

Previous Migration Experience and Legal Immigration Status among Intending Mexican Migrants to the United States

Peter B. Brownell and Michael S. Rendall



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Peter B. Brownell

RAND Corporation

Michael S. Rendall

University of Maryland and RAND

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Michigan Retirement Research Center

University of Michigan

P.O. Box 1248

Ann Arbor, MI 48104

www.mrrc.isr.umich.edu

(734) 615-0422

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Abstract

We examine the size and composition of flows of Mexican migrants intending to cross the border and enter the United States. We focus on two characteristics which relate to eligibility for Social Security retirement benefits: legal immigration status and prior US migration history. We compare estimates from before and after the onset of the Great Recession in 2007. We analyze data from the Survey of Migration at the Northern Border of Mexico (EMIF-Norte), an innovative survey of migration flows fielded in border cities and towns in Mexico. We find that the declining overall level of migration from Mexico to the US since 2007 is driven entirely by declines in the level of undocumented immigration. The size of the legal immigrant flow from Mexico has actually increased since the recession began. We find an overall shift away from migrants with no previous trips to the US, toward migrants with 11 or more previous trips. There was no significant shift in the distribution of previous US trips among undocumented migrants, but among work-authorized migrants, the representation of both first time migrants and those with more than 11 previous US trips grew. The increasing share and absolute number of work-authorized Mexican immigrants with 11 or more past trips to the US seems likely to affect the share of Mexican immigrants qualifying for Social Security retirement benefits in the future, and it may be valuable to continue to examine these trends.

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Demographers have noted that the relatively young age structure of the US immigrant population may help to address forecasted future shortfalls in Social Security caused by population aging (Myers, 2008; Lee & Miller, 2000). Due to the prevalence of temporary labor migration between Mexico and the US, the Mexican immigrant population in the US is concentrated in working ages. Based on the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS), 70.1% of the Mexican-born population in the US is between the ages of 20 and 49, while only 38.3% of the native-born population is within this age range.

Additionally, the employment of immigrants may provide benefits to the Social Security trust funds to the extent that immigrants (and their employers) make contributions, but do not collect benefits. This may occur in the case of aliens without valid work authorization working under Social Security Numbers (SSNs) and names which do not match a valid record, although such misreported earnings may be attributed later to workers who subsequently legalize their immigration status (Nuschler & Siskin, 2005). It may also occur in the case of legally authorized immigrants who do not earn sufficient qualifying credits in US employment to gain eligibility for retirement benefits.¹ Thus an understanding of re-immigration rates and the prior US migration history of arriving immigrants has the potential to improve understanding of the likelihood that immigrants making a series of trips to work in the US over their working years may earn sufficient qualifying credits to become eligible for retirement benefits. Similarly, such an analysis disaggregated by legal immigration status and work authorization can improve our understanding of the extent to which immigrants will be ineligible for benefits due to legal status and their Social Security contributions placed in the Earnings Suspense File.

¹ An employee earns one credit for each \$1200 in earnings (as of 2014), up to the annual maximum of four credits for earnings of at least \$4800.

The present study uses Mexican border survey data collected continuously from 2005 to 2011 to examine the previous migration experience and legal status of Mexicans migrating to the US. Among immigrants to the US, Mexicans stand out for their volume, their geographical proximity to the US, and for their especially large unauthorized component. Mexican immigrants account for 29% of the foreign-born population in the US as of 2010 (Batalova & Lee, 2012). Moreover, Mexican immigrants account for approximately 59% of the unauthorized immigrant population (Hoefler et al., 2012; Passel & Cohn, 2011).

Mexican migration to the US has long been characterized by repeated temporary labor migrations, particularly of male household heads (Massey et al., 1987; Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs & US Commission on Immigration Reform, 1998). Most permanent settlement in the US among Mexican immigrants has been preceded by multiple temporary migration trips of the household head, who ultimately settles in the US and reunites with (or forms) his family here (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Massey et al., 1987; Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs & US Commission on Immigration Reform, 1998). Evidence suggests that since the early 1990's, trip duration, and possibly levels of settlement, have increased (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002; Lowell, Passel, & Pederzini, 2008). Since the decline of the housing market in 2007 and the financial crisis in 2008, net migration flows of Mexican immigrants to the US, particularly unauthorized immigrants, have declined (Hoefler et al., 2012; Passel & Cohn, 2011). This appears to be driven by decreases in temporary labor migration from Mexico, rather than increased levels of return migration to Mexico (Rendall, Brownell, Kups, 2011; Batalova & Lee, 2012).

