

Migration Trends and Transnational Families in North America: Parenting Practice and Policies

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This paper reviews recent trends of regional migration in North America, experiences of transnational families and parenting across distance, and related mental health issues. We also provide a preliminary comparison of the reunification policies of Canada and the United States.

Regional migration trends in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico

Canada

In 2021, Canada had an estimated population of 38.25 million people. According to Statistics Canada, 58% of census respondents were born outside of the country, 10.2% of respondents had both parents born outside of the country, and 7.3% had one parent born outside of the country. The largest populations of people born outside of Canada migrated from India, China, and the Philippines, with counts exceeding 45,000 migrants. Between 2016 and 2021, the regions bordering the Atlantic Ocean and Great Lakes experienced the greatest population increases. In some cases, more than 10% (see Figure 1). In 2022, Canada surpassed its previous record for accepting immigrants in a single year. According to reports, this trend aligns with the government's goal of accepting 500,000 new migrants annually by 2025 (Cheatham & Roy, 2023).

A non-permanent resident refers to a person from another country with a usual place of residence in Canada and who has a work or study permit or who has claimed refugee status or asylum claimant. Family members living with work or study permit holders are also included unless these family members are already Canadian citizens, landed immigrants (permanent residents), or non-permanent residents themselves. Non-permanent residents between the ages of 20- and 34 years old accounted for 60.1% of the NPR population in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023b).

Currently, about one in four permanent residents in Canada are immigrants. This is the highest recorded growth since 1871, making Canada's population growth one of the highest in the world (see Figure 2). The largest share of immigrants migrate seeking employment opportunities as evidenced by the number of economic immigrants granted residency (see figure, 2020 Taxfilers Admitted in 2019). Migrants admitted under the economic category (e.g., skilled workers, skilled trades), have begun to drive Canada's labor market after the economic losses Canada experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (The Daily, 2022). Records indicate that the majority of recent immigrants fall within working age (i.e., 15 to 64 years old), benefiting a society that is aging and has fewer children.

Though the number of unauthorized migrants is difficult to ascertain, Sanchez et al. (2023) suspect that there are more than 500,000 undocumented migrants living in Canada. Reports suggest that the majority of unauthorized migrants come to the country legally but fall out of compliance when their documentation expires (Government of Canada, 2022b). For example, people enter the country with a tourist visa and continue to stay after the tourist visa expires. A Mexican-born migrant shared her story, describing her hope for better employment before her tourist visa expired (Ortiz-Garza, 2023).

United States

According to the United States Census Bureau (2022), 13.9% of the population in the U.S. was foreign-born in 2022. On average, the U.S. resettles 73,300 refugees annually through its resettlement program, and in 2021 and 2022 the numbers were 11,400 and 25,500 (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). In 2018, there were over 11 million unauthorized or undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. (Baker, 2021; USA Facts, 2022). Since 2007 unauthorized immigrant population from Mexico and South America decreased and that from Central America and Asia increased, and overall, since 2010 this population remained steady (Lopez, Passel, & Cohn, 2021). The trends of Immigration across borders in the U.S. are largely affected by U.S. immigration policies. The annual number of new legal permanent residents (LPRs; including green card holders; see Figure 4) has been fluctuating for decades, depending on the U.S. economic situation and government practices of immigration policies. For example, this number drastically increased during the 1990s and early 2000s mainly because of the Immigration Act of 1990, which aimed to accept immigrants based on their skills and education and eventually increased the numbers of general immigration visas (e.g., family-sponsored and employment-based) (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). The number of people who received U.S. green cards sharply decreased mainly because the Reforming American Immigration for a Strong Economy (RAISE) Act in 2017 cut legal immigration/green card numbers by half, and because there were the shutdowns of embassies and international travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wallace & Zepeda-Millán, 2020).

Regional economic status, financial opportunities, and other family-related reasons impacted the trends of within-country migration in the U.S. In recent years, there have been more in-migrants than out-migrants in the southern area of the U.S., and many of them are movers from abroad, especially from Central America (Toukabri et al., 2022). Northeast and Midwest have relatively lower migrations compared to migrations in South and West (Toukabri et al., 2022).

Mexico

Emigration refers to the act of leaving one's own country to settle permanently in another (Foster, 2001). More specifically, the emigration of human groups takes place for multiple reasons such as seeking safety, shelter, food, farmable lands, and human freedom. One notable trend in recent years has been the dynamic migration trend between Mexico and the United States.

