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**THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO:  
IMMIGRATION REFORM FOR STRONGER ECONOMIC GROWTH**

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By Matthew Denhart

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# INTRODUCTION

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This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the implementation of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. The historic agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico liberalized trade, phased out tariffs and ultimately created the world's largest free-trade zone.

Buoyed by these developments—and the international supply chains which they created—the continent has experienced a manufacturing boom over the past twenty years. Not surprisingly, NAFTA countries combined for an annual economic output of approximately \$17 trillion in 2012, larger than that of the entire European Union.<sup>1</sup>

However, for all its successes, NAFTA largely ignored one critical issue: immigration. In today's global knowledge-based economy, human capital is a critical component needed for economic competitiveness. With more than 450 million residents, North America enjoys a large and diverse labor force, but outdated immigration policies hamstringing the continent from fully capitalizing on the potential of its human assets.

This problem is particularly pronounced when it comes to the United States and Mexico. While immigration policy with respect to Canada remains an important issue, this article will focus specifically on the relationship between the two southernmost NAFTA partners.

To successfully compete with other major world economies, the U.S. and Mexico need compatible immigration systems to foster mutual cooperation and facilitate the easy movement of workers to areas where they are needed most. Unfortunately the current immigration system between these countries—characterized by millions of unauthorized immigrants, expensive and often ineffective border security, and the inability for many residents of either country to work in the other—falls far short of this ideal.

This paper will address the role of Mexican immigrants in the United States, discuss the problems with current immigration policies, and outline major reforms needed to leverage immigration and labor mobility for economic growth across the continent. Not only are the lives of immigrants and the success of businesses on both sides of the border at stake, but also the economic competitiveness of North America as a whole in an increasingly competitive world economy.

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<sup>1</sup> "North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)," Office of the United States Trade Representative, accessed February 25, 2014, <http://www.ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/north-american-free-trade-agreement-nafta>.

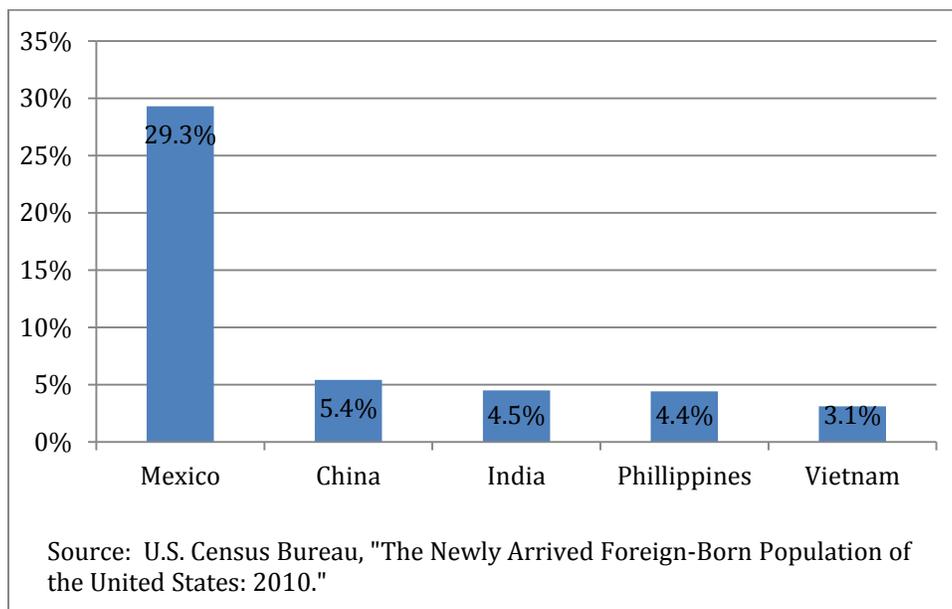
# THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO: IMMIGRATION REFORM FOR STRONGER ECONOMIC GROWTH

By Matthew Denhart<sup>2</sup>

## Section I: The Current State of U.S.-Mexico Immigration

In 2010, approximately 11.6 million Mexican-born immigrants lived in the U.S., accounting for nearly 30 percent of all immigrants living in the U.S. at the time (see Figure 1). This large proportion demonstrates the importance that immigration policy represents for the U.S. and Mexico.

