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PUSH FACTOR IN MEXICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES: THE BACK--ETC(U)
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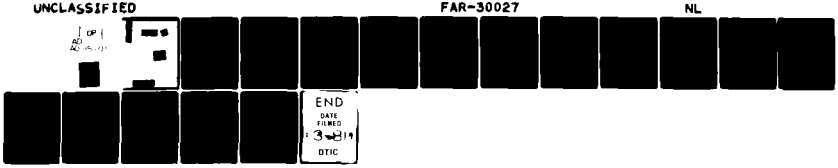

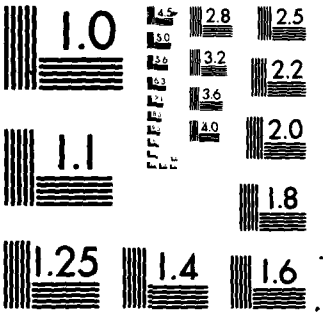

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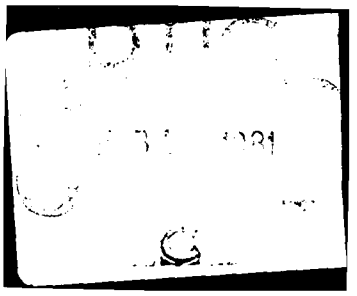

PUSH FACTORS IN MEXICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES:

The Background to Migration, a Summary of Three Studies with Policy Implications.

by

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The report is a summary and synthesis of the three studies comprising the contract/project: push factors in Mexican migration to the United States. Each of the reports is summarized, and then implications for policy on Mexican migration to the United States are presented.

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The Background to Mexican Migration

Three independent but related reports comprise the project, "Push factors in Mexican migration to the United States." The reports are independent in that each deals with a separate data base, asks different questions, uses different analytic methods, and is carried-out by different people. They all deal with the migration of Mexicans to the United States. The three projects are limited in much of the data used in the primary analyses or had to be collected in connection with purposes other than the study of internal or external migration in Mexico. On the other hand, the three projects are unique in that they offer a blend of ideas from economists and anthropologists. Quite often only the former is offered, while an anthropological perspective is left wanting.

The project director has served as a liaison among the three separate projects as well as written this summary. I would like to acknowledge the assistance and support of the director of the Institute of Latin American Studies, Professor William Glade, his staff, and Mr. Daniel Fendrick of the Office of External Research, Department of State, who has been encouraging, helpful and patient -- all in the extreme.

The three projects of the contract are included in the accompanying reports:

(1) Kenneth D. Roberts, with the assistance of Gustavo Treviño: Agrarian structure and labor migration in rural Mexico--The case of circular migration of undocumented workers to the United States.

(2) Henry A. Selby and Arthur D. Murphy: The role of the Mexican urban household in decisions about migration to the United States.

(3) Michael E. Conroy, Mario Coria Salas and Felipe Vila González: Socio-economic incentives for migration from Mexico to the United States -- Magnitude, recent changes, and policy implications.

In this introduction I will summarize and synthesize the three projects, with specific emphasis on implications for policy on Mexican migration to the United States.

The Agrarian Structure Project

Roberts originally intended to examine the roles played by different sets of agricultural conditions, or agricultural sub-systems, on seasonal and permanent migration to the United States. However, restricting the analysis to migration to the United States would have made it difficult to distinguish between factors which cause households to work off-farm and those which bring about migration to the United States. To this end, Roberts evaluated the demand for farm labor and off-farm wage labor among rural, landholding households in four zones of Mexico: (1) the Bajío, Guanajuato, a rich agricultural region with many small landholders to provide many migrants to the United States; (2) the Mixteca Baja, an extremely poor region of Oaxaca, which represents the lowest level of the rural socioeconomic development in Mexico; (3) Las Huastecas, an indigenous zone in San Luis Potosí, a state closer to the United States border and one known

to send relatively large numbers of migrants to the United States; and (4) Valsequillo, a densely populated area in Puebla. Roberts describes each region with the following variables: the characteristics of the region, farm income and labor use, off-farm income and labor, and migration. He then offers a synthesis of the observations for the four areas. The following summarizes the major findings:

(1) The Bajío has the highest farm income of the four zones compared. This refutes the notion that it is the poorest regions which contribute most heavily to the immigration stream. The region is rich and exporting labor.

