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Connecting the Dots: Emerging Migration Trends and Policy Questions in North and Central America

MARCH 7, 2018 FEATURE | By Claudia Masferrer, Víctor M. García-Guerrero, and Silvia E. Giorguli-Saucedo

North America and the Central American countries of the Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—represent one of the world’s most dynamic migration corridors, with millions traveling from, through, or to these countries in recent decades. The United States has the world’s largest immigrant population; Canada has one of the highest immigration rates per capita; and Mexico and Central America have significant shares of their nationals abroad, primarily in the United States. However, policies and public perceptions around immigration, especially in the United States, are not keeping up with emerging shifts in the region’s migration.

Together, some 59 million international migrants live in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, nearly one-quarter of the world’s total, according to 2017 United Nations data. Traditionally dominated by South-North migration, with the United States and Canada as the main destinations, patterns of mobility today are more complex, spanning new places of origin and destination. Though regional migration discussions still tend to focus on Mexico-U.S. migration, data show these arrivals peaked in 2007, and in the past decade hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and their U.S.-born children have returned, whether forcibly or voluntarily.

Meanwhile, the unauthorized population in the United States has stabilized, and possibly declined, even as immigration from the Northern Triangle has increased. Further, demographic shifts—both within origin and destination countries, and among those migrating—are adding greater complexity to these trends and posing new challenges for societies, as birthrates decline throughout the region and life expectancy in Mexico and Central America has stagnated. Amid anticipated declines in working-age populations across the region in the decades ahead, demographic pressures and incentives to migrate will lessen.

This article, based on the authors’ research for the report *A Migration System in the Making* published by El Colegio de México, documents current migration patterns, forecasts demographic changes, and discusses the national and regional policy responses, or lack thereof, to these changes in North America and the Northern

Triangle. It examines the role international migration plays in the population dynamics in each of the six countries, and further discusses the demographic and socioeconomic forces that will affect migration itself.