**Figure 1**  
**Percentage Share of Total U.S. Foreign-Born Population by Country of Birth, 2010**



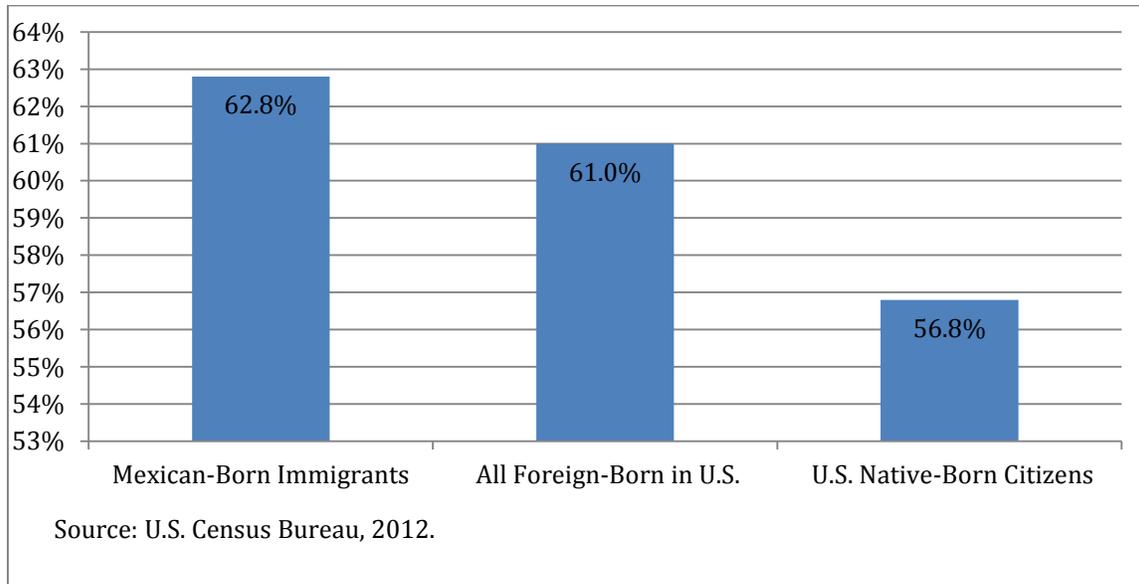
By and large immigrants come to America in search of better lives. The best way to secure that future for themselves and their families is to participate in the U.S. economy—after all, immigrants can command much higher wages in the U.S. than is usually possible in Mexico.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that Mexican-born immigrants accounted for 3.7 percent of the U.S. population, but 4.6 percent of all employed people in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

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Furthermore, data show that immigrants are more likely than native-born U.S. citizens to be employed. In 2012, 63 percent of Mexican immigrants were employed compared to 57 percent of native-born citizens (see Figure 2). Even more surprising: almost one-in-three foreign-born workers in the U.S. was born in Mexico.

**Figure 2**  
**Percentage Share Employed, by Group, 2012**



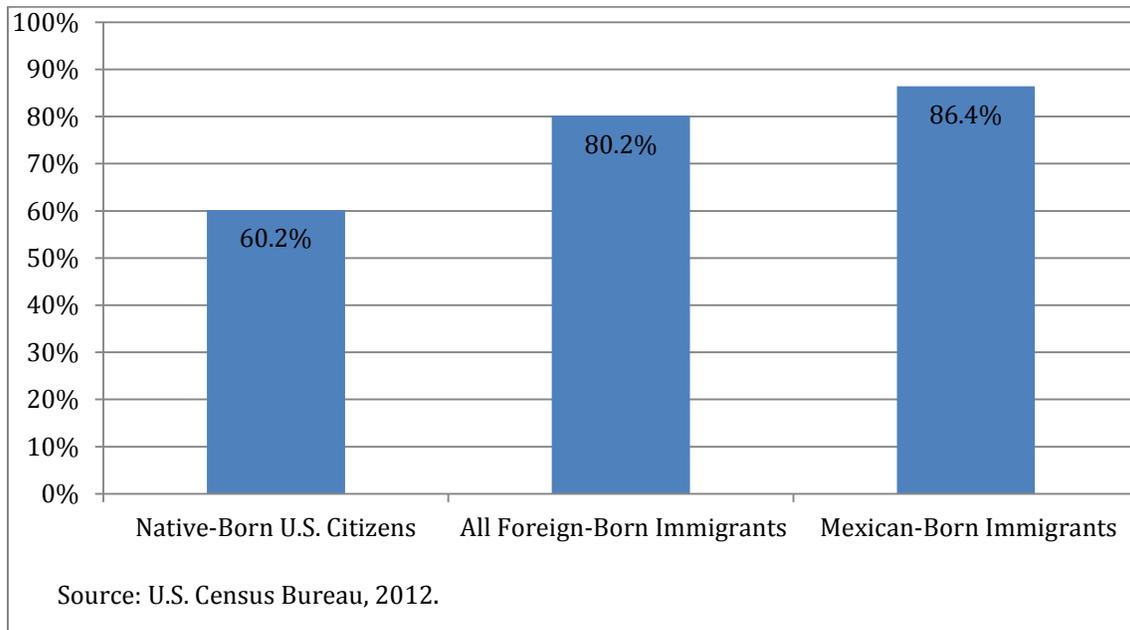
One major reason Mexican-born immigrants are employed at such a disproportionate rate is that they are more likely than native-born U.S. citizens, and even other immigrant groups, to be of working age. An alarming trend in the U.S. has been the aging of its population,<sup>4</sup> which matters from an economic standpoint because the elderly are less able to work, and especially less likely to perform jobs that require physical exertion or stamina.