In 2015-2016, approximately 11.6 million foreign-born individuals, the majority of whom hailed from Mexico, were estimated to be living and working in the United States (Baranowski & Smith, 2018). Notably, in 2016, this Mexican immigrant population made up roughly 50% of the total undocumented population, amounting to 5.6 million individuals. In 2020, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) of Mexico, the population was estimated to be around 126 million, and as of July 1, 2022, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the U.S. Hispanic population had reached 63.7 million, making it the largest racial or ethnic minority in the nation (see Figure 6).

Over the past four decades, the immigrant share of the U.S. population has steadily increased, with nearly one in six people in the United States being born outside the country (Handal et al., 2022). Among these immigrants, Mexican-born individuals account for 25% of the total.

Transnational ties are evident in four U.S. states along the Mexican border. These states also have the highest percentage of Latinx, particularly those of Mexican origin, within their local populations. New Mexico leads with 47.7%, followed by Texas at 38.6%, California at 38.6%, and Arizona at 30.5%. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) of Mexico, indicators of migratory movements include a wide array of reasons, reflecting the complexity of the migratory process (see Figure 7).

Economic factors represent a significant driver, with many people and families pursuing enhanced job opportunities and a higher quality of life, considering better wages, education, and others. Equally important is the desire for family reunification, as numerous Mexicans have relatives already established in the United States. Furthermore, some individuals are compelled to escape insecurity and violence in their home regions, seeking refuge and asylum. The various motivations underlying Mexican emigration emphasize deep connections with economic, social, and political forces.

Increases in global mobility, advances in communication infrastructure, demand-pull factors in the United States, and supply-push factors (Garcini et al., 2019) in sending countries make it likely that international migration to the United States will continue to grow. It's worth noting that before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant shift in migration patterns. According to the Pew Research Center, for the first time in several years, more Mexicans were moving to the United States than returning to Mexico between 2013 and 2018 (see Figure 8).

In the period spanning from 2009 to 2014, in contrast, approximately one million individuals departed from the U.S. to return to Mexico, while 870,000 Mexicans chose to make the opposite journey. This reversal in migration trends underscores the ongoing evolution of international migration dynamics. The decline in Mexican immigrants in the U.S. has been due mostly to a decrease in the undocumented immigrant population from Mexico (UIFM), in accordance with stricter enforcement of U.S. immigration laws.

Transnational Families

Among the families across the globe are observed four major reasons for family separation and migration -- economic opportunity, sociopolitical crisis, personal crisis, and normative cultural practice in pursuing education (de Guzman, Brown & Edwards, 2018). Migration and separation, regardless of reasons, are major events that disrupt family life and force family members to rearrange care for children and aging parents, create new ways to communicate and maintain relationships, and take on new roles and responsibilities.

Transnational family refers to family members who are geographically separated but maintain close family ties and connections across borders (Schmalzbauer, 2004; Shih, 2016). The number and proportions of transnational families in the U.S. largely increased in recent decades due to globalization and modernization. In 2022, one-quarter of children are with at least one immigrant parent in the U.S. child (age 0-17) population (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.a). Latin American immigrants (e.g., from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) constitute the largest proportion of transnational families population in the U.S. (see Figure 6), followed by Asian countries (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.b).

Many refugee families experience a lengthy traumatizing journey before and during migration. Even after migration, they face increased hardships and challenges such as limited access to resources, cultural adaptation, financial difficulties, and emotional distress from family separation (Lim, 2009). Given the number of refugees has increased dramatically in the U.S. in recent years (Tran & Lara-García, 2020), family separation continues to be a major challenge to many refugees and their family members (see Figure 5).

Long-distance connections can also bring changes to the family structure and functioning, depending on transnational families' composition (Van Hook & Glick, 2020). Migrated parents have ongoing negotiation processes about migration, especially for mothers, who often need to balance both working for money and providing emotional care to family members (Delgado, 2020; Dreby & Adkins, 2010; Schmalzbauer, 2004). Transnational couple relationship often experiences shifting power to women in a new sociocultural, economic context of gendered ideologies (Acedera & Yeoh, 2020; Bryceson, 2019; Paul, 2015). For example, Dreby & Adkins (2010) illustrated how Mexican-migrated women would feel higher levels of freedom in post-migration than Mexican-migrated men because of increased rates of labor participation in women. Mexican transnational families are likely to encounter significant "systemic" obstacles such as poverty, disparities in health and education, and racism. These families have one or more members residing in Mexico while others are living in another country, notably the United States.