Historical and Emerging Trends

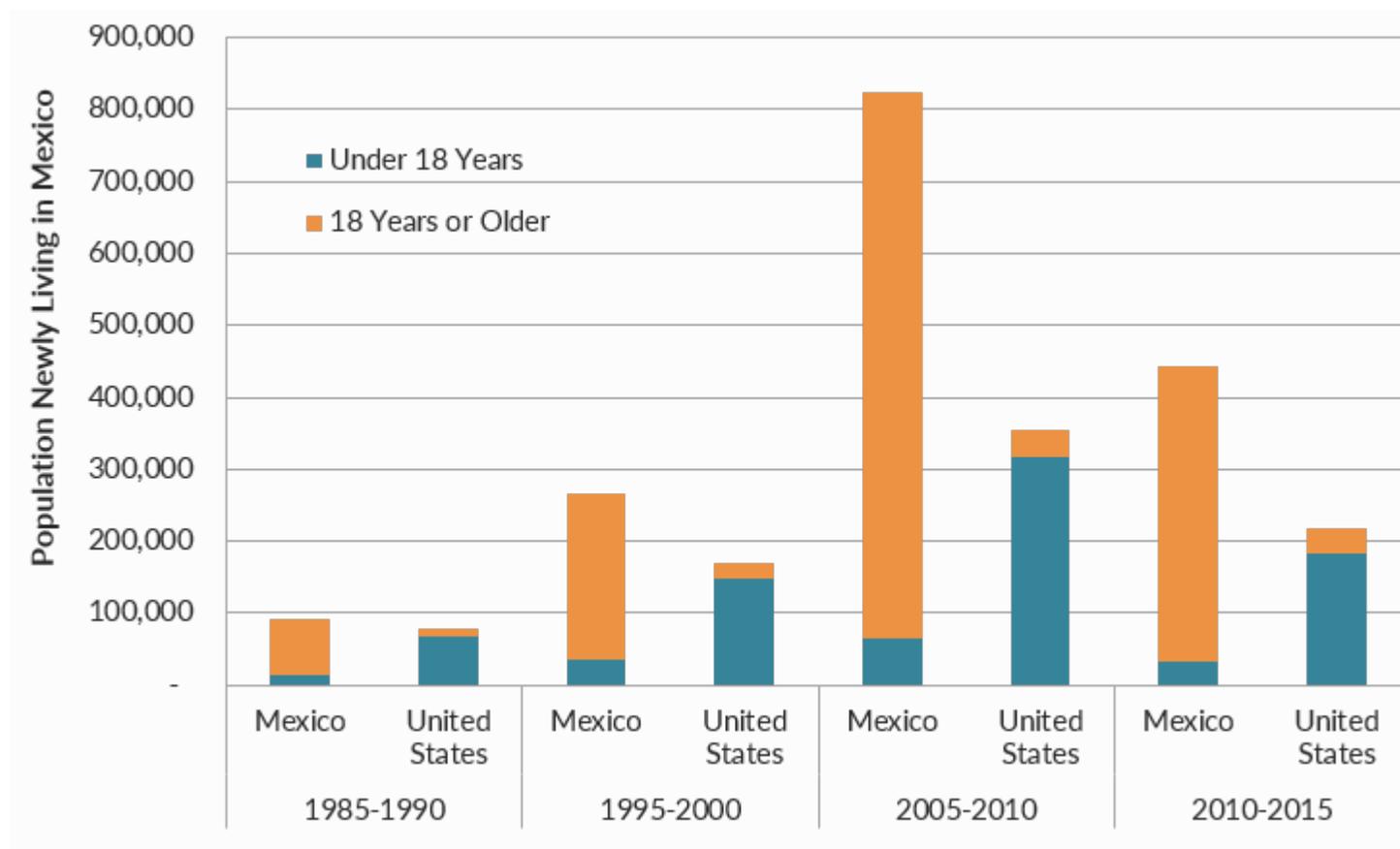
Historically, most migration within the region has occurred between the United States and Mexico, which share one of the longest and busiest borders in the world. Large-scale movement of Mexicans and Central Americans across this border has been motivated by labor and other policies, strong social and family ties, and economic factors including significant income differentials. Similarly, since the mid-1950s, political instability, insecurity, and economic hardship in the Northern Triangle due to civil wars, political conflicts, gang- and drug-related violence, and natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes have spurred migration northward. Regional mobility was primarily South-North and labor driven, a large number of migrants moving irregularly. Many moved and continue to move for family reunification. And in recent decades, the direction of the movements, as well as the policies that influence them, have changed: Migrants with temporary work visas in the main destinations have increased, as have deportations of long-term residents.

Several important policies set in motion the dynamics of Mexican migration. Between 1942 and 1964, approximately 4.7 million Mexican temporary workers were hired through the U.S. bracero program, in response to the growing demand for low-skilled agricultural labor. After the program ended, labor demand remained, amid few legal options for Mexican and Central American migrants. Immigration enforcement at the border increased after enactment of the 1986 U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). Due to the growing deterrence, circular migration became riskier and the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States increased.

Since 2009, the unauthorized population has remained stable at roughly 11 million, with a decline in the number of Mexicans (from 6.9 million to 5.8 million) and an increase in immigrants from elsewhere (from 5 million to 5.3 million), according to Pew Research Center estimates. The latter increase has been driven by the rise in arrivals from Central America, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Though the exact number of annual unauthorized entries is unknown, in fiscal year (FY) 2017, there were just 128,000 apprehensions of Mexicans at the Southwest border—a far cry from the 1.6 million in 2000. This is consistent with data on northbound migration from the Survey of Migration at Mexico's Northern Border (EMIF Norte, for its Spanish acronym).

The stagnation in the unauthorized population is the combined result of the decline in Mexican immigration, and forced and voluntary return migration. In other words, North-South migration has increased. This includes approximately 1 million U.S.-born persons who moved, mainly to Mexico, over the 2010-15 period, the majority (70 percent) of whom were under age 15, according to Mexican census data. Contrary to common belief, American retirees comprise a far smaller share—less than 5 percent of the U.S. born in Mexico were older than 60 in 2015. Many minors joined parents who returned or were deported, and are likely to be dual citizens with the possibility of remigrating later in life. Overall, these flows represent the largest North-to-South movement in the world: Between 2005 and 2010, the number of U.S.-born arrivals in Mexico reached a historical peak of more than 350,000 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Population in Mexico Who Lived in the United States Five Years Prior, by Age and Country of Birth, 1990-2015



Note: Recent migration flows to Mexico are only available with nationally representative data for five-year periods, and are defined using place of residence five years prior and country of birth.