Moreover, while research indicates that the magnitude of migrant flows from Mexico to the US have declined significantly since the recent recession (Passel & Cohn, 2011; Batalova & Lee, 2012), it is likely that the composition of flows (by legal status and prior US experience) has also changed. Thus our analysis focuses on the most recent data (2010-2011) and also on data collected prior to the decline in the housing market and onset of the recession (2005-2006).

Data and Methods

The present study uses data from the Survey of Migration on the Northern Border of Mexico, known by its Spanish acronym, EMIF-Norte. The EMIF-Norte is a survey of migratory *flows* through Mexico's northern border region. The EMIF survey design is based on methods originally developed by biologists for sampling migratory populations (Bustamante, 1998), and is similar to the United Kingdom's International Passenger Survey (IPS) (Office for National Statistics, 2008). Like the IPS, the EMIF-Norte uses time-location sampling methods to generate probability samples of intending migrants at airports, bus depots and train stations. EMIF-Norte sampling points are in Mexican border cities and towns chosen to maximize coverage of cross-border migrant flows (Secretaría de Gobernación et al., 2010; Santibáñez, 1999; Bustamante et al., 1998; CONAPO , n.d.-a).

EMIF-Norte is specifically designed to measure flows of labor migration. It is sponsored by the Mexican government's Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (STPS), National Population Council (CONAPO), National Migration Institute (INM), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE), and is carried out by COLEF (the College of the Northern Border). Funding for the survey has also been provided by the World Bank.

EMIF-Norte is made up of four subsamples of migrants entering or leaving Mexican border cities. The present study relies on observations of northbound migrants entering border cities from the Mexican interior who report intending to cross the border into the US. The present analysis is limited to those who responded to the survey both that they intend to cross the border *and* that they intend to do so within the next 30 days.² The subsample of northward migrants allows estimation of size and composition of flows of migrants intending to cross the border. During the period from 2005-2011, the sample size of migrants intending to enter the US within 30 days ranged from 5,878 to 11,389 (see Table 1). Rendall et al. (2009) evaluated the

² The survey items read (in Spanish): "¿Piensa usted pasar al otro lado?" and "¿Piensa usted hacerlo en los próximos 30 días?"

EMIF-Norte against Mexico's Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID), and found that its northbound sample performed well at capturing the flow of migrants by source geographical area and level of education. The EMIF-Norte underestimated female migrants and men at younger working ages relative to the ENADID, and hence also total migration, but nevertheless, captured a considerably greater share of flows for all groups than US household surveys, including the American Community Survey.

Importantly to the present study, EMIF-Norte is one of very few probability surveys with data on intending migrants' legal immigration status and previous migration histories (National Research Council, 2013). In addition to demographic characteristics and data on Mexican labor force experience, EMIF-Norte includes items for intending border crossers on whether the migrant has legal documents permitting entry to and/or employment in the United States, the total number of previous US trips, and primary reason for the intended trip to the US. While the EMIF-Norte also includes items about the migrants' experiences in the US labor market, these items have changed over time. For the period 1999-2009, the EMIF-Norte asked intending migrants detailed questions about the job they held *longest* on their last trip to the US. In 2010 and 2011, the survey asked a similar set of detailed questions, but focused instead on the *last* job held on the last US trip. Due to the lack of comparability, the present study does not examine the differences in wages, hours, or occupations over time.

Results

Consistent with findings based on US and Mexican survey data (Passel, Cohn, Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012; Passel & Cohn, 2011; Batalova & Lee, 2012; CONAPO, n.d.-b), our analysis finds steep declines in the magnitude of the flow of immigrants into the US across the Mexican border. Migration peaked in 2007, with an estimated total of 850,163 intending migrants, declining to 312,619 in 2011 (see Figure 1 and Table 2). As the overall flow decreased, its composition shifted toward an increased share of migrants legally authorized to be present and work in the US. Figure 1 shows that in 2007, 79% of migrants crossing the US-Mexican land