Immigrants help counteract the problem of an aging U.S. population. Figure 3 shows that immigrants are more likely than native-born Americans to be of working age, defined as being between 18 and 64 years old. In 2012, 86 percent of Mexican-born immigrants in the U.S. were of working age, compared to only 60% of native-born U.S. citizens.

<sup>3</sup> Author's calculations using data from: U.S. Census Bureau. Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Latin America. 2012 American Community Survey.

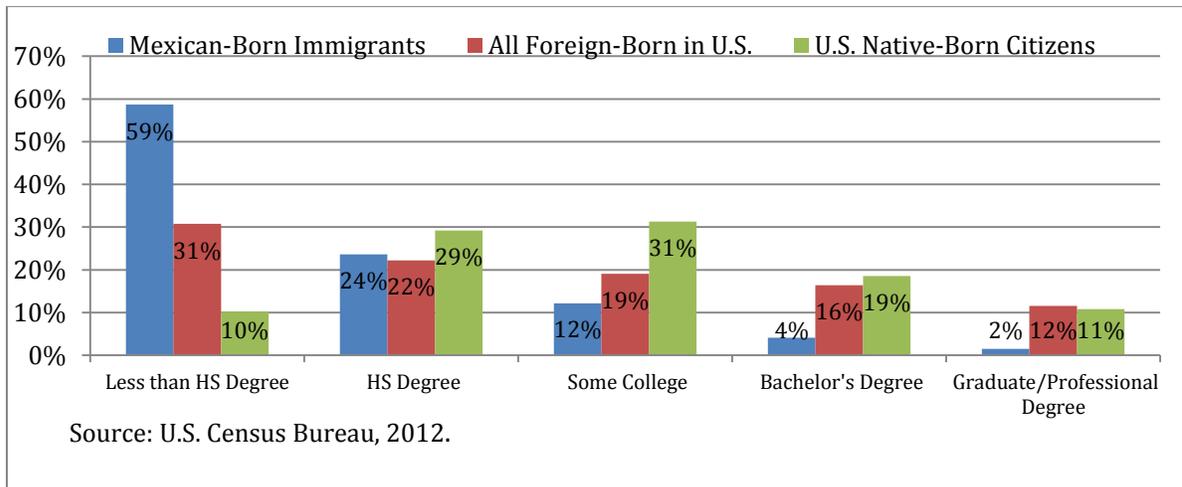
<sup>4</sup> As recently as 1970, less than 10 percent of the U.S. population was over the age of 64. Yet, by 2010 that figure stood at 13 percent and is projected to climb rapidly: by 2040 more than one-in-five people in the U.S. will be over the age of 64. Data from: "Projected Future Growth of the Older Population." Administration on Aging. Accessed March 3, 2014.  
[http://www.aoa.gov/AoAroot/Aging\\_Statistics/future\\_growth/future\\_growth.aspx#hispanic](http://www.aoa.gov/AoAroot/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/future_growth.aspx#hispanic).

**Figure 3**  
**Percentage of Each Group that is of Working Age (18-64 years of age), 2012**



Mexican immigrants are employed in virtually every sector of the U.S. economy, serving as business executives, entrepreneurs, doctors and teachers. However, the vast majority of Mexican-born immigrants fill voids in the so-called lesser-skilled areas of the U.S. labor market. The reason is that they possess, on average, less education compared to native-born U.S. citizens and immigrants from other countries. Figure 4 shows that almost 60 percent of Mexican-born immigrants lack even a high school degree, only 4 percent have a bachelor's degree, and less than 2 percent have a graduate or professional degree. These figures greatly underperform the educational attainment of native-born U.S. citizens and immigrants as a whole. Clearly working with Mexico on improving educational systems and workforce training should be a top priority for the U.S. when it comes to greater North American economic integration.

**Figure 4**  
**Highest Level of Education Attained, by Group (25+ years of age), 2012**



But even with generally low levels of education, Mexican-born workers still play an important role in the U.S. economy. As Americans have gained more and more education over the past decades, blue-collar jobs have become less attractive to them. This reality means that U.S. citizens and immigrants, especially Mexican-born immigrants, generally do not compete with one another for jobs. Rather they complement each other by working in different sectors of the economy. While native-born U.S. citizens specialize in occupations that reward things like their educational training, fluency in English, familiarity with U.S. culture and informal norms, immigrants find work in areas that require more physical exertion or stamina relative to communication skills.