Source: Authors' calculations using the 1990, 2000, and 2010 Mexican Censuses and the 2015 Mexican Intercensal Survey.

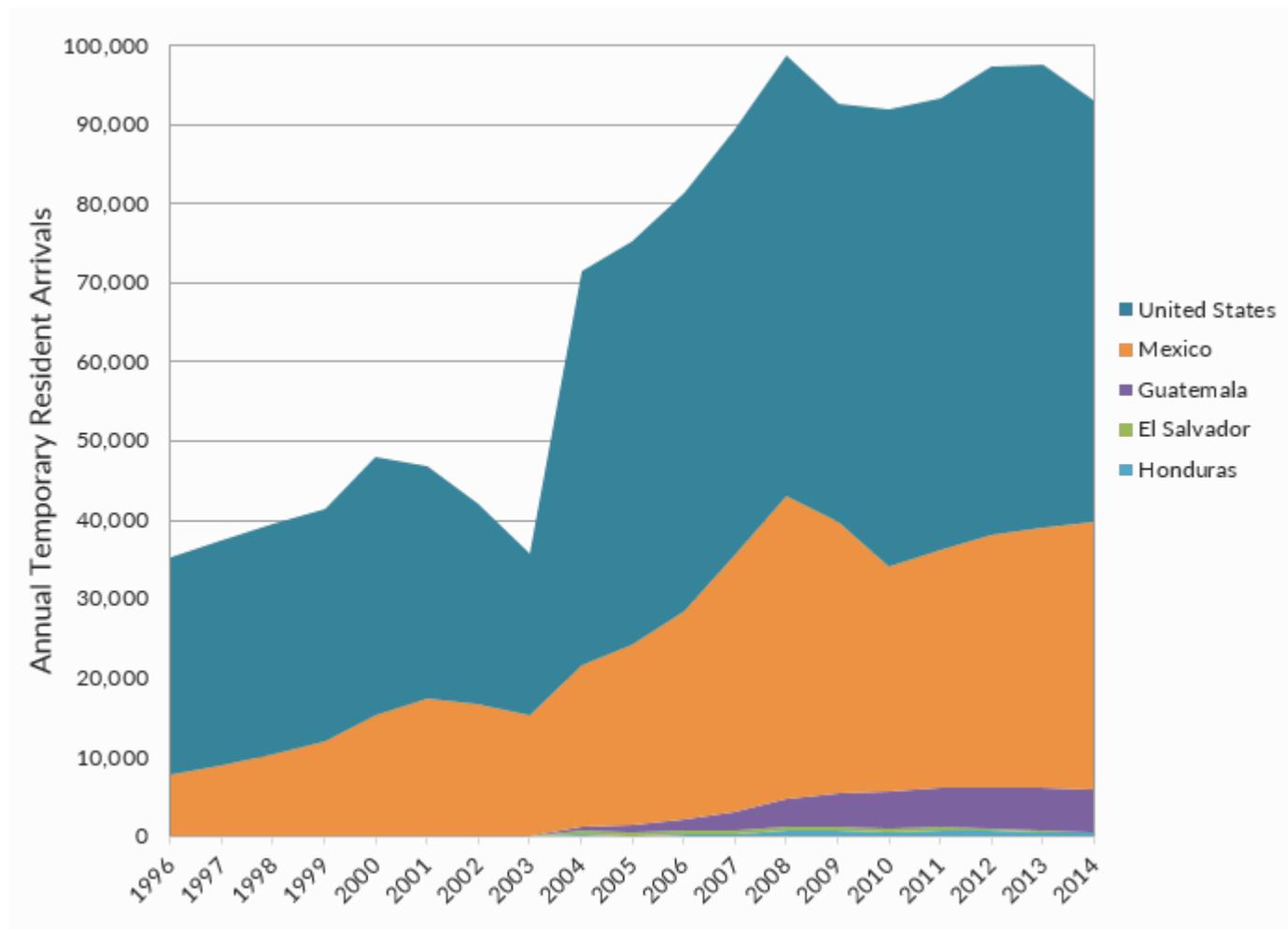
The increase in southbound movement has resulted in net-zero—possibly even net-positive—migration rates to Mexico. In other words, Mexico has transformed from a country of emigration to one of increasing immigration—not only as a place of return, but also as a destination for U.S. and Central American nationals. The foreign-born population in Mexico doubled between 2000 and 2010, though it accounts for less than 1 percent of the total population, and three-quarters are U.S.-born. Guatemalans are by far the second-largest group arriving in Mexico, and their numbers are steadily growing. Transit migration has also increased, especially of Northern Triangle migrants en route to the United States without prior authorization. Given its clandestine nature, this migration is difficult to measure, although recent estimates suggest more than 300,000 Central Americans may have crossed Mexico in 2016, having steadily increased from around 130,000 in 2011.

