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**Foundations of U.S. Immigration Control Policy: A  
Study of Information Transmission to Mexican  
Migrants and the Role of Information as a Deterrent at  
the Border**

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Senior Honors Thesis, University of California, San Diego

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and the Role of Information as a Deterrent at the Border**



**Adam L. Sherry**



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A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to  
the Department of Political Science,  
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## ***Introduction***

## **Introduction**

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The ability to designate who will be granted the benefits of citizenship is one of the most cherished prerogatives of the modern nation-state. Elaborate governmental bureaucracies are constructed to regulate the number and character of population inflows. Despite these efforts, unauthorized immigration has been a constant feature of American life since the 1920s, when the first effort was made to secure the U.S.-Mexico border. Current public debate regarding immigration encompasses topics ranging from health care system impacts to driver's licenses, from human rights to state's rights, from racial purity to state-sponsored multiculturalism.

The government takes this public debate into account when designing policy that is intended to “regulate the flows of undocumented migrants”<sup>1</sup>. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (~~INS~~), known since 2003 as the Bureau of Customs and

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Immigration Enforcement, has evolved into the main arm of the government responsible for the implementation of immigration control measures. As of 1960, the INS' budget was less than \$50 million; by 1982, its budget had increased to \$200 million. In the last ten years, the immigration enforcement budget more than tripled, reaching \$5.5 billion in Fiscal Year 2002, making the INS the nation's second largest law enforcement agency, after the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Cornelius: 2001).

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Despite the greatly increased funding and governmental attention to border enforcement, highly motivated Mexican migrants in very large numbers continue to leave their home communities and enter the United States and its labor markets. The number of unauthorized migrants being apprehended along the U.S.-Mexico border was essentially the same in 2003 as it was ten years earlier, at the beginning of a period of unprecedented U.S. Government investment in border control, and the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey data show continued strong growth in the stock of undocumented immigrants during this period. In order for immigration controls to serve as an effective deterrent, they "will have to change well-established perceptions, behavior patterns, and socialization process" among prospective Mexican economic migrants. Additionally, "expectations about finding well paid work in the United States, with or without legal entry documents, will have to be lowered, especially among prospective first-time migrants" (Cornelius: 2001).

There are two plausible explanations for the unresponsiveness of migration flows to immigration control policies. First, it is possible that U.S. immigration control policies have not been effective in altering the real cost/benefit ratio of migration to the United States, as perceived by the average Mexican economic migrant. A second possible

explanation is that the information possessed by potential migrants concerning the costs and benefits of migration is not sufficiently detailed or accurate.

Current theoretical models do much to explore the economic motivation for the migration, the social networks through which information could pass, as well as the factors within sending communities that may serve to promote migration. These models rest largely on the assumption that migrants are rational actors who use the information available to them to make a decision [to pursue](#) marginal increases in well-being. But the scholars using such models usually fail to assess the quality of the information entering into decisions to migrate. This thesis investigates migrants' information about the costs, risks, and benefits of unauthorized migration to the United States, as a way of explaining the limited effectiveness of U.S. immigration control policies.

### **Rafael and José**

To gain a better insight into the behavior that these policies seek to modify, we examine the cases of two Mexican migrants whom I interviewed in December 2003. When interviewing Raphael and José, I was immediately aware of some basic similarities. Both men shared a spirit of determination, a quick smile, and a desire to work in the United States. Both men lacked documents that would allow them to cross the border at an official checkpoint. After talking with them for some time, differences began to surface. Where Raphael was optimistic, José seemed resigned. José had a good idea of what he was undertaking in an undocumented migration, while Raphael was equipped with a colorful array of untested expectations. After concluding interviews with both men, I became aware that their similarities could be explained by their social



origins in a country with a stark division between rich and poor, and that their dissimilarities could be explained by differences in their migration histories, recounted below in their own words.