Recent transnational families with children left behind are found to have several distinct characteristics, for example, reconfiguration of the family (de Guzman, Brown, & Edwards, 2018), parenting through digital technology (Madianou & Miller, 2011), kinship care and care rearrangement for children, conflicts upon reunification between family members, including couples, parents and children, and siblings, i.e., children left behind and other children (Carling, Manjivar, & Schmalzbauer, 2012). In many cases, migrated mothers and/or fathers would seek better economic opportunities (i.e., labor migration) while leaving other family members, especially children, behind in their home country. While transnational parents will maintain familyhood through technological communications and family reunification (Van Hook & Glick, 2020), left-behind children (LBC) inevitably face increased developmental risks due to their parental absence. Similarly, with children experiencing transnational motherhood, LBCs have higher risks of having depression and anxiety, feeling unwanted, and dropping out of school compared to children with accompanied parents (Delgado, 2020). Transnational families have to negotiate life that crosses borders "economically, socially, and emotionally, including transnational family life" (Redmond & Martin, 2023, p.773).

In some cases, Chinese and South Korean migrant parents have adopted social reproduction strategies by sending their children back to their home country to be raised by family members. This strategy helps to minimize stressors associated with education (Okazaki & Kim, 2018), employment outside the home, daily household responsibilities, and childcare (Man & Chou, 2020). These and other transnational practices have been utilized by Chinese migrants to Canada and the U.S. for decades, as there is a documented history of Chinese men and women migrating to Canada for paid work and educational opportunities. Transnational migratory patterns are

“dynamic and fluid, involving multiple patterns of migration for varying lengths of time which may not eventually result in permanent family reunification” (Man & Chou, 2020, p. 357).

In transnational families, informal care for aging parents is rearranged through negotiation and managed between family members in separate countries, often at significant distances. These negotiations and management plans are often complex and dynamic. In a qualitative study involving 29 Canadian residents who were responsible for the care of a relative living outside of the country, data highlighted the use of communication technology as a central facilitator in navigating care arrangements (Andruske & O’Connor, 2020).

Transnational Motherhood, Families and Mental Health

Parenting and parenthood are gendered roles and so are transnational parenting and parenthood. Although transnational fatherhood is equally important to examine, this current paper focuses on transnational motherhood. Transnational motherhood pertains to the efforts made by migrant mothers to meet their maternal responsibilities by providing their children with essential support, such as financial assistance, as well as emotional care through sustained and extended telephone conversations (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). These mothers “exchange their physical presence and nurturing for their children’s material well-being” (Horton, 2009, p. 29).

Transnational mothers are involved in parenting whether they are physically present or not. Migrant Polish mothers than fathers were expected to be a caregiver (Ryan et al., 2009). In societies where social and religious beliefs define and influence “proper mothering,” migrant mothers are unlikely viewed to live up to this traditional role’s expectations. Migrant mothers who are socialized into this gendered role may feel they abandoned their children and thus have a strong feeling of guilt when they decide to leave their families for work and future financial security.

Previous empirical studies have found that mother-child separation during the migration process has various negative impacts on both mothers’ mental health and children’s development (Horton, 2009; McCabe et al., 2017; Millman, 2013). Even after the separations, the reunion between mothers and children has different meanings and consequences depending on their situations and the multiple uncertainties they have encountered (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). The children who were left behind in their homelands due to mothers’ migration have been found to face multiple risks for poor well-being and having a hard time navigating new life when they were reunited with their mothers in the U.S. These children continued to struggle in their adolescence (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; McCabe et al., 2017). Father and child separation also seems to have a negative impact on migrated fathers. Research shows stiffer border policies are linked to more drinking problems among Mexican and Latin American migrant fathers who were not able to visit loved ones (Worby & Organista, 2007).

Immigrant and transnational families are faced with unique psychosocial challenges to their mental well-being that include family separation, isolation, and loss of support. Language barriers and navigating a new cultural context also present challenges. Engagement with community-based organizations that take a holistic approach to settlement and resettlement may serve as a protective factor for immigrant and transnational families (Aubé et al., 2019). A

stronger measure to strengthen and protect transnational families is to address systemic barriers through effective policies.