Figure 5 displays the occupational breakdown for Mexican-born immigrants compared to all foreign-born workers in the U.S. and native-born U.S. citizens. Service jobs are the most common occupation for Mexican-born immigrant workers, with almost one-in-three working in this area. The next two most typical occupational categories for Mexican-born immigrants include “natural resources, construction and maintenance” and “production, transportation, and material moving.”

While it is not uncommon for immigrants of any background to fill these types of blue-collar jobs, Mexican-born immigrants are disproportionately clustered in these occupations. For instance, almost 30 percent of all foreign-born workers in the U.S. work in “management, business, science, and arts” positions, but the same is true of only 9 percent of Mexican-born immigrants. Similarly, some 17.3 percent of all foreign-born workers in the U.S. serve in “sales and office” positions, while that is true of only 12 percent of Mexican-born workers in the U.S.

Mexican-born immigrant workers are especially vital to the U.S. agricultural sector. For the period 2007-09, Mexican-born immigrants accounted for 68 percent of hired farmworkers in the U.S.<sup>5</sup> and as recently as 2001-02 an astounding 73 percent of U.S. farmworkers were born in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> In the future, for sectors like U.S. agriculture to thrive, an ample supply of willing immigrant workers will be necessary.

**Figure 5**  
**Occupational Categories of Workers by Group, 2012**

| Occupational Category                        | Mexican-Born Immigrants | All Foreign-Born Immigrants | Native-Born U.S. Citizens |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Management, Business, Science, Arts          | 9.0%                    | 29.5%                       | 37.4%                     |
| Sales and Office                             | 12.0%                   | 17.3%                       | 25.9%                     |
| Service                                      | 31.6%                   | 25.1%                       | 17.0%                     |
| Production, Transportation, Material Moving  | 22.4%                   | 15.5%                       | 11.5%                     |
| Natural Resources, Construction, Maintenance | 24.9%                   | 12.5%                       | 8.3%                      |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012.

One important trend for U.S. policymakers to keep in mind is the slowing rate of Mexican migration to the U.S. The 1990s saw strong economic growth in the U.S. and economic turmoil in Mexico (with the peso crisis in 1995). A major consequence was that migration to the U.S. from Mexico spiked. Over the course of that decade, annual migration to the U.S. from Mexico increased from under 400,000 migrants in 1991 to around 750,000 migrants in 2000.

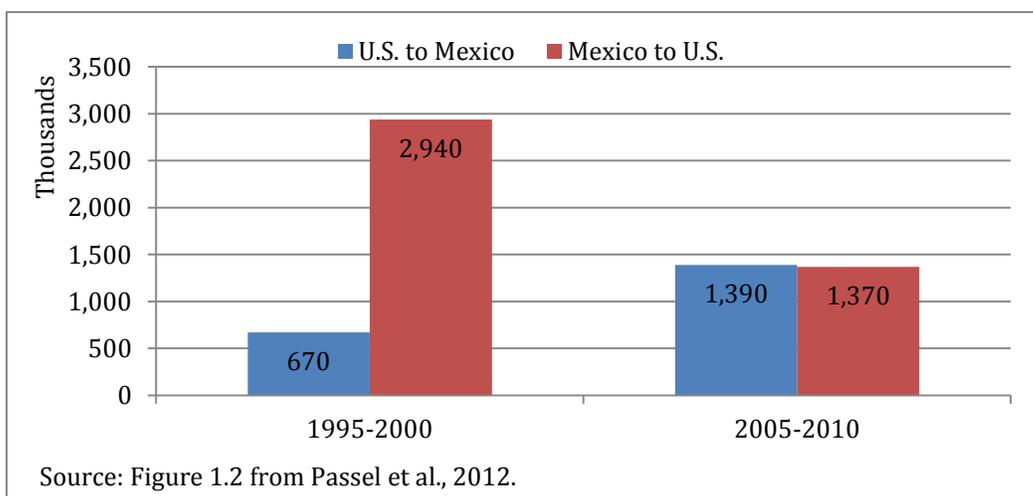
<sup>5</sup> *Facts About Farmworkers*. Report. National Center for Farmworker Health, 2012. <http://www.ncfh.org/docs/fs-Facts%20about%20Farmworkers.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Carroll et al., *A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farm Workers*, report no. 9 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005), accessed March 3, 2014, [http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/report9/naws\\_rpt9.pdf](http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/report9/naws_rpt9.pdf).