**Rafael<sup>1</sup>**

I am 20 years old. My family had enough money to put me through school until *preparatoria*<sup>2</sup>, but I live in Chiapas, the poorest state in Mexico, and there is nothing for me here. If I can't put my education to use, at least I can make money like my brother and cousin. They are living the life I want to be living. My cousin and brother left Chiapas and crossed the border three years ago. We don't talk often, but when we do they tell me they make good money landscaping and say they like the North. They never mention if they are treated well, or if they work long hours, but they say life in the United States is good.

My brother and cousin crossed the border with ease, but it cost them. They paid a coyote. They have offered to send me \$1800 to hire a coyote to take me across, but I would have to wait for two months for the money to arrive. I can't wait. I don't have a job in America yet but I will get one when I arrive. Never has anyone returned from America because he couldn't find a job. It won't take longer than one day to find work as a landscaper. Getting a job in the United States is not hard, like it is in Chiapas. I do not know how much money I will be paid, but I know I will

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<sup>1</sup> The family names of all interviewees referenced in this paper have been withheld in the interest of privacy.

<sup>2</sup> In Mexico, *preparatoria* is the level schooling which follows their equivalent of high school.

be paid well. There is a good chance that my employer will even pay for health care. I plan to work very hard to impress my boss and earn a promotion. The money I will send home will make my parents proud. All I have to do is cross.

I don't want to wait in Tijuana for two months. Eighteen hundred dollars is too much money, and I know I can cross on my own. I heard a man from Chiapas froze to death in the desert, and people at the border tell me to watch out for bandits. I hear talk about Operation Gatekeeper, and although I am not sure what it is, I know I can sneak past the border without papers. None of these things are problems. Only if my mother were to get sick would I turn back now. I know crossing the border is dangerous, but I must face these risks if I want to earn good money.

**José**

I am 27 years old. In my hometown in Jalisco, Mexico I earned 25 dollars a week working construction. It was barely enough to survive and not enough to live properly, so when I was 19 I crossed the border in search of a better life. I found it in Los Angeles. Everyone can find work in L.A., unlike Jalisco. As soon as I arrive in Los Angeles I will be making \$400 a week cleaning up construction sites. I will not have health care, but there is a chance I may be promoted if I work hard enough. Rent, utilities, food and everything else is expensive in America, but I will still have enough money to support my wife and son in L.A. and send the extra money to relatives in Jalisco.

As I have tried to cross, Border Patrol agents have captured me and sent me back to Tijuana three times this month, but I will not give up. My wife, my son and my only hope of making good money are in Los Angeles. I have crossed the border six times before. The first time, I had no idea how hard it would be, but now I know. I don't worry much about the cold weather or bandits. I am most concerned about Border Patrol agents and finding a way around them. There are more agents at the border these days which makes getting caught more likely. As I mentioned, I have already been captured three times this trip, but giving up is not an option. I will make it across the border to my family and my job. Nothing will stop me.

### **Explanatory Models**

A phenomenon involving millions of people from thousands of communities making the decision to migrate is not likely to be easily explained. Explanatory models may focus on the migrant as a rational economic actor, historical circumstances motivating the migration, the role of personal contacts (friends, relatives, potential employers) in encouraging migration, or migratory traditions within communities of origin. Each of these theoretical approaches increases our understanding of the complex migratory phenomenon. However, using several of these complementary theories together provides a more complete understanding.

### Neo-Classical Economic Theory

Neo-classical economic theory focuses on the decision to migrate from the perspective of the individual rational economic migrant. As described by this model, disparities in economic conditions between the sending and receiving countries create migratory flows. Such disparities either push the migrant from his home community or pull him toward the receiving community (Faist: 2000). Migratory flows are seen as being composed of individual rational actors responding to macro-level economic conditions (Faist: 2000). The rational decision-making process of the migrant seeks marginal increases in living standards. The pursuit of a marginal increase in living standards is the crucial factor that allows the push and pull factors to operate independently of each other. Independent operation is useful in explaining how migratory outflows can be the result of either deteriorating economic conditions in the sending area, or increases in labor demand in the receiving country, or a combination of the two.