border had no legal documents to enter the US. By 2011, the share without legal documents had decreased to 51% of the total flow. The share of border crossers with legal work authorization increased from 7% in 2007 to 17% in 2011, having peaked at 20% in 2010. The share with documents allowing legal entry to the US, but not authorizing work, also increased from 13% in 2007 to 31% in 2011.³ These changes in composition were primarily driven by a 76% decrease in the size of the flow lacking any legal documents, from 668,433 in 2007 to 158,697 in 2011. The size of the work-authorized flow increased from 59,914 in 2007 to a peak of 92,943 in 2010, before dropping to 53,764 in 2011. Comparing 2007 to 2011, we can say that the large decline in the share without any legal documents was driven by an absolute decline in the number without documents, while the number with documents to both enter and work has changed relatively little. Although we include the category of intending migrants who indicated they had submitted some type of application for legal documents⁴, this small group never constituted more than 2% of the share of intending US migrants.

Since the Great Recession began in 2007, the migrants crossing the land border to the US from Mexico are more likely to have made prior trips to the US (see Figure 2 and Table 3). In 2007, 81% of migrants arriving at the Mexican side of the border had zero prior US trips and only 1% had made 11 or more prior trips. In 2011, 76% of intending migrants had not made any prior trips, while 10% had made 11 or more prior trips. However, during this same period, the absolute number of migrants with 11 or more previous trips actually increased since the Great Recession, peaking at 50,870 in 2010. In 2011 the number decreased to 29,966 in 2011, still

³ This category includes a number of non-immigrant visas, including border crossing cards, tourist visas, spouses and dependents of principals admitted on certain non-immigrant visas which do permit employment, and student visas without additional authorization for on-the-job practical training or on-campus employment. For more information on types of temporary (“non-immigrant”) visas and whether they allow employment at US firms, see the US Department of State’s webpage entitled “Types of Visas for Temporary Visitors” (http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_1286.html).

⁴ The survey item reads (in Spanish): “¿Ha realizado algún trámite oficial con la finalidad de obtener documentos para: 01 entrar a Estados Unidos? 02 trabajar en Estados Unidos? 03 las dos anteriores? 04 quedarse a vivir allá? 05 no ha realizado ningún trámite.”

considerably above the pre-recession levels. There was relatively little change in the shares of migrants with one, two, three, or 4-10 prior US trips. The absolute number of migrants with 10 or fewer previous trips declined 66% from 835,179 in 2007 to 278,457 in 2011.

Breaking down the distribution of prior US trips by legal immigration status, we compared two pooled pre-recession years (2005-2006) and two pooled post-financial crisis years (2010-2011). Among those with legal documents authorizing work in the US, the share with 11 or more prior trips increased from 35% to 57% and the share with no prior trips increased from 8% to 15% (Figure 3). This was accompanied by a decrease in the share of work-authorized migrants with two, three, or 4-10 prior trips from a total of 52% in 2005-2006 to 22% in 2010-2011, while the share with one prior trip held constant at 5%. Figure 3 also shows no appreciable change in the distribution of prior US trips among migrants with documents to enter the US, but not to work. Ninety-four percent of such migrants had not made any prior US trips in 2005-2006, while in 2010-2011 the share was 93%.

Among the small group of migrants with some type of application pending legal status, Figure 3 indicates a shift toward the categories of one, two, three, or 4-10 prior US trips. In 2005-2006 these categories together accounted for 29% of all migrants with applications pending, while in 2010-2011, these categories accounted for 46% of such migrants. The share with no prior trips decreased from 61% to 52%, while the share with 11 or more prior trips decreased from 10% to 3%.

Interestingly, despite the large overall decline in the number of migrants without legal documents, Figure 3 shows that those undocumented migrants intending to cross the US-Mexico border in 2010-2011 had essentially the same distribution of prior US trips as those intending to cross prior to the Great Recession in 2005-2006. Eighty-four percent of such migrants had made no prior trips to the US in 2005-2006, compared to 85% in 2010-2011. In both periods, 6% of undocumented migrants had made one previous US trip, while the share who had made 2, 3, 4-10, or 11 or more each changed by no more than one percent.