Between 2000 and 2007, with a somewhat slower growing U.S. economy and increased U.S. border security in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, migration from Mexico to the U.S. leveled off. In 2007, less than 300,000 Mexicans migrated to the U.S.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. financial crisis in 2008-09 and sluggish recovery ever since—especially in the construction sector, which is a major employer of Mexican-born immigrants—has further slowed migration in recent years. In fact, data show that for the period 2005-10, net-migration of Mexicans to the U.S. has actually been *negative*. During these years, 1.39 million people moved to Mexico from the U.S. while only 1.37 million made the more traditional move to the U.S. from Mexico (see Figure 6).<sup>8</sup>

In the George W. Bush Institute’s 2012 book, “The 4% Solution,” Nobel Laureate economist, Gary Becker, expresses some concern at what this slowing rate of migration to the U.S. could mean for the economy. He concludes that in light of the diminishing migration to the U.S. from Mexico and other Latin American countries, and in order “to spur its own economy and secure a better economic future, the United States may need to increase the number of immigrants who can enter the country legally.”<sup>9</sup> In the next section we turn to Becker’s suggestion of increasing legal immigration.

**Figure 6**  
**Number of People Moving Between the U.S. and Mexico, 1995-2000 and 2005-10**



<sup>7</sup> Daniel Chiquiar and Alejandrina Salcedo, *Mexican Migration to the United States: Underlying Economic Factors and Possible Scenarios for Future Flows*, report (Migration Policy Institute, 2013), accessed February 27, 2014, <http://migrationpolicy.org/research/mexican-migration-united-states-underlying-economic-factors-and-possible-scenarios-future>.

<sup>8</sup> Passel, Jeffrey, D’Vera Cohn, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera. *Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero—and Perhaps Less*. Report. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2012. [http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2012/04/Mexican-migrants-report\\_final.pdf](http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2012/04/Mexican-migrants-report_final.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Gary S. Becker, “Chapter 17: When Illegals Stop Crossing the Border,” in *The 4% Solution: How to Unleash the Economic Boom America Needs in the 21st Century* (Crown Publishing Group, 2012), pg. 243.

## Section II: Present Day Immigration Challenges for the U.S. and Mexico

The current U.S. immigration system suffers from a classic economics problem: demand dramatically exceeds supply. In this case, the high “demand” refers to the millions of people around the world who desperately want to work and live in the U.S. The “supply” refers to the greatly limited number of visas and green cards that the U.S. government makes available for people to migrate to its country legally.

Under current U.S. immigration law, Congress determines each year the maximum number of visas and green cards it will make available. A common complaint is that there are never enough visas and green cards made available to satisfy demand. The data bear this out. As of November 2013, an estimated 4.3 million would-be immigrants worldwide were waiting for their visas to be processed by the U.S. Department of State.<sup>10</sup> The reason for the backlog, of course, is that each year thousands more foreigners apply for visas than there are available slots according to statutory limits.

Contributing to the backlog, the U.S. places a 7 percent per-country quota on the available visas and green cards. This means that every country—regardless of its total population or its citizens’ demand for a U.S. visa or green card—has access to a maximum of 7 percent of the U.S. visas or green cards available in any given year.<sup>11</sup> While this per-country quota was no doubt established with good intentions to encourage fairness, it makes little economic sense and is especially problematic for countries like Mexico, where millions of people would like to migrate to the U.S. In fact, in November 2013, Mexico had 1.3 million would-be immigrants on waiting lists for visa processing—by far the most of any country in the world.<sup>12</sup> What’s more, many of those would-be immigrants had been waiting for up to 20 years for their visas to process.<sup>13</sup>

To make matters worse, current U.S. immigration policy gives low preference to work-based immigration, instead favoring immigrants with existing family ties in the U.S. Figure 7 shows that among immigrants admitted to the U.S. in 2003, only 11.6 percent gained admittance through an employment-based preference. Meanwhile, 22.5 percent were sponsored by a family member and another 47.1 percent were granted a visa or green card thanks to the immediate relative preference.

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<sup>10</sup> *Annual Report of Immigrant Visa Applicants in the Family-sponsored and Employment-based Preferences Registered at the National Visa Center as of November 1, 2013*, report (U.S. Department of State, 2013), accessed March 14, 2014, <http://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/Immigrant-Statistics/WaitingListItem.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> “Per Country Limit.” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Accessed February 25, 2014. <http://www.uscis.gov/tools/glossary/country-limit>.

