

# Mexican immigration into the USA

**Events:** With more than 10 per cent of its native population living abroad, overwhelmingly in the USA, Mexico is the country with the most emigrants in the world. In 2011, some 10.8 per cent of the US population were Mexican-Americans, over 35.5 million Americans having full or partial Mexican ancestry, not including an estimated 6.1 million 'undocumented' or 'illegal' Mexicans. Until the early twentieth century, Mexicans were free to move across the border with the USA, and even when immigration controls started to be applied, exceptions were often made in the case of Mexican immigrants. Special allowances for Mexican immigrants ended abruptly in the 1930s, as, fuelled by the Great Depression, anti-immigration sentiment spread across the USA. Tighter immigration control in the post-WWII period nevertheless failed to prevent the level of immigration from Mexico exceeding that from any other single country in US history. However, there are signs that this trend may have ceased: between 2005 and 2010, the net flow of Mexicans into the USA dwindled to a trickle and may have gone into reverse.

**Significance:** The high level of migration across the Mexican-US border – the most crossed border in the world – is easy to explain. The chief underlying factor has been the dramatic imbalance in the economic fortunes of Mexico and the USA. Powerful 'push' factors, including low pay, widespread unemployment, poor medical facilities and limited education prospects, encouraged generation after generation of Mexicans to seek better opportunities in *el Norte*. This was facilitated by relatively easy access from Mexico to the USA. Not only are Mexico and the USA neighbouring countries, but the length of the border between them (3,169 km) means that immigration control is, at best, imperfect, despite the efforts of over 20,000 border patrol agents. The main reason for the altered pattern of migration in recent years is that while the USA has suffered an economic downturn, particularly associated with the 2007–09 global financial crisis, the Mexican economy has been growing steadily. Other factors may include a crackdown on illegal immigrants under Obama since 2009, and increased violence in Northern Mexico associated with drugs cartels and organized crime.



It has widely been assumed that emigration has been a key factor inhibiting economic growth in Mexico. Persistent migratory flows have left the Mexican countryside with a shortage of economically active people, and social problems have emerged due to the fact that most migrants are males and relatively young, leaving fewer people to support the elderly and the very young. And yet, at \$22.45 billion in 2012, remittances, overwhelmingly from the USA, constitute Mexico's second largest source of foreign revenue (after petroleum), and make a major contribution to improving domestic living standards. Over time, Mexico's formal policy of discouraging emigration has given way to an emphasis on supporting the integration of the Mexican migrant community in the USA, largely through the Institute of Mexicans Abroad.

US policy on immigration from Mexico has tended to focus on a combination of efforts to reduce irregular immigration (both by increased border enforcement and strengthened legal sanctions on the employment of undocumented workers) and attempts to stimulate economic growth in Mexico, not least through the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). However, a recognition of the vital importance of workers of Mexican ancestry to certain sectors of the US economy, and, above all, the growing political significance of Latino voters in the USA, have dictated a more liberal approach to immigration. Although this has primarily affected the Democratic Party, encouraging, amongst other things, President Obama to support the DREAM Act (which would provide a conditional path to citizenship for a proportion of undocumented immigrants), it is difficult to see how the Republican Party can long remain immune from the same pressures.