Figure 4 shows the primary reason for migration by legal immigration status in 2005-2006 and in 2010-2011. For all categories of intending migrants with legal documents or with pending applications, the share migrating to work or to look for work declined between the pre-recession years of 2005-2006 and the post-financial crisis years of 2010-2011. For these categories of legal status, the decline in the share of work-related migration was accompanied by a shift primarily toward family reunification. Among migrants without any legal documents, the share of migrants migrating to work or to look for work was little changed (up from 92% to 94%). Of course, as discussed earlier and shown in Figure 1, the total number of undocumented migrants declined sharply over this period, even while the primary reasons for migrating remained fairly constant among those migrating in 2005-2006 and 2010-2011. For all legal status groups except the pending application group, among those reporting a primary reason for migration of either “to work” or “to look for work,” the share that reported “to work” increased relative to “to look for work.” In other words, those work-motivated migrants who did come to the US after the beginning of the Great Recession were more likely to report *actual* plans to work and less likely to report plans to *search* for a job. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that the lack of employment opportunities and increased uncertainty and difficulty in finding jobs was a central factor in the overall decline in migration flows. Figure 4 also shows that, among migrants with documents to cross (but not to work), “business” as a primary reason for migration decreased from 9% prior to the Great Recession to 1% in 2010-2011.

Discussion

Our analysis of the EMIF-Norte data indicates that the steep decline in the magnitude of migration flows from Mexico to the US during and after the Great Recession has been driven entirely by declines in immigration of undocumented immigrants while the flows of documented migrants increased, peaking in 2010 and declining to just below pre-recession levels in 2011. Based on this, we expect that the number and dollar value of Social Security contributions that cannot be attributed to a valid identity (the Earnings Suspense file) are also likely to have

declined sharply since 2007. The direction of future changes in the size of unauthorized immigrant flows depends significantly on the extent to which the decline in such migration has been due to the economic downturn and the lack of employment opportunities, to increased enforcement, or to other factors such as shifting demographics and labor market conditions in migrants' home countries. If the economic downturn is the primary factor, then we might reasonably expect unauthorized migration to increase significantly as the US economy improves and creates more employment opportunities.

Defining re-immigration as migration into the country by persons with at least one prior trip to the US, re-immigrations constituted a quarter of migrants in the most recent years available (2010 and 2011) up from a fifth in the immediately pre-recession years. Our analysis found a considerable decrease in the number of first time migrants. However, this was primarily driven by the declining share of unauthorized migrants, who were overwhelmingly first-time migrants both before the recession (84%) and after (85%). Similarly large proportionate declines of migrants with 1, 2, 3, and 4-10 prior trips to the US were found, whereas the absolute number of migrants with 11 or more previous trips actually increased from pre-recession levels. Authorized migrants were prominent in this group of very experienced migrants. Among migrants legally authorized to work in the US and potentially eligible for Social Security retirement benefits with sufficient qualifying credits of covered US employment, the share of migrants intending to enter the country who had made 11 or more prior trips increased from one third to one half. While the absolute number of such experienced migrants has fluctuated year-to-year, it has increased relative to pre-recession levels, including in the most recent year (2011) analyzed here. The increasing share and absolute number of work authorized Mexican immigrants with 11 or more past trips to the US seems likely to affect the share of Mexican

immigrants qualifying for Social Security retirement benefits in the future, and it may be valuable to continue to examine these trends.⁵

While the present analysis does not speak directly to the causes for the decline in unauthorized migration, if research could establish that certain factors, such as the economic conditions or enforcement affect decisions to migrate by potential first-time migrants differently than those with past US migration experience, then our finding that the distribution of prior US trips among unauthorized migrants has changed very little could help discern the factor(s) which have caused the declining flows. However, it seems likely that the poor job opportunities in the US and increased enforcement would both have stronger impacts on potential first-time unauthorized migrants than their more seasoned counterparts, which limits our ability to draw conclusions from the lack of change in the composition of unauthorized flows.

The most recent report by the Pew Hispanic Center indicates that the declines in the unauthorized population have leveled off or even begun to reverse (Passel, Cohn and Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). Whether the unauthorized immigrant population will grow and how rapidly remains unknown, but the persistence of relatively high unemployment rates, combined with the possible influence of enforcement and conditions in source countries, make it unlikely that levels of unauthorized immigration from Mexico will return to the high rates seen in the 1990's and early 2000's in the short term.

⁵ If, however, the increased share of authorized migrants making 11 or more trips made significantly shorter trips, they might earn fewer Social Security credits. Because one presently earns the maximum annual four credits once one has earned \$4,800, any such potential offsetting effect of shorter trips is likely to be small.