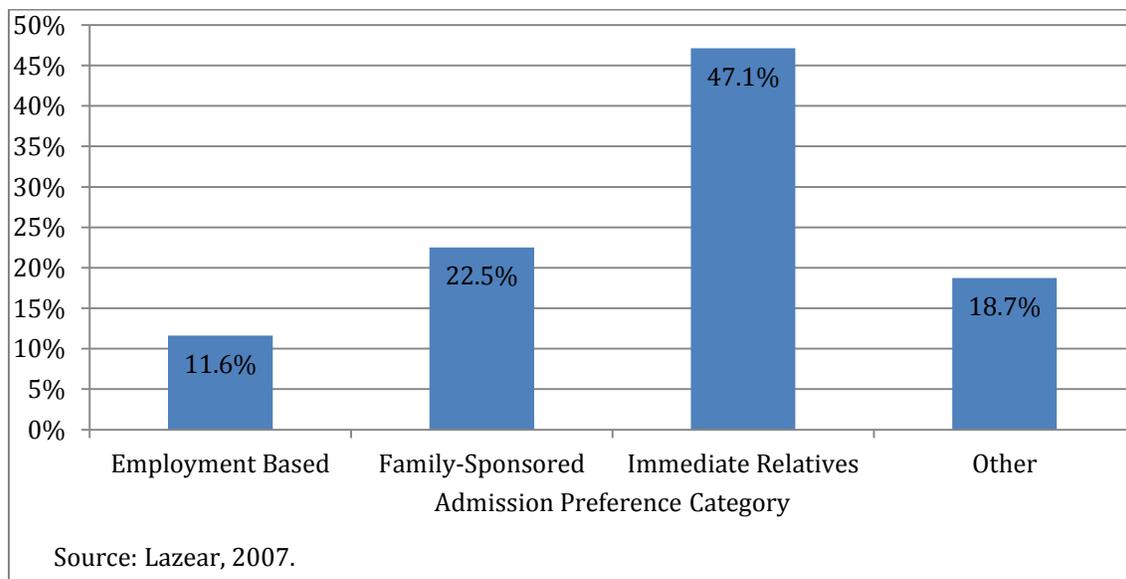
<sup>12</sup> *Annual Report of Immigrant Visa Applicants in the Family-sponsored and Employment-based Preferences Registered at the National Visa Center as of November 1, 2013*, report (U.S. Department of State, 2013), accessed March 14, 2014, <http://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/Immigrant-Statistics/WaitingListItem.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Claire Bergeron, *Going to the Back of the Line: A Primer on Lines, Visa Categories, and Wait Times*, report, 1st ed. (Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, 2013), pg. 3-4.

Among Mexican-born immigrants, the numbers are even more skewed. In 2003, less than 3 percent of legally admitted Mexican-born immigrants to the U.S. were admitted on an employment-based preference. On the other hand, almost 94 percent gained access because of family connections in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

While any immigration system must maintain a family reunification feature, the U.S. system's anti-worker bias is harming economic competitiveness. Immigrants coming to the U.S. on family-based preferences are disproportionately low-skilled with little educational training. Meanwhile, employment-based immigrants tend to be more highly educated, and are therefore more productive workers. To be competitive in the world economy, U.S. companies need to be able to attract the best talent the world has to offer. By greatly restricting entry to the very immigrants who help drive the economy, the U.S. is unnecessarily holding itself back.

**Figure 7**  
**Immigrants to the U.S. by Class of Admission, 2003**



High levels of unauthorized immigration are the most obvious consequence of America's cumbersome immigration system. With highly restricted means for coming to the U.S. legally, millions of immigrants have resorted to unauthorized entry. By 2012, an estimated 11.7 million unauthorized immigrants were living in the U.S., and a majority (52 percent) of them were Mexican-born immigrants.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Edward P. Lazear, "Mexican Assimilation in the United States," ed. George J. Borjas, in *Mexican Immigration to the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pg. 121, <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c0099>.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel, D'Vera Cohn, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, *Population Decline of Unauthorized Immigrants Stalls, May Have Reversed*, report, September 23, 2013,

Such high levels of unauthorized immigration are problematic for many reasons. First, unauthorized immigration erodes the respect for the rule of law and undermines America's immigration system. Widespread unauthorized immigration has also led to a dramatic increase in costly border security. The U.S. now has more than 20,000 border patrol agents<sup>16</sup> and the total enacted budget of the U.S. Border Patrol was more than \$3.5 billion in 2011, up from \$452 million in 1990 (in 2011 inflation-adjusted dollars).<sup>17</sup> Not only is this border security expensive, it also has created dangerous and sometimes life-threatening conditions for immigrants who persist in attempting to cross the border.

Unauthorized immigration is not ideal from an economic standpoint either. To maximize the growth potential of any economy, it is best to have workers performing the tasks at which they are best suited. For example, a computer programmer should work with computers, a bricklayer should lay bricks, and a teacher should work with students. However, when immigrants are unauthorized, they have fewer employment options and often must take whatever job can be found even if the job does not best suit their skills. This restrained labor mobility harms the overall efficiency of the economy and keeps economic growth from being as strong as it otherwise could be.