Canada: A Northern Haven

Notably, unlike the United States, neither Canada nor Mexico are home to a large unauthorized population. Canada has a largely authorized population of temporary and permanent residents, and has long been an attractive destination owing to its economic stability, high standards of living, and active development of policies and programs to encourage immigration. Canadian immigration policy provides legal options for

Mexicans and Central Americans not only through temporary worker programs, but also by granting refugee status and allowing family reunification. Unlike in the United States, arrivals from both Mexico and the Northern Triangle are increasing, and in an orderly fashion. Among the five countries, for many decades, the United States has been the main origin of new residents in Canada, reflecting cultural and economic ties.

Figure 2. Annual Temporary Resident Arrivals in Canada by Country of Origin, 1996-2014



Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, "Facts & Figures 2015: Immigration Overview - Temporary Residents - Annual IRCC Updates," accessed February 14, 2018, [available online](#); "Facts and Figures 2005: Immigration Overview. Permanent and Temporary Residents" accessed February 14, 2018, [available online](#).

Demographic Convergence in the Region

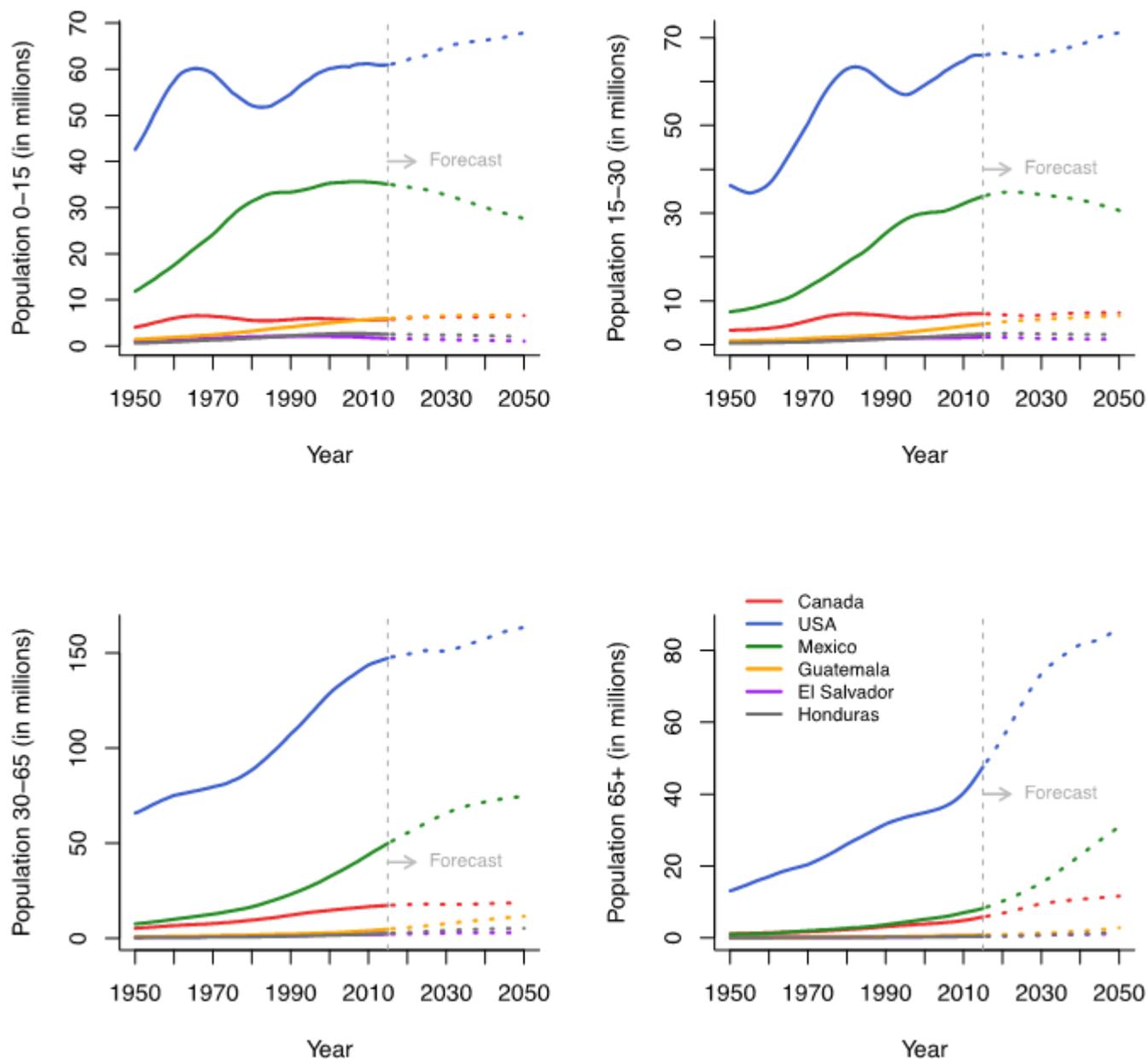
Migration patterns often interact with broader demographic trends. For sending and receiving countries alike, migration changes population size, distribution, and composition. The demographic impact of international migration in developed countries, particularly in relation to problems associated with population aging, has been well studied since the 1990s. However, research on how demographic shifts and aging are connected to migration in sending and receiving countries has been limited.