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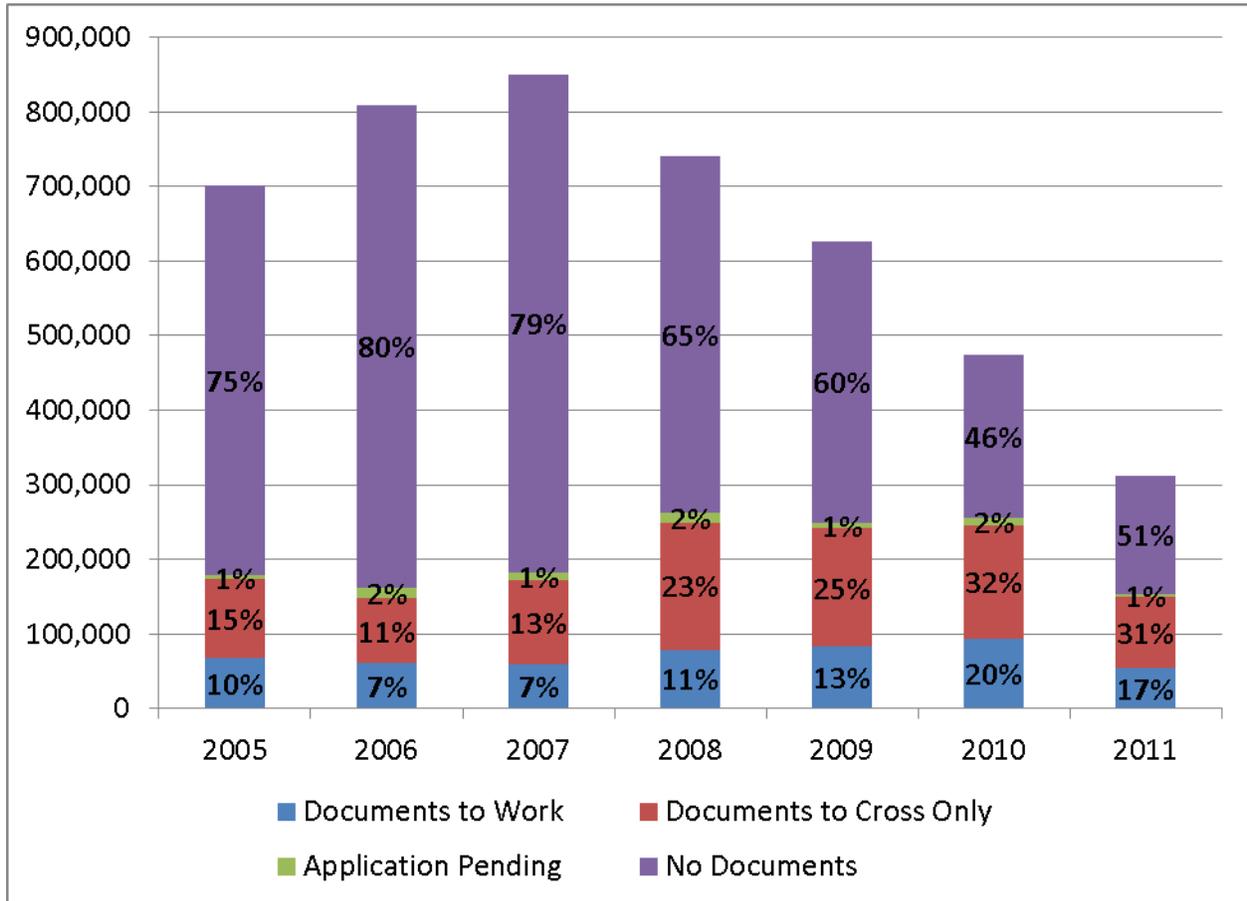
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Table 1: Unweighted EMIF-Norte Sample Size of Migrants Intending to Enter the US within 30 Days

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
5,878	9,502	9,847	8,075	7,283	10,345	11,389

Source: Authors' calculations from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México (EMIF-Norte).

