enforcement buildup along the border, which started during the Bush administration, has made many Mexicans think twice about the cost and danger of an illegal trek when no job awaits on the other side, scholars said.

“There is a lack of certainty about jobs, so for the time being it is better to stay home,” said Agustín Escobar Latapí, a sociologist at the Center for Research in Social Anthropology in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Most immigrants now need smugglers to guide them through searing deserts and hidden mountain passes where there are gaps in Border Patrol surveillance. In Mexicali, smugglers’ fees are now \$3,000 to \$5,000 for a trip to Los Angeles, immigrants and social workers said. They reported that

Mexicans' relatives in the United States, struggling to hold on to their own jobs, no longer had money to lend to a family member to pay a smuggler.

Some here in Mexicali said they were not surprised by the low number of Mexicans coming back from the United States. "Our people are not stupid," said Mónica Oropeza Rodríguez, the executive director of the Albergue del Desierto. "There may be a crisis in the United States, but they know that we have been in an economic crisis in Mexico for many years."

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