Furthermore, unauthorized immigration makes hiring more difficult for U.S. employers. Most employers strive to comply with all laws. However, it can be very difficult for an employer to identify an unauthorized immigrant – particularly if the immigrant possesses forged documents. In such a case, employers can find themselves in a “catch-22”, where refusing to hire an immigrant who turns out to actually be authorized could lead to discrimination charges. But, then again, hiring an immigrant—even unknowingly—who turns out to be unauthorized could result in an audit by the federal government and substantial financial penalties.

### **Section III: The Way Forward: Policy Reform to Unleash Economic Growth**

Substantial reform is clearly needed to fix America's broken immigration system. Outlining an entirely new immigration system is beyond the scope of this article. However, two components of domestic immigration reform are especially critical to better integrating the economies of the U.S. and Mexico: (1) using policy as a means to encourage more high-skilled immigration, and (2) creating a more dynamic guest-worker program. Both of these components are described in more detail.

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<http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/09/23/population-decline-of-unauthorized-immigrants-stalls-may-have-reversed/>.

<sup>16</sup> *United States Border Patrol Border Patrol Agent Staffing by Fiscal Year*, report, accessed March 1, 2014, <http://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/U.S.%20Border%20Patrol%20Fiscal%20Year%20Staffing%20Statistics%201992-2013.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> *Enacted Border Patrol Program Budget by Fiscal Year*, report (U.S. Border Patrol), <http://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/BP%20Budget%20History%201990-2013.pdf>.

*Encourage high-skill immigration.*

U.S. immigration policies discourage high-skilled immigration. This perverse bias in immigration policy is harming U.S. economic competitiveness and must be addressed in a meaningful way.

A few modest suggestions:

- *Give greater preference to employment-based immigration* – The current U.S. immigration system allocates visas and green cards primarily to promote family reunification. In 2010, some 73 percent of U.S. green cards went for this purpose. Another 15 percent of green cards were designated for humanitarian purposes, while only 7 percent were for work-based immigration.<sup>18</sup>

While family reunification is a noble goal, and should be maintained at a certain level, employment-based immigration must get much more priority than is currently the case. Other countries understand this. In 2010, for instance, South Korea, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom all allocated more than half of their available green cards to employment-based immigration.

Finding a better balance between family reunification and work-based immigration would also benefit the U.S.-Mexico immigration situation. After all, America's family reunification preferences are a main reason an overwhelming percentage of Mexican-born immigrants to the U.S. are lesser-skilled. In a country as large as Mexico, there are certainly many highly-trained workers who would like to work in the U.S. However, if they do not have existing family connections in the U.S., they are greatly stymied by current laws.

- *Expand the H1-B visa program* – The H1-B visa program is the primary vehicle by which high-skilled workers can work legally in the U.S. The program applies to employers in speciality occupations that require “the application of a body of highly specialized knowledge and the attainment of at least a bachelor's degree or its equivalent.”<sup>19</sup>

While this program is a good one in theory, in practice it suffers from a number of crucial limitations, in particular its low annual cap. The current annual cap of

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<sup>18</sup> “Trends in International Migration Flows and in the Immigrant Population,” in International Migration Outlook 2012 (OECD Publishing, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> “U.S. Department of Labor - Wage and Hour Division (WHD) - H-1B Program,” U.S. Department of Labor - Wage and Hour Division (WHD) - H-1B Program, accessed March 05, 2014, <http://www.dol.gov/whd/immigration/h1b.htm>.

65,000 H1-B visas is dramatically inadequate. In 2013 the statutory cap on H1-B applications was met within one week of the opening of the filing period.<sup>20</sup>

Foreigners who qualify for an H1-B visa are the exact type of workers whom the U.S. should want. They are highly educated, and contribute much to innovation in the economy. Capping H1-B visas at all is a suspect policy, and a cap as low as 65,000 is particularly misguided. After all, the H1-B visa program had no cap before 1990, and even since 1990 the cap has been higher than the current 65,000 level.<sup>21</sup> If there is to be a cap on H1-B visas, it should be raised considerably and tied more closely to demand for these high-skilled foreign-born workers.

Another problem with the H1-B visa is that it has a six-year limit, which means that H1-B visa holders wanting to work in the U.S. for a longer period must apply for a green card for permanent resident status. Yet the application process is difficult and does not guarantee success. Thus, under current policy U.S. companies recruit H1-B workers, and train them, but must worry about these workers being forced to leave the country after six years. This is not ideal for either the employer or the H1-B workers.