Figure 1: Estimates of US-Mexico Immigration Flows by Immigration Documentation Status, 2005-2011



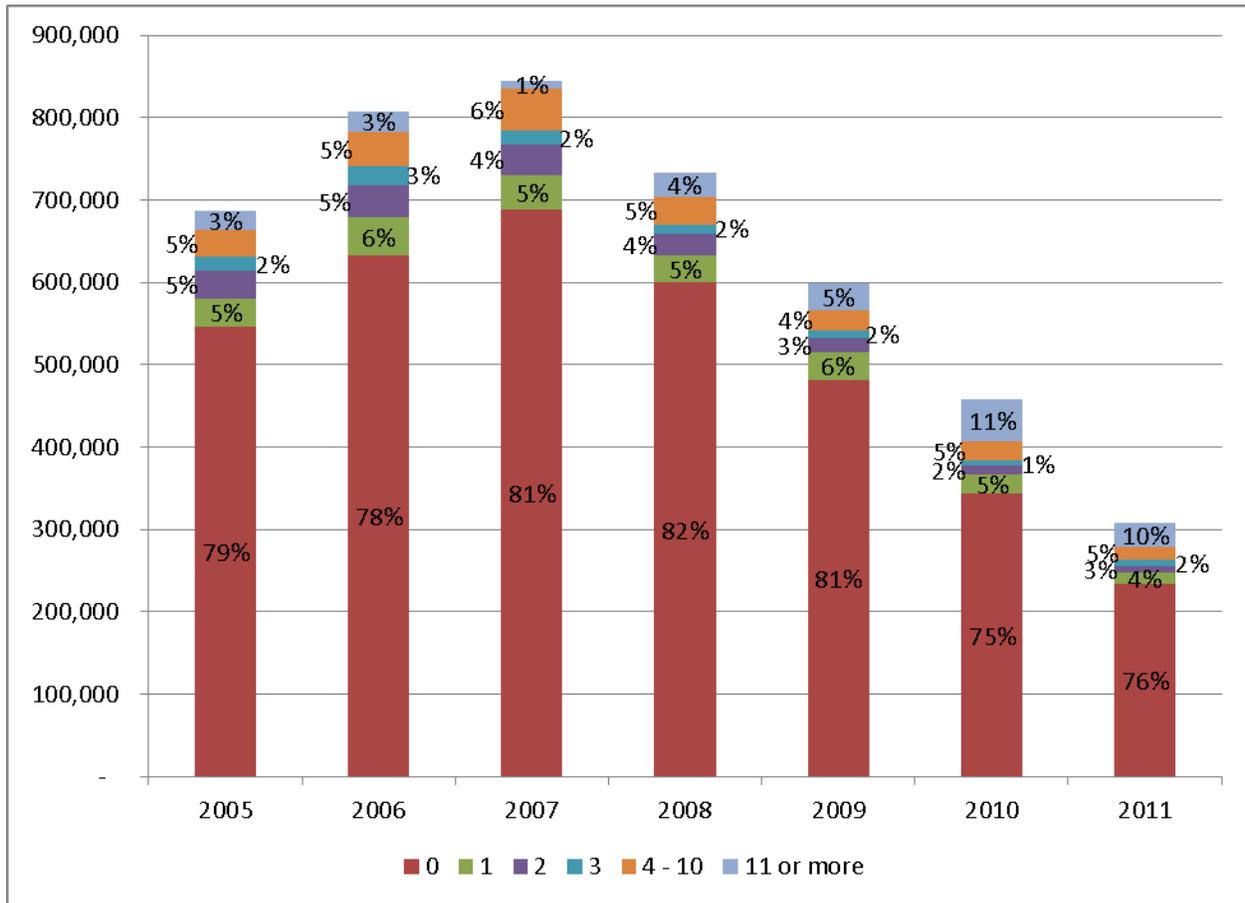
Source: Authors' calculations from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México (EMIF-Norte).

Table 2: Flows of Migrants Intending to Enter the United States from Mexico by Legal Immigration Status, 2005-2011

Immigration Status	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Documented to Work	68,192	60,259	59,914	78,952	82,948	92,942	53,764
Documented to Cross	104,818	87,871	112,237	170,669	158,526	152,493	95,871
Application Pending	5,055	13,874	9,579	12,581	6,742	9,780	4,287
No Documents	522,717	647,142	668,433	477,734	378,383	218,584	158,697
Total	700,782	809,146	850,163	739,937	626,600	473,800	312,619

Source: Authors' calculations from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México (EMIF-Norte).