While neo-classical economic theory is useful in describing some elements of the complex migratory phenomenon, it is ultimately incomplete. The model fails to explain why residents of the poorest regions are not the first to migrate. Migration is absent from some of the places with the strongest push factors; these localities are composed of members who stand to gain the most in regards to marginal increases in living conditions. On a country level, the model fails to describe why the poorest segments of a given society are not those who migrate first or most frequently. In reference to Mexican migration to the United States, this model fails to explain why Mexican nationals, who come from a country with an intermediate level of development, are by far the largest

contingent of foreign workers arriving in the United States. In addition, neo-classical economic theory is unable to explain the emergence of transnational behaviors that link particular sending and receiving communities. It was with these shortcomings in mind that the following theories of “social networks” and “sending community cultures” were developed.

### **Alternative Models**

Social network theory stresses the importance of family ties and other social connections between prospective migrants and migrants who have already settled into receiving communities, as an explanation for migratory flows. “Social networks provide the mechanisms for connecting an initial, highly selective group of seedbed immigrants with a gradually growing base of followers back home. Those connections rely on social relationships developed prior to the migration decision and in which trust is taken for granted. Consequently, the network provides durable, efficient conduits for the flow of information and support” (Waldinger: 1997).

Once an initial group of migrants has established such a network, it is both self-perpetuating and expansionary. Each new migrant [takes](#) on the role of recruiting other migrants and facilitates their migration, through tips on how to gain entry into the receiving country, locate affordable housing, and seek employment (Stalker: 1994). Such assistance has the effect of lowering the costs of migration to potential migrants while increasing the potential gains. As the social network consolidates [itself](#) over time, it can provide more and more assistance to potential migrants, lowering their costs and risks.

Another theoretical approach emphasizes the importance of communal norms supporting migration. In communities where social networks have successfully [supported](#)

migration for multiple generations, a culture of migration may come to exist. Such a culture makes international labor migration almost a communal rite of passage. Specific elements of a culture of migration include the expectation that a large part of one's working life will be spent abroad, and the belief that emigration is the only sure way of improving one's economic situation (Cornelius: 1998). In communities with a culture of migration, it is common to have particular age groups working in the United States. It is within these sending communities that young people are socialized to participate in an international labor migration. This theory recognizes home-community socialization as a distinct factor contributing to international migration.

While models that stress social networks and sending-community cultures of emigration address many of the shortcomings of the neo-classical economics model of migration, they too have some important limitations. The most commonly cited shortcoming of social network theory is that cannot explain the decision of the "pioneer migrant" to migrate. The theory explains how migratory networks get consolidated but not how they get started. The sending community culture argument fails to explain why a tradition of emigration develops in some communities but not in others, even in the same regions. Sending culture theory highlights another element contributing to decisions to migrate yet the phenomenon demands a more complete explanation.

### **Quality of Information: A Key Missing Ingredient of Standard Models of Migration**

A common deficiency of three explanatory models discussed above is that the rational underpinning of migratory behavior is underdeveloped in these theories. A fundamental assumption in a rational decision-making model is that an actor is limited by the quality of information he possesses. Neo-classical economic theory gives primacy to

the migrant as a rational actor but fails to describe how the actor obtains informational inputs. Social network theory gives a plausible explanation of how information is shared, but it fails to critically examine the quality of information. Network theory also fails to examine the constraints placed on information-sharing among economically disadvantaged actors located in different countries.

In the case of Mexican migration to the United States, another important constraint on the ability to transmit information through social networks is stronger border enforcement, especially in the post-1993 period. One of the primary means of transferring pertinent information to potential migrants has been the regular return of migrants to sending communities. Prior to increases in border vigilance, undocumented migrants were able to engage in “shuttle” migration, working in the United States for a portion of each year and spending the rest of the year in their home community in Mexico. It was during these periods in their home communities that [the returning migrants shared](#) much of the information regarding the migration process with sending community residents. Increased border enforcement activities since 1993 have caused a dramatic decline in shuttle migration. This is a major new constraint on information flows.

[A](#) calculation of perceived costs and benefits, in pursuit of marginal increases in living standards, [is the basis](#) upon which the decision [to migrate](#) is made. [Poor quality of informational](#) inputs limits the migrant’s perception of costs and benefits. An investigation of the quality of these informational inputs will allow us to understand why migration flows have not responded more closely to changes in border enforcement policies. A better understanding of the quality of the information inputs can help us to

differentiate between a well-informed migrant who is willing to accept the costs of migration in pursuit of known benefits and the ill-informed migrant who makes a decision to migrate using information that is not sufficiently accurate or detailed.

### **Research Design**

The decision whether or not to migrate is the product of a calculation by which the prospective migrant weighs the costs of the migration against the gains they believe are attainable by the move.

**Decision to Migrate = Perceived Benefits – Perceived Costs of Migration**

**Perceived Benefits > Perceived Costs: Decision to Migrate = Yes**

**Perceived Benefits < Perceived Costs: Decision to Migrate = No**

U.S. immigration control measures attempt to affect the inputs of this calculation so as to deter undocumented migration. Post-1993 border enforcement operations were meant to raise the cost of undocumented migration by increasing the risk of physical harm. Information regarding these policies is then supposed to travel to prospective migrants before they have left their home communities. It is at this point, according to policy design, that a migrant will perceive a danger associated with clandestine entry that will be greater than the perceived benefits to be gained from migration, resulting in a decision not to migrate.

By interviewing Mexican migrants I was able to conduct an exploratory investigation into the transmission of information between migrants and receiving-country sources. Specifically, I studied the breadth of information reaching migrants in the pre-migration period, the effects of social norms on information sharing, and the



deterrent effect of information regarding the perils of unauthorized migration under current border enforcement conditions.

I interviewed Mexican occupants of La Casa del Migrante in Tijuana, Baja California<sup>3</sup>. The Scalibrini Order of Catholic monks operates this facility, which provides temporary shelter and other forms of assistance to migrant men in transit to the United States. While some occupants of La Casa del Migrante may have been recently deported and decided to return to their communities of origin, a majority of the guests are still in the process of migrating to the United States. It cannot be claimed that the guests of the shelter are statistically representative of the universe of Mexican men making an undocumented migration. Tijuana is, however, one of the most highly used border crossing points for undocumented Mexican migrants. The city is host to hundreds of false-document vendors, professional people-smugglers (“*coyotes*”), and other providers of services to migrants in transit. La Casa del Migrante, in particular, is a good location from which to draw cases because of the wide variety of guests it houses. The limited-stay nature of the shelter combined with its large capacity yields a group of men who are diverse in terms of sending communities in Mexico as well as intended U.S. destinations. The migrants arrive at the shelter by various means, assisted by a variety of personal contacts, and seeking many different types of employment in the United States.

La Casa del Migrante does receive some migrants originating in Central and South America, but since this investigation is limited to Mexican migrants, such guests

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<sup>3</sup> While researching locations where I could collect interviews, I discovered this location six months prior to my first interview. In order to assess the character of the population and build a rapport with the directors of the shelter, I spent two months volunteering at the shelter for approximately 35 hours a week. They receive journalists and photojournalists, but according to the director this was the first sustained sampling project to be conducted at the facility.

were not included in the interviewee group. The adult-male-only clientele of the shelter also means that females and children under the age of fifteen were not interviewed. Thus, the universe for this study is defined as male guests of La Casa [del](#) Migrante, fifteen years of age or older, whose point of origin is within Mexico and who are en route to the United States. I was aided by information collected by the staff of La Casa del Migrante regarding the country of origin of the migrants. I approached Mexican migrants individually and began a casual conversation intended to discover if they had come to Tijuana with the intention of crossing. If they indicated they had, I explained that I was a student and asked if I could interview them. Throughout more than three weeks of daily interviews only three U.S.-bound Mexican migrants declined to participate. The data were gathered through 40 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Sixty-five standard questions were asked, including open-ended and closed items, with allowances for lines of inquiry not directly related to the study objectives. The administrators of La Casa del Migrante provided full access and cooperation but were not present at any of the interviews.

I predict that a large proportion of the migrants interviewed will have “social network” contacts in the United States, but the information they were able to obtain from these sources before heading to the border will be of a limited scope. I expect to see the breadth of topics engaged to be limited to those that are likely to be mentioned in casual conversation. [I believe these limitations will be due to the means of communication, as well as social norms.](#) Once at the border, I predict that migrants will possess information suggesting that unauthorized border-crossing is a difficult and dangerous endeavor. [Due to perceptions of American wages and employment opportunities that I expect to find in](#)

the migrants' responses, I do not think this information will have a deterrent effect. I expect that a majority will make the decision to continue their migration.



## ***Chapter 1***

## **Chapter 1: History of U.S. Attempts to Control Migratory Flows**

Immigration scholar Philip Martin has described the U.S. government's approach to immigration control during most of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as "laissez-faire" (Martin 2004). This is a fair categorization of a period in U.S. history when employers openly recruited Mexican laborers with very little government interference. During this century, which saw a massive annexation resulting from the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Gadsden Purchase, population increases could not keep pace with the geographical expansion of U.S. territories. Despite the fact that the U.S. government was actively promoting a Westward movement with generous land grants, there was a substantial demand for Mexican labor.

One of the earliest large-scale projects creating this demand was the construction of a railroad network that was to connect the American West with shipping operations on

the East Coast. In addition to Asian laborers, railroad contractors actively recruited laborers from Mexico. They did so by sending scouts into Mexican communities offering jobs to those who were willing to travel north, often at the employer's expense, to participate in railroad construction. Faced with a weak Mexican economy and plagued by political instability, many Mexicans went north despite the harsh working conditions and meager pay. The interdependence of an American economy in need of labor and a Mexican workforce eager to escape an unstable and faltering Mexican economy would be a recurring feature in the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico in the years to come.

The Mexican presence in the United States' labor force expanded in subsequent years into American military service. In the 1840's, immigrants comprised one third of army regulars, and even larger proportions of the state militias (Martin: 2004). As the 1800s were concluding, groups of Mexican laborers began to enter the Texas labor market to harvest cotton. At the same time, Mexicans represented a majority of those involved in sheep herding and shearing (Reisler: 1976). In the first decade of the 1900s, extensive irrigation projects coincided with the completion of the railroad projects to create an environment that would further increase demand for Mexican labor. The irrigation of new tracts of land in the American southwest created huge areas of land that could be cultivated for commercial agricultural production. While the railways provided a means for delivering these products to U.S. markets, an ample American labor force still did not exist. In response to recruitment efforts, and of their own initiative, Mexicans supplied the labor needed to drive this enterprise.

During this time, the U.S. government was ill informed concerning the numbers of Mexicans who were entering this country, as well as to the proportions that were settling permanently. Until 1908, the government did not keep any records of the numbers of Mexicans that were entering the country through land borders (Reisler: 1976). In addition to an absence of any large-scale data gathering, there were no substantial border regulations or worksite enforcement. An informed observer of the immigration process of the era estimates that by 1907, 60,000 Mexicans were entering the United States annually, and twenty-five to thirty three percent did not return to their sending communities (Reisler: 1976). Census figures from the period indicate similar trends. In 1900, 103,393 Mexican-born persons had taken up residence in the United States. In 1910, the numbers had increased to 221,915. Ten years later, the numbers had more than doubled to reach 486,418 people (Reisler: 1976).

In this early era of Mexican migration to the United States, [it seems that](#) government policies were able to achieve their goal of providing a labor force to burgeoning U.S. commercial interests. Their ability to promote inflows [of manual](#) laborers [did](#) not match their ability to ensure these [laborers' return](#) to their communities of origin once their term of employment had ended. Nor was the U.S. government's enthusiasm for adding this new group to their labor force matched by sentiments regarding the prospect that these people were settling permanently. Opposition to the settlement of Mexican laborers combined with economic recession to produce a national campaign aimed at forcibly expelling these Mexican nationals.



**Mass Repatriation Program of 1929-1935**

With the passage of the Act of March 4, 1929, the entry of non-citizens at points along the border not designated by the U.S. government became a misdemeanor. This same legislation made entering the country by means of “a willfully false or misleading representation” a misdemeanor as well. A previously deported person who tried to re-enter the country could be convicted of a felony. Such infractions were punishable by a fine and/or imprisonment (Nevins: 2002). In the six years following this legislation, hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants, and Americans of Mexican descent, were expelled from the country. During this same period, there was a marked decline in the number of new Mexican migrants entering the country, as was the population of Mexican nationals residing in America as reported by census figures.

To suggest that these figures are a testament to the effectiveness of the Act of March 4<sup>th</sup> would be to overlook a host of historical factors, which probably had a greater aeffect on these return rates than did the actual legislation. During this period, a strong current of anti-Mexican sentiment made conditions for many immigrants very uncomfortable. This popular movement also inspired many citizens to mobilize and deport those who they deemed undocumented residents of their communities. Such actions had the unintended consequences of leading confused perpetrators to deport tens of thousands of U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry (Nevins: 2002). Anti-immigrant sentiments were exacerbated in large part by the increasing scarcity of employment opportunities for Americans during the “great depression” of 1929. Lack of employment opportunities seems to have had the largest effect on the decline of the Mexican population in the United States. With few available jobs, Mexican migrants stood to gain

little in regards to [an increase](#) in their standard of living. It was under such circumstances that many Mexican migrants chose to return to their sending communities. In the communities where their families lived, they [could appreciate](#) being re-immersed in their native culture. Similarly, the unavailability of jobs was responsible for the decline in the arrival of new Mexican migrants. The incentive to migrate was eliminated as agricultural employment opportunities disappeared.

### **The Bracero Program of 1942-1964**

The wartime Bracero program was initiated through bilateral treaties with various Western Hemisphere countries, including Mexico. This program provided for the importation of temporary agricultural workers. Congress, in the Act of April 29, 1943, gave the program retroactive approval. The legislative oversight of this program ended in 1947. Nevertheless, the Bracero program continued. [Employers](#), rather than the U.S. government, acted as the contracting agents from 1948-1951. New legislation for governmental oversight of the program was passed in 1951. [Having been given](#) this extension the Bracero Program continued to be operational until 1964 (De Laete: 2000).

Increased spending, resulting from the United States' involvement in World War II, lead to a full economic recovery vanquishing the lack of jobs associated with the era of the great depression. Economic restructuring, combined with the absence of a large part of the work force, left the United States [requiring](#) Mexican labor once again. It was believed that demand for this labor



**Figure 1** "Braceros" mid-1940's

would subside following the end of wartime activities; thus, it was not necessary to increase the permanent labor supply of the country. The Bracero program was the government's attempt to meet labor demands without losing control of the flow of Mexican labor migrants. The administration believed that by documenting the laborers they would be better able to control the length of stay of these temporary workers. At the end of the said term, the laborer would no longer be authorized to work. This program also was intended to reduce the gains to be had by seeking employment without government regulation.

Worksite enforcement, supplemented by [border patrolling](#) policies, was to be the mechanisms for limiting the length of [temporary residence](#) of the Bracero worker. This policy approach was supposed to be responsible for ensuring that only documented participants were obtaining jobs. Border patrolling proved to be ultimately ineffective as thousands of Mexicans, who were not selected to participate in the program, continued toward the United States. Additionally, a lack of incentive to return combined with the ability to find work without documentation led many Bracero workers to stay in the United States.

The increased stock of undocumented residents combined with increased numbers of attempts to cross the border without documentation suggest that [the Bracero Program](#) was ultimately unable to control the flows of migrants into the United States. In direct opposition to the policy aims, undocumented migration to the United States increased during the years of the Bracero program as well as the years that followed. The active recruitment of Mexican