Since the 1950s, the six countries of the North American and Northern Triangle region have shown a downward trend in birthrates, together with a sustained increase in life expectancy at birth. Fertility decreased in Canada and the United States throughout the second half of the 20th century, the result of increasing secularization and female labor force participation, and in Mexico due to policies in the 1970s explicitly designed to slow population growth. In the Northern Triangle, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) led efforts to reduce fertility by providing free birth control and family planning information campaigns. By 2050, all six countries will have fertility rates below the replacement level required to sustain population growth, alongside high life expectancy—implying population aging.

However, recent empirical evidence suggests that Mexico, and very likely the Northern Triangle countries, will not converge to higher life expectancy levels, owing to the increase in homicides between ages 15 and 50 since 2006. This would imply an acceleration of the aging process: As deaths in this age bracket increase, the relative size of the elderly population also rises. Dependency ratios, defined as the number of dependent children and elderly per 100 working-age individuals, also increase in the short term.

Owing to these trends, the working-age population will stop growing in the coming decades, reducing demographic pressure and incentives to migrate. In all countries, except Guatemala and the United States, the age 15 and under population has reached a peak (see Figure 3). Further, the 15-to-30 population—which includes most first-time migrants—is already decreasing in Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador. Given this trend, it is hard to imagine that emigration from these countries will reach the historical peak observed in the past decade.

Figure 3. Estimated and Projected Population by Age Group and Country, 1950-2050



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2015), [available online](#).