Figure 2: Estimates of US-Mexico Immigration Flows by Number of Prior US Trips, 2005-2011



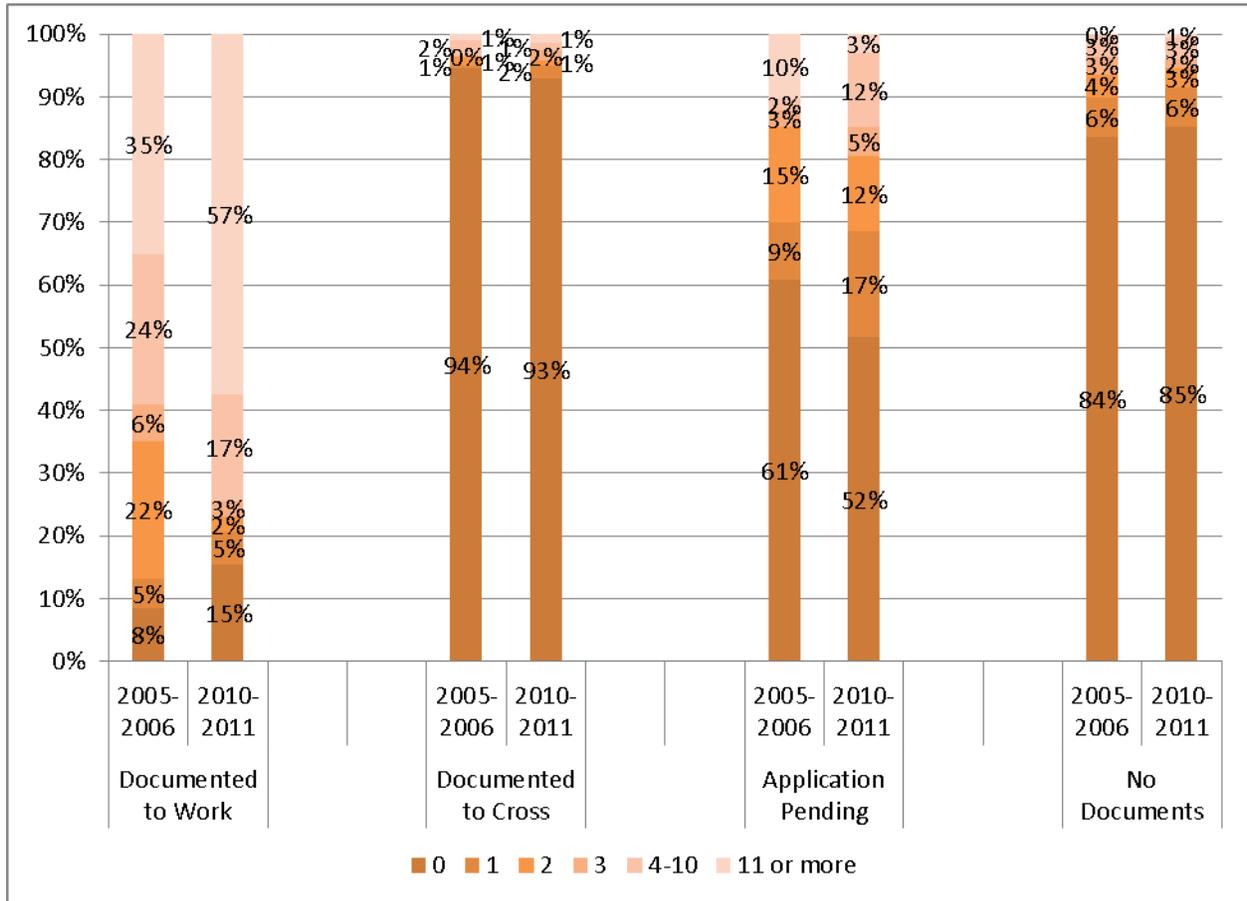
Source: Authors' calculations from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México (EMIF-Norte).