(2) The Bajío and Valsequillo have the highest degree of capitalist penetration, both in the agricultural and commercial/industrial sectors. And, it is capitalist penetration with its attendant processes of capital intensification and market-oriented cultivation that is generating the flow of migrants.

(3) The Bajío and Valsequillo also have high off-farm income, and have a larger percentage of households with workers off-farm. Migration to the United States is, apparently, only part of a diversified strategy of seeking employment where it can be found. (Selby and Murphy's results are exactly the same.)

(4) In contrast, household farm labor inputs are larger in Las Huastecas and the Mixteca Baja, the two primarily indigenous zones, reflecting the labor intensity of subsistence agriculture and the degree to which it absorbs "potential migrants."

(5) Households in the Bajío are more efficiently organized for agriculture than those in the other areas. Ironically, <u>only households in the Bajío engage in United States migration</u>.

(6) Households in the Bajío are larger and more mature than in the other zones. There are more extended families as well. The sender households are much bigger than nonsenders in the Bajío, and, household size is the only variable distinguishing between households which send migrants to the United States, and those who do not. (Selby and Murphy found a similar trend in their analysis.)

The Report on Urban Households

Selby and Murphy examined the characteristics of sender and nonsender households and families in order to understand, how the decision was made to migrate to the United States. Data for five cities are examined: Querétaro, Qro., San Luis Potosí, S.L.P., Mazatlán, Sin., Mexicali, B.D., and Tampico, Tamps. Of the five cities, Mexicali is economically the best-off, while San Luis Potosí is the poorest (Conroy's report rank orders the cities the same as does Unikel.) Households that send migrants to the United States (senders or sender households) are compared to households that do not send migrants to the United States (non-senders). Results of the comparisons are summarized below:

(1) Sender households are migratory households. They not only send migrants to the United States, but they also send disproportionate numbers of migrants to others parts of Mexico. This accords with Roberts' finding that the Bajío sender families send migrants elsewhere than the U.S.

(2) Sender households are better housed and have a slightly better life-style by Mexican Standards compared to nonsender households. They have significantly higher levels of educational attain-

ment, as well. This too accords with Roberts' finding that it is not the poorest households which send migrants.

(3) Sender households have reached a more developed state in the domestic cycle, i.e., the heads of the household are older and the family is more likely to have completed fertility.

(4) Sender and non-sender households do not differ in genealogical complexity. Selby and Murphy had originally felt that extended, genealogically complex households would be formed to maximize the efficient allocation of workers to domestic chores and the labor market. Not true. Maiden aunts or other female relations are not brought in to tend small children.

(5) Sender households can and do deploy more workers into the work force than non-sender households. In this sense, they are more efficient. Their <u>households</u> (those who reside in the house) are for example, not larger than nonsenders. Their <u>families</u> (counting all the family members who are reported to belong to the household) are much larger. Previously larger sender households shuck off members into the migrant stream to bring their numbers down to those of nonsenders. Senders and nonsenders do differ in dependency ratios: sender households have a smaller number of children under 14 and a larger number of workers. Thus, household size is not a factor per se; age and developmental state are distinguishing characteristics of sender households.

(6) Although there is no significant difference between median incomes of the heads of sender and non-sender households, sender households tend to have a higher total income and income per adult.

(7) Tampico is a somewhat special case among the five cities compared, but some commonalities are found. First, sender families in Tampico are superior. Jobs held by the heads of sender households as well as by second workers in these households are better than those held by corresponding members in nonsender households. This is probably related to the development of the petroleum industry in the Tampico area. In contrast there is little difference in the jobs of heads and second workers of sender and non-sender households in the other four cities.

(8) When the data for the five cities are grouped into four economic classes (very poor, poor, barely adequate, and making it), sender households are underrepresented in the poorest class, and overrepresented in the other three better-off economic categories. Thus, it appears that migration is not a strategy for the very poor in these five cities.

Selby and Murphy conclude that migration to the U.S. is a decision taken by the most successful (and numerous) of the families of the poor in an attempt not to earn money and start a new life and a new family in the U.S., but rather to maintain the old family in Mexico by all means at their disposal. They note the familiar irony in this attempt: in order to save the family some members are lost to a foreign culture.