As mentioned earlier, all the countries in the region are experiencing a rapid growth in the elderly population (see Figure 3). Accordingly, old-age dependency ratios will rise in the next decades. Canada's aging is more advanced than in the other countries, followed by the United States and then El Salvador (until 2040). This entails a growing need for care workers in the three countries. Immigration—specifically the entry of working-age immigrants—has already delayed the increase in dependency ratios in Canada and the United States. Coming years will see a further decrease in the potential supply of migrants from Mexico and the Northern Triangle, which are also experiencing rapid increases in their old-age dependency ratios.

Policy Mismatches

Despite the challenges that demographic shifts pose for governments and societies, policies in the United States and Mexico reflect neither a recognition of the changes, nor clear-headed thinking about how to leverage migration to address coming needs. Moreover, migration management and integration policies in the United States and Mexico generally are not in line with historical or emerging patterns. Although Canada has been an exception by recognizing demographic changes, and for its active management, its immigration system is not without challenges.

Canada

Canadian immigration policy has explicitly acknowledged demographic dynamics and their interrelation with migration. More than one in every five Canadians was born abroad, among the highest immigration rates for leading destination countries. Since the 1980s, the government has sought to increase the population by annually admitting a number of immigrants equivalent to 1 percent of the population. As a result, Canada has received an average of 250,000 new permanent residents each year since 2000. In 2015, Canada further increased its intake in light of the global refugee crisis, and did so again in 2016 and 2017 to account for new labor market needs. The focus of Canadian policy has been to consider immigrants permanent residents with the right to citizenship.

Canada's system for temporary and permanent arrivals represents a model for migration management. Illegal immigration is almost nonexistent—though geography is clearly a major factor—and, unlike in the United States, most unauthorized immigrants lost legal status by overstaying their visas. Moreover, Canada's assertive integration policies and multicultural approach have created an environment where the benefits of migration have been capitalized by the host society and migrant groups. Still, challenges remain, particularly in the economic integration of high-skilled migrants, who face barriers in translating their experience and foreign credentials to the Canadian labor market. In addition, the lengthy processing times for permanent resident applications when certain occupations were in high demand has created a mismatch between the points system used for selection and the changing needs of the labor market.

As noted above, Canada's population is the most advanced in its aging, implying demand for skilled and semi-skilled health-care workers. Although Canada has explicitly acknowledged this need, the focus has been on high-skilled workers. With rising educational attainment in Mexico and the Northern Triangle, owing to urbanization and improvement of the education system, immigration from the region could offset Canada's demand for care work.