Table 3: Number of Prior US Trips, 2005-2011

Previous US Trips	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
0	545,512	632,096	687,848	599,676	481,830	343,034	233,862
1	34,875	46,842	41,804	33,501	33,249	24,056	13,723
2	33,839	39,483	37,861	26,218	16,934	9,713	7,970
3	17,057	23,038	16,265	11,125	10,110	6,432	7,296
4 - 10	32,334	41,520	51,402	33,757	23,751	23,892	15,606
11 or more	22,996	24,185	10,026	28,781	32,148	50,870	29,966
Total	686,613	807,165	845,206	733,057	598,021	457,998	308,423

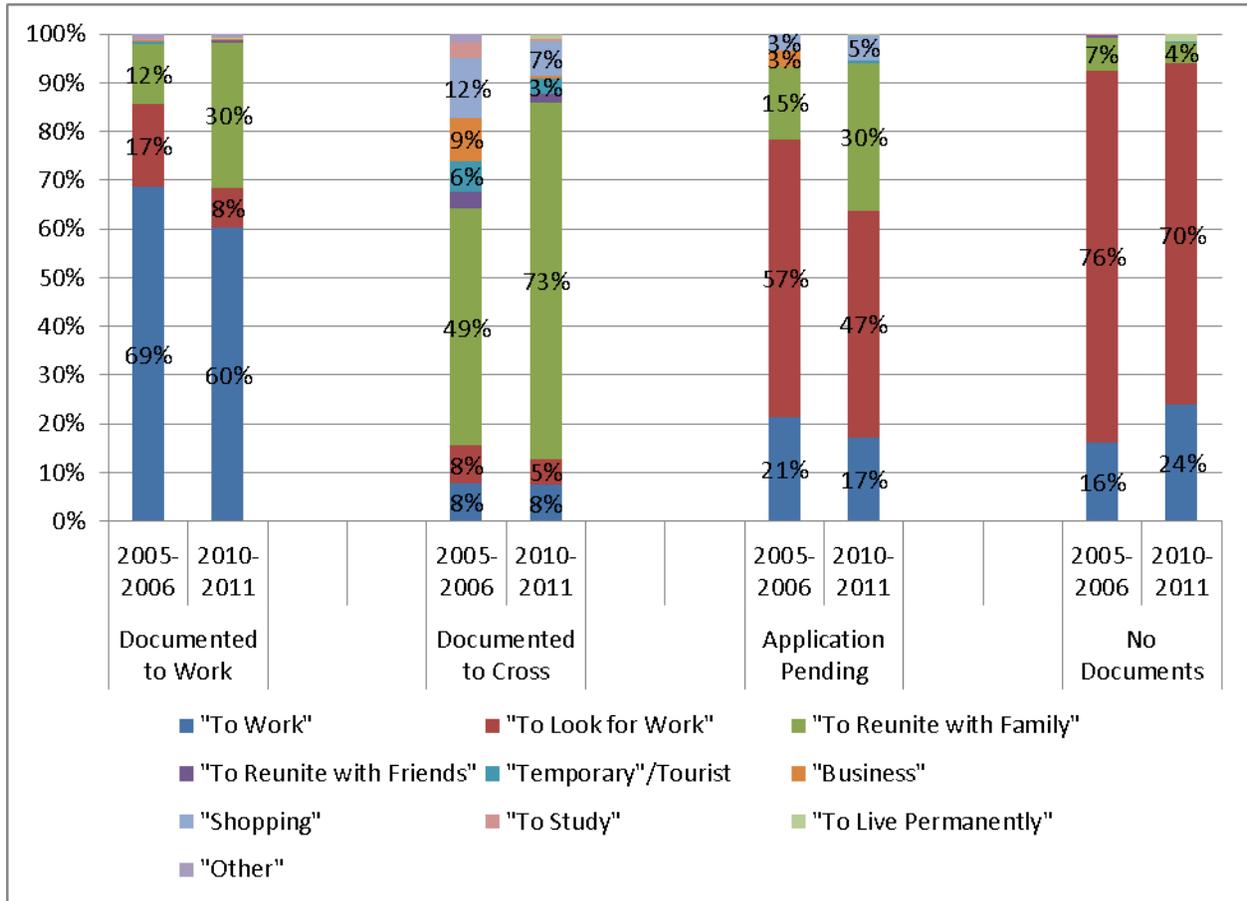
Source: Authors' calculations from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México (EMIF-Norte).

Figure 3: Distribution of Prior US Trips by Immigration Documentation Status, 2005-2006 & 2010-2011



Source: Authors' calculations from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México (EMIF-Norte).

Figure 4: Distribution of Primary Reason for Migration by Immigration Documentation Status, 2005-2006 & 2010-2011



Source: Authors' calculations from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México (EMIF-Norte).