The Push-Pull Project

Conroy and colleagues examined socioeconomic incentives to migration to the United States, specifically looking at wage differentials for low-skill laborers within different areas of Mexico and

through the southwestern part of the United States. Recent devaluations of the Mexican peso were found to be extremely important in dramatically enhancing the values of United States wages. Geographic information from the southwestern United States and from all of Mexico (by municipio), including income and minimum wage data were used for the analysis. The data were adjusted accordingly to account for recent changes. The following summarizes some of the major observations of the project:

(1) Estimated wages for low-skill workers in Mexico have increased, after adjustment for inflation and interregional variation, by almost 30% between 1969 and 1978. In contrast, estimated comparable real wages for low skill workers in the Southwestern United States have decreased by more than 12% over the same time interval.

(2) The devaluation of the Mexican peso since 1975 has offset the apparent increases in estimated wages of low-skill workers in Mexico.

(3) Thus, although the changes in estimated real wages for low-skill workers in Mexico and estimated comparable wages in the southwestern United States imply a decrease in the incentive for permanent migration to the United States, the devaluation of the Mexican peso has encouraged an incentive for temporary migration to the United States.

(4) Using a composite index of socioeconomic variables relevant to migration decisions (e.g., per capita income, medical facilities per capita, industria production, etc.), there was a marked contrast between Mexico and the southwestern United States in relative socioeconomic conditions.

(5) The importance of the "cost" of migrating cannot be assessed in the data set, but fragmentary evidence suggests it may be expensive. However, the number of migrants to the United States who utilize contacts or contracts to come to the United States is not known.

Conroy's analysis was exploratory, if thorough, in the sense that he provided a powerful set of tools for empirically testing all-variants of the push-pull hypothesis. In the absence of good data on flow rates, origin and destination, however, a subsequent project to relate INS questionnaire data to relative attractiveness and retentiveness, or to origins and destinations would yield, quite easily, very rich results.

Policy Implications

These three studies taken together suggest a number of common themes and policy implications.

(1) There is no stemming the tide of Mexican migration. Conroy's study shows that migrants are going to come; only their numbers are going to fluctuate depending on economic conditions that change the attractiveness of the United States as a place to come to, and the costs (coyotes, papers, distance) within Mexico incurred by the prospective migrants. There are two ways to slow down the flow. The passage through the frontier area could be made so hazardous that the coyote's fee become prohibitive, or alternatively direct pressures would be brought upon the coyotes by the Mexican authorities to drive up their price. Or, another Macnamara line could be set up along the United States-Mexican border. Both these suggestions are politically unacceptable. The United States has to live with the fact that it is going to experience a flow of temporary migrants who come here to work. Parenthetically, it should perhaps be noted that this pattern is in contrast to past migrations to the United States, which were generally permanent.

(2) The flow will continue because it is determined mainly by forces outside the control of the United States, except to the degree that the United States controls world commodity markets and thereby influences international economic conditions. Increasing capitalization of the rural areas of Mexico, which is the way that Mexico has chosen to relieve the poverty of its rural areas, guarantees that farming families will generate a migratory flow as a response

to increased tightening of economic conditions at home. A similar pattern is found among urban families in response to both economic conditions and large families. Selby and Murphy found that the most important determinant of urban emigration was the large family. And, the old INPI slogan of "la familia pequeña vive mejor" is wrong; large families live better. Children, under present (unsatisfactory) conditions, do not cost that much to raise, and they can go to work as early as 14 years of age. They are an abiding source of solace and pesos to the family that is lucky enough to have them. So having many children is a boon to the poor. And, the response to tightness in the employment market is migration ... everywhere ... including the United States. This is a pattern that may go back to the period of Tenochtitlan.

(3) A collateral point, viewing migration from its origin, means seeing migration as a household decision, not an individual one. Households send out their members in order to preserve the family. Migrants do not set off, so to say, with their possessions over their shoulder, to seek their fortune. They are emissaries of their own households and families, and they will remit income to them in order to preserve those institutions.[1]

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[1]We distinguish between family and household. The family is a kinship unit; the household is a residential unit. Briefly: the dog belongs to your household, and so does the maid if you have one, but neither belongs to your family. The family is defined as the extended family, i.e. a man, his wife, their married children, spouses and children, and their unmarried children.