- *Allow foreign-born college graduates to remain in the U.S.* – One of America’s greatest strengths is its ability to attract talented young people to study at its universities. Almost one-in five international college students<sup>22</sup> across the world choose to study in the U.S. This is by far the greatest proportion of any country. Yet recent data suggest that America’s advantage is shrinking. In 2000, approximately 22 percent of all international college students studied in the U.S., but by 2009 that figure had dropped to 18 percent.<sup>23</sup>

Even so, each year thousands of foreign-born students earn undergraduate and advanced degrees from U.S. colleges and universities, often in critical fields like science, technology, engineering and mathematics. However, for many of these graduates there are few options to remain and work in the U.S., so they are forced to return home. A common refrain in immigration reform circles is to “staple a green card to every diploma” of graduating foreign-born students.

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<sup>20</sup> “H-1B Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 Cap Season,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, April 14, 2013, <http://www.uscis.gov/working-united-states/temporary-workers/h-1b-specialty-occupations-and-fashion-models/h-1b-fiscal-year-fy-2014-cap-season>.

<sup>21</sup> Suzette Brooks Masters and Ted Ruthizer, *The H-1B Straitjacket Why Congress Should Repeal the Cap on Foreign-Born Highly Skilled Workers*, issue brief no. 7 (Cato Institute, 2000), <http://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/tbp-007.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Defined as tertiary students who were enrolled in a higher-education institution located outside their country of citizenship.

<sup>23</sup> OECD. *Education at a Glance 2011* (OECD Publishing, 2011). <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/48631079.pdf>.

*Create a better guest worker program for lesser-skilled immigrants.*

U.S. immigration policy must acknowledge the reality that many, if not most, unauthorized immigrants from Mexico come to the U.S. to fill seasonal or temporary jobs. As emphasized throughout this article, it is good for the U.S. economy to have these workers. But what's needed is a new policy mechanism that encourages circularity about the border, i.e., a mechanism that allows immigrants to fill temporary jobs in the U.S. but encourages reverse migration when jobs are not available.

The obvious solution to widespread unauthorized immigration from Mexico, therefore, is the implementation of a new guest worker program. A guest worker program does currently exist for lesser-skilled immigrants, the H-2A and H-2B programs.

Unfortunately, these programs are so insufficient and bureaucratic that they are rarely used. With this in mind, policymakers would be wise to replace the current program with an entirely new guest worker program that is robust, flexible and user-friendly. Each of these crucial characteristics is described in greater detail:

- *Robust* – A new guest worker program should provide temporary visas to a large number of immigrant workers. In addition to agriculture, many other U.S. industries—ranging from construction and food preparation to healthcare—often report trouble recruiting qualified workers. Immigrant workers are ready and willing to fill these jobs. An expanded guest worker program must provide a sufficient number of visas each year to satisfy the demand.
- *Flexible* – The new program should provide much greater flexibility for both employers and guest workers. Employers should have the flexibility to hire workers for more than one season at a time without being forced to file a new petition with the federal government. Guest workers should have the flexibility to change employers. That is to say, their guest worker visas should be portable, allowing them to move between employers in search of the best labor-market opportunity.
- *User-friendly* – Finally, the new program must be much more user-friendly. The application process should be straight-forward and easy to navigate. Rather than involving multiple agencies of the federal government, as is the case currently with the H-2A and H-2B programs, the application process should be streamlined. Employers should be able to complete the application electronically and easily track its status. Reducing the burdens associated with participating in the guest worker program is one of the most crucial steps to gaining greater program buy-in from employers.

## Conclusion

The U.S. and Mexico have a historic opportunity to use immigration reform as an opportunity to more fully integrate their economies and help North America increase its global economic competitiveness.

The U.S.-Mexico border is the largest immigration corridor in the world, and Mexican-born immigrants already contribute much to the U.S. economy. However, these contributions are in spite of current U.S. immigration policies, rather than a result of them. In particular, America's immigration policies give low preference to work-based immigration on both the high- and lesser-skill levels.

With no satisfactory legal pathways to come to the U.S. to fill available jobs, many Mexican-born immigrants have reverted to illegal means to work in America. Unfortunately, this situation has come to define much of the rhetoric around immigration reform.

Yet there is much hope. Immigration reform that fosters mutual cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico is possible. In considering immigration reform, U.S. policymakers should keep in mind two critical components: the need to give more weight to high-skill immigration and the need for a workable guest worker program for lesser-skilled foreign workers. These reforms are necessary at a very fundamental level, but will also do much to further improve the immigration situation between the U.S. and Mexico.

North America's large and diverse population is a tremendous asset. After all, an economy's greatest strength is always its people. The twentieth anniversary of NAFTA is an opportune time to enact immigration reform that will move North America further along its path of economic integration.

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