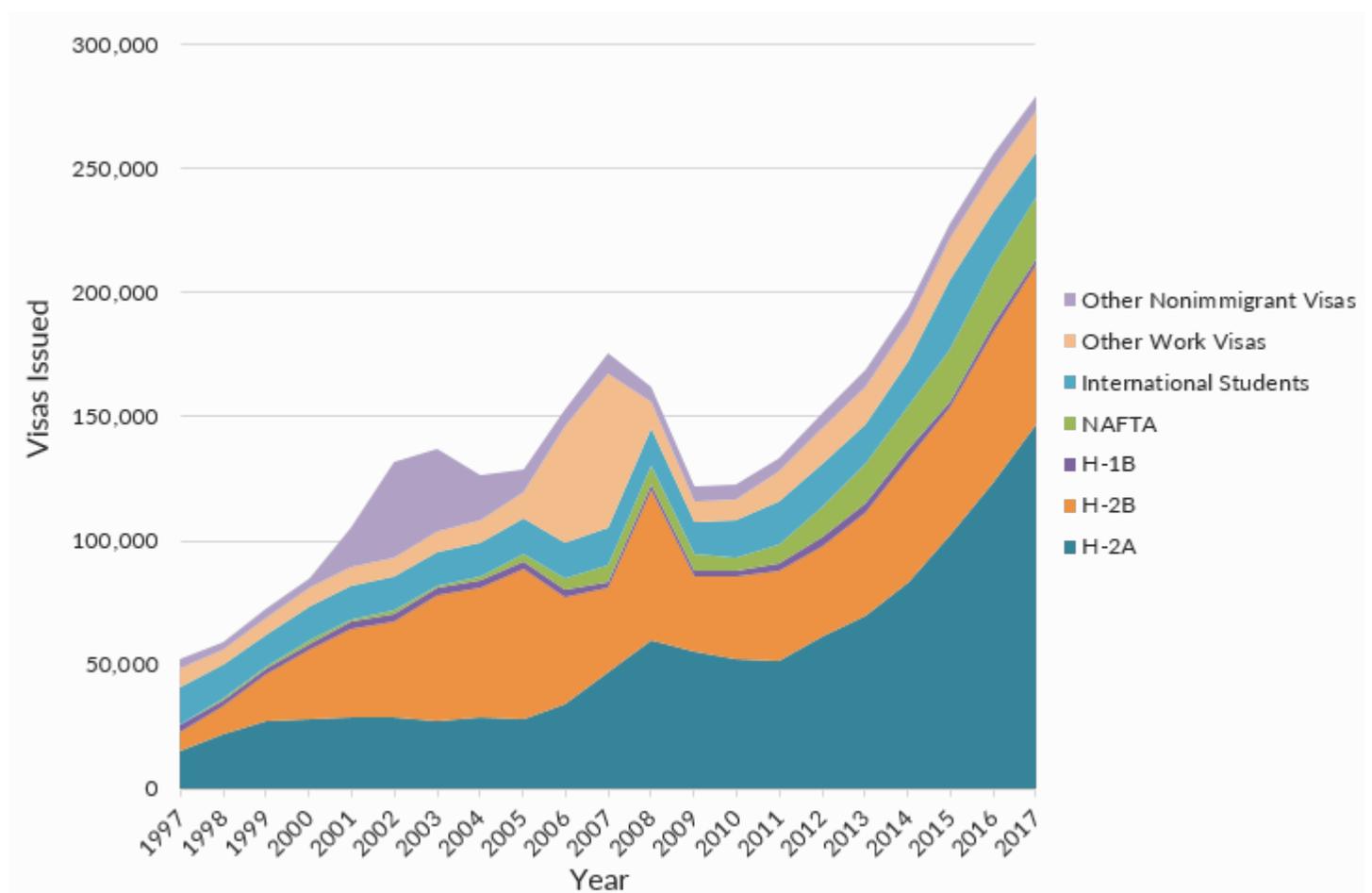
United States

Future demographic scenarios show that the U.S. population will also experience aging, an outcome that may be slowed with immigration. Unlike Canada, U.S. immigration policy has not explicitly acknowledged this trend. The United States has the world's largest immigrant population, and its 43.7 million foreign born account for 13.5 percent of the total population. The large unauthorized population in the United States poses challenges for integration and remains a contentious issue in discussions of immigration reform.

Under the 1965 Immigration Act, the focus of U.S. immigration policy shifted to family reunification, reducing other options for temporary legal entries. For Mexicans, a family reunification backlog quickly formed, which slowed arrivals under these procedures. The demand for labor continued to increase, meanwhile, creating a large, unauthorized, circular flow.

However, legal immigration options for Mexicans and Central Americans remain. During the 1990s, the United States launched several temporary worker programs. Notably, the 1994 ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) facilitated the arrival of Mexican and Canadian professionals via NAFTA visas (also known as TN visas). The annual number of nonimmigrant visas (excluding visitor and transit visas as well as border crossing cards) rose from 100,000 issued in fiscal year (FY) 1997 to more than 1.7 million in FY 2017. Of this total, more than 300,000 were granted to Mexicans, Canadians, and Central Americans, with Mexicans the main recipients. After the 2008-09 economic crisis, temporary visa grants surged—including H-2A and H-2B visas for Mexicans—suggesting a silent strategy to increase legal immigration options and respond to the needs of the U.S. labor market.

Figure 4. U.S. Nonimmigrant Work, Exchange, and Study Visas Issued to Mexicans, Fiscal Year (FY) 1997-2017



Notes: International students do not include visas for Canadian and Mexican commuter students. "Other Work Visas" includes E-1, E-2, H-1A, H-1B1, H-1C, H-2R, H-3, L-1, L-2, O-1, O-2, O-3, R-1, and R-2 visas, while "Other Nonimmigrant" visas includes G-1 through G-5, H-4, K, NATO-1 through N-9, S, T, U, and V visas.

Source: U.S. Department of State, "Nonimmigrant Visa Statistics," accessed February 14, 2018, [available online](#).

Today, while immigration debates dominate the airwaves, particularly regarding how to address the large unauthorized population (including the young immigrants brought by their parents, known as DREAMers), no comprehensive strategy has been designed to meet the demands of the current economic, political, and social context. The political discourse on controlling annual entries does not address underlying labor market needs that have perpetuated illegal immigration, for example. Moreover, the recent focus on high-skilled workers as the most desirable immigrants and attempts to implement a Canada-style points system will not solve current and emerging needs for workers at all levels of the skills continuum, particularly in light of projected demographic trends.

Mexico

For decades, Mexicans and foreigners alike have regarded Mexico as a country of emigration. Thus, immigration policy was not a priority, with most programs implemented in reaction to specific situations. In recent decades, however, transit migration and immigration have increased. Still, just 1 percent of the population in Mexico is foreign born. In 1990, responding to the civil war in Guatemala, Mexico signed its first general asylum law. It also created the National Migration Institute in 1993, and since then has created mechanisms to manage and control arrivals. As a response to the vulnerability of Central Americans crossing Mexico or moving to the country, Mexico enacted the 2011 Immigration Law and in 2014—the year of the unaccompanied child migration crisis—launched a program to control its southern border.

The changing scenario poses unique challenges, and policy responses should consider Mexico's nature as a sending country and its increasing role as a receiving one. Most of the recent foreign-born arrivals are U.S.-born minors with limited Spanish proficiency and no experience in the Mexican educational system. Many arrive with a Mexican parent who faces challenges reintegrating economically and socially upon return, especially for those who lived abroad for years. A U.S. crackdown on immigration combined with upticks in arrivals from Central America might contribute to the growth of an unauthorized population in Mexico. Moreover, if Mexico's system reduces pathways to legal entry, produces bureaucratic backlogs, and restricts access to citizenship, it risks replicating the situation in the United States. The 2011 Migration Law concentrates on managing entry but remains silent on possible integration paths for newcomers and returnees.

Mexico faces the challenge of shifting from a reactive approach to a more assertive strategy, focused on harnessing the potential benefits of immigration for sending communities and the country as a whole. Demographic shifts herald lower pressure and incentives to migrate, as well as challenges due to population aging, as with Canada and the United States.

Building a Regional Migration System

Owing to geographic proximity coupled with sustained historical, cultural, social, and economic ties, the migration patterns in North America and the Central American countries of the Northern Triangle will likely remain dynamic and multidirectional. This broader regional perspective acknowledges existing ties and transnational communities in all countries. Yet demographic and socioeconomic transformations in traditional places of origin are underway and will continue. This trend may translate into changes in the

composition of the flows. For example, increasing numbers of Mexican and Central American migrants have higher levels of education and come from urban centers.

As of early 2018, the potential effects of recent policy changes are uncertain. First, ramped-up immigration enforcement in the United States might not only deter new arrivals, but also accelerate the reversal of the flows and increase emigration elsewhere. The end of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans and Hondurans (as well as Haitians and others), and the planned phaseout of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, might increase the number of foreign nationals leaving the United States—not necessarily back to their countries of origin, but to Mexico or Canada, for example. Of course, many may also opt to remain in the United States without work authorization or protection from deportation.

Second, the responses of other countries in the region to U.S. policy changes will need to be creative. If Canada were to receive TPS beneficiaries, this would mirror the support it provided in the post-IRCA era, when it granted permanent residence for Central Americans facing the risk of deportation. Although Mexico has increased attention to returnees and new arrivals, it has not yet defined a clear legal framework for integration. The Northern Triangle countries will need to address similar issues as well, while continuing to grapple with ongoing challenges related to gang violence and rule of law. In the six countries, new challenges will arise if migrants are not fully incorporated socially or economically—influenced by the political situation in each country, as well as the prevailing social and economic conditions.

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