(4) Once one sees the Mexican context of migration, one sees that some important problems are being ignored in Mexico that could form the basis of a humanitarian, cooperative policy on migration. The Mexican government is embarrassed by the fact that as many as one in five Mexican workers works in the United States. We could conceivably be embarrassed by the fact that we are party to an arrangement whereby the Mexican family is broken up, children missing their fathers (and increasingly their mothers) when there is so much emphasis in Mexican culture on the integrity of the family, and so much social and career planning is done with the family in mind. Some important decisions concerning the children are more difficult to make in the absence of a parent, for example, major medical or educational decisions. There are costs associated with the increasing reliance (in areas of high migration) on United States earnings, so much so that when the migrant father is at home, in Mexico, he may not engage in productive work, but may live off his accrued earnings until it is time to go back to the United States. Since the work ethic is central to Mexican culture, Mexican fathers who do not work are not proper Mexican parents to their children, ... or so the argument could easily be made.

The near-obsessive focus in United States thinking about the effects of the migrant worker on the United States has prevented us from seeing the impact of the migration process on the Mexican family and household. Many of the more serious effects of migration are mitigated by the fact that the vast majority of migrants are

temporary.[2]

(5) Migration is not a desperation strategy undertaken by the desperately poor. Both Roberts' study and Selby and Murphy's, covering rural areas and urban areas respectively, point this out, and there is evidence to support this interpretation in the general literature on migration. For example, in the urban case, households that sent migrants to the United States were in the 30th to the 80th percentile range for household income. Migration apparently is a rational strategy undertaken by families who want to better their position in Mexico. This means that as soon as the economic differentials between the two countries erode, or when the employment picture in the formal sector improves in Mexico, the flow of migration will slow. But this is the prospect in the long term. In the short term (next five to ten years), we can expect that the number of children coming of working age will continue at pre-transition rates, a fact which is guaranteed since the children are already born. And we can further expect the recent commitment of the government toward labor intensive industrial development, along with projected unprecedented levels of investment in the labor intensive subsistence crop production, will require a good deal of lead time before its impact will be felt. But once again, policies in Mexico

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[2]The argument can be made that migration can only be a successful long run strategy under two conditions: either the migrant returns to Mexico where he or she can enjoy the windfall income that has been earned at home where food and rent are cheap and entertainment is restricted and not costly. Or, one can stay permanently in the United States, a costly alternative, and join the urban or rural underclass until such time as one can work his way out of it. The ease, familiarity, and prestige among one's own people, and familiarity of the first strategy make it the preferred one.

favor a diminution of the migratory flow. Informal estimates from the National Fertility Study carried out by Urquidi and his associates at the Colegio de México have hinted at a significant decrease in the crude birth rate from about 3.7, to about 2.8, a decrease of about one child per family.

Our analysis thus suggests that there will be a rise in migration rates in the short term. However, the heralded sharp decline in fertility should relieve demographic pressures on the Mexican family in the 1990's.

Similarly, if the effect of the United States embargo on grain sales to the Soviet Union continues to have the effect of making Mexico pursue self-sufficiency in food (the recently instituted SAM program), and if ways are found to develop small scale subsistence agriculture so that it can produce surpluses instead of the current deficits, as is currently envisaged, the demand for on-farm labor will increase and migratory flows will be reduced accordingly.

Whether it is in the interest of this country, and in particular in the interests of United States agriculture, to encourage Mexican self-sufficiency in Mexican food production is hard to say. But, the trade-off is clear: a dried-up export market yields as a byproduct a reduced migratory flow.

(6) If we were to suggest a single solution to the problems posed by Mexican migration to Mexicans, Mexico, Americans and the United States, we would suggest an obvious one: <u>a guest worker program</u> in which both governments cooperate to legalize the migratory

flow. We are aware that guest worker programs are not without their defects, and that they can produce inhumanities in the hands of poor administrators. However, the present system substitutes in its place an extra-official entry permit furnished by the coyote at considerable cost to the migrant.

Our analysis of rural, urban, and international conditions convincingly shows that the migratory flow is controlled by factors beyond our (U.S.) direct control, and that a means to transform the migratory process into one which is least unjust and most advantageous is needed.

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