Reunification Policy Comparison

Both Canada and the U.S. have adopted new immigration measures to reunite families who are currently separated by borders. According to the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS, 2023), “The Family Reunification Parole process allows for parole only on a case-by-case and temporary basis upon a demonstration of urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit, as well as a demonstration that the beneficiary warrants a favorable exercise of discretion.” Through the policy program, U.S. citizens and people with permanent residency can submit petitions on behalf of their spouses, children under the age of 21, and in some cases parents, siblings, and unmarried adult children.

In the past 10 years, the United States has used Family Reunification Parole Process programs to bring separated family members in different countries to the U.S. For example, these programs were used in 2007 for Cubans, in 2014 for Haitians, and recently for Afghans, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Ecuador (DHS/CIS, 2023). In May 2023, the U.S. Department of State and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced sweeping new measures, “to further reduce unlawful migration across the Western Hemisphere, significantly expand lawful pathways for protection, and facilitate the safe, orderly, and humane processing of migrants” (U.S. Department of State, 2023). The new family reunification parole processes were changed for certain populations, especially from Central America, and available for their immediate family members to reunite (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Moreover, refugees also have different options and programs to reunite with their family members; however, each program has different eligibility requirements (The UN Refugee Agency, n.d.; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023). U.S. law also requires that only refugees’ immediate family members can request reunification, which only includes the children who are unmarried and under 21 years old), spouse, or parent of the person requesting reunification (The UN Refugee Agency, n.d.).

A government review of family reunification efforts through a governmental interagency task force reported that in two years the task force had reunited 600 children with their families who were separated under the “zero tolerance” of the previous administration (DHS, February 2, 2023). Despite the efforts to bring these children to their families are successful, many separated families are waiting for years to be united. Bélanger and Candiz (2020) describe family reunification as a period of waiting with a central tension of mobility and immobility. In many cases, family members on either end are waiting to provide care for a relative (i.e., grandparents waiting to migrate to provide care for a new child, or adult children waiting to provide care for an aging parent). Charles Huck, an Atlanta-based immigration attorney wrote in his blog there was a severe case backlog, almost two million family-based petitions waiting to be adjudicated.

The Canadian government offers different ways to immigrate to Canada. Programs that are directly related to family reunification include family sponsorship and caregiver policies. The family sponsorship program allows for the sponsorship of spouses, common-law partners, conjugal partners, dependent children, children to be adopted, parents, grandparents, and other eligible relatives. As of November 2022, Canada’s family sponsorship program gave permanent

residency to over 85,570 individuals. In 2022, the number of individuals interested in sponsoring their parents and grandparents exceeded the number of applications the Department could accept to meet its target of randomly accepting 15,000 completed applications (Government of Canada, 2022a).

It is worth noting that the Canadian government brings families together with simple and quick procedures and meanwhile to relieve the lack of workers in labor markets, for example, by cutting down the processing time of issuing temporary resident visas (TRV) to spousal applicants and extending open work permit time. Canada appears to adopt a more family-friendly and inclusive policy than the U.S. as reflected by the remarks of Fraser, Canadian Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRC) (IRC, 2023).

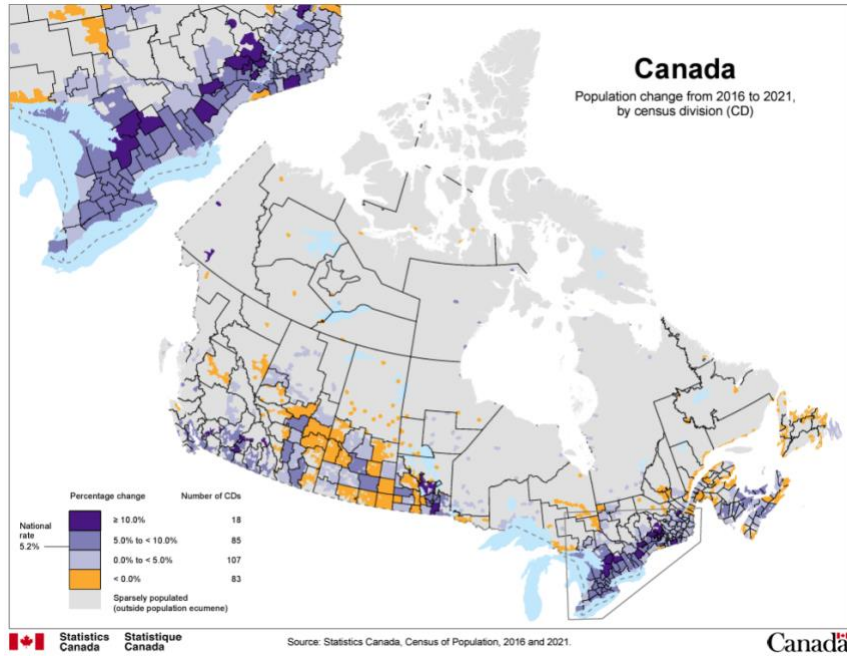
“Family reunification through immigration is not only a matter of compassion; it is a fundamental pillar of Canadian society. Today's announcement is a mandate commitment to help build inclusive and resilient communities. We are supporting Canadians and newcomers by reuniting families faster and also allowing them to work and support themselves more quickly once they're here. By doing so, Canada is helping newcomers achieve their true potential, while also strengthening Canada's economy and social fabric.”

– The Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship

Recommendations

Figures

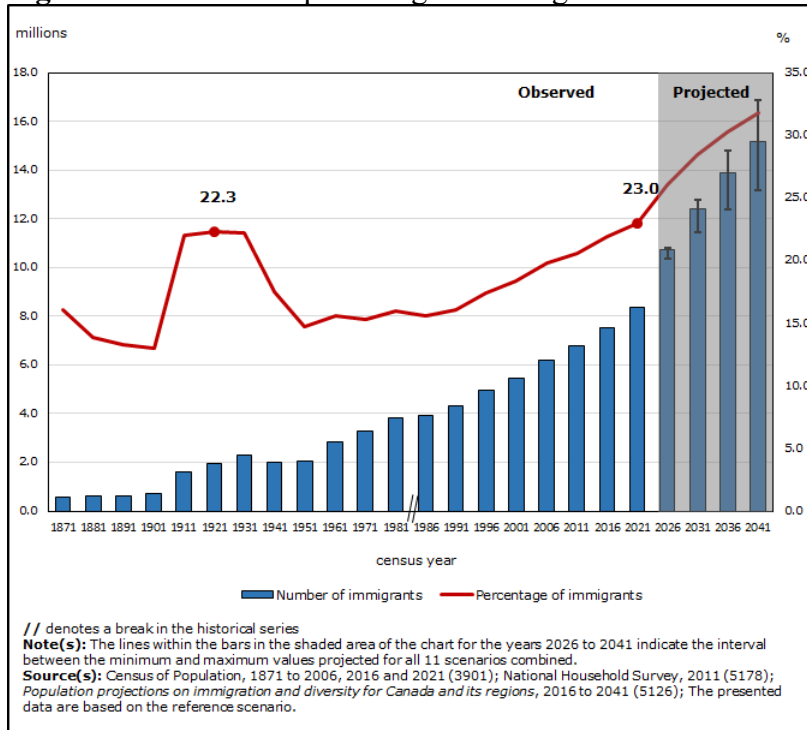
Figure 1. Canada population change



Source: Statistics Canada, Census Division, Population change from 2016 to 2021.

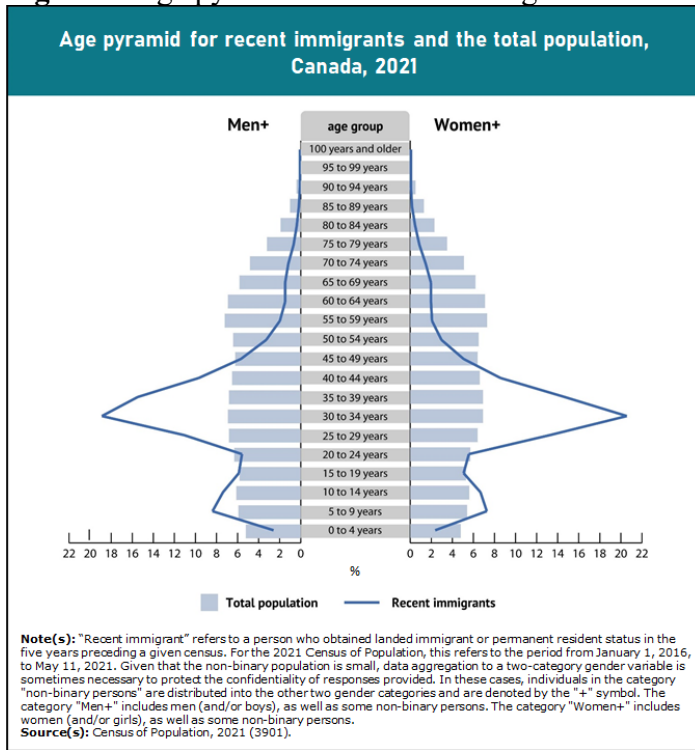
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Figure 2. Number and percentage of immigrants in Canada



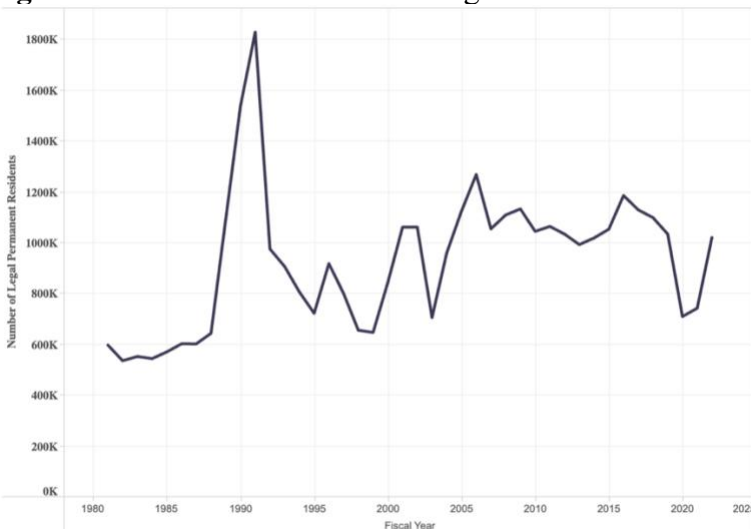
Source: Statistics Canada, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/g-a001-eng.htm>

Figure 3. Age pyramid for Recent Immigrants and the Total Population, Canada, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/g-a002-eng.htm>

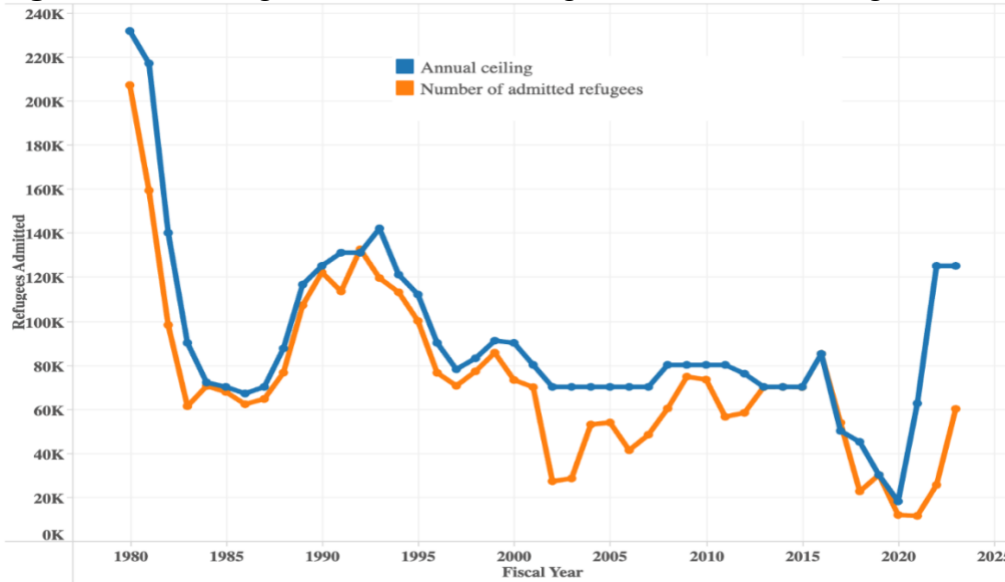
Figure 4. Annual Number of U.S. Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs), Fiscal Years 1980-2022



Notes: These data represent persons admitted for lawful permanent residence during the 12-month fiscal year ending September 30 of the year designated.

Source: Migration Policy Institute. Tabulations of U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (various years). Available at www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm.

Figure 5. U.S. Refugee Admissions & Refugee Resettlement Ceilings, Fiscal Years 1980-2023

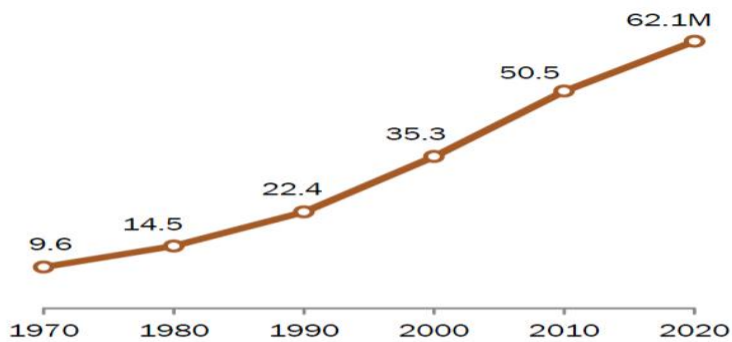


Notes: For tracking the sources of data to create this graph, see the original source below.

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI). Analysis of WRAPS data from the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. Available at www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/.

Figure 6. U.S. Hispanic Population Reached more than 62 Million in 2020

In millions



Note: Population totals are as of April 1 each year. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1970-1980 estimates based on decennial censuses (see 2008 report "U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050"), 1990-2020 PL94-171 census data.

Source: Pew Research Center (2022). A brief statistical portrait of U.S. Hispanics.

Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/06/14/a-brief-statistical-portrait-of-u-s-hispanics/>

Figure 7. Percentage distribution of international emigrants due to emigration

Percentage
2018

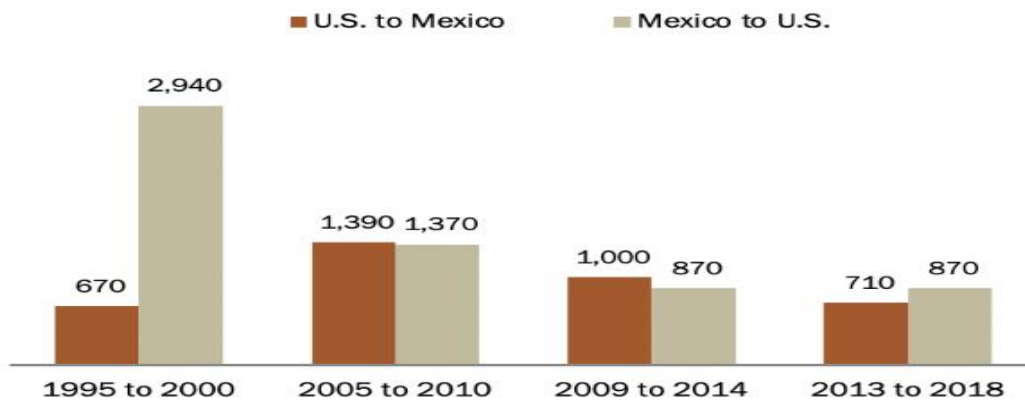
Indicator ^{/a}	Porcentaje
	2018
Search for work or work	67.7
Meeting with the family	14.1
Studies	12.2
Public insecurity or violence	0.8
Immigration regularization	0.2
Another reason	0.0
Not specified	5.0

Notes and Calls:
From August 2013 to October 5, 2018.
Fountain:
National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID) (/programas/enadid/2018/)

Available at <https://www.inegi.org.mx/temas/migracion/>

Figure 8. Net Migration from Mexico to U.S. returned to positive between 2013-2018

In thousands



Note: Figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000. Estimates are for February 1995 through February 2000, June 2005 through June 2010, August 2009 through August 2014, and August 2013 through August 2018. Migration from the U.S. to Mexico includes persons born in Mexico, the U.S., and elsewhere; Mexico to U.S. includes Mexican-born persons only. Source: 1995-2000 and 2005-2010: Passel, Cohn and Gonzalez-Barrera (2012); 2009-2014: Gonzalez-Barrera (2015); 2013-2018 U.S. to Mexico: Pew Research Center estimates from population, household and migrant microdata samples of 2018 ENADID; Mexico to the U.S.: based on Pew Research Center estimates from augmented March supplement to the 2013-2018 Current Population Survey and augmented 2013-2018 American Community Survey. Estimate for 2018 based on the American Community Survey is preliminary.

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Source: Pew Research, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/09/before-covid-19-more-mexicans-came-to-the-u-s-than-left-for-mexico-for-the-first-time-in-years/>

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<https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/news-releases/dhs-announces-family-reunification-parole-process-for-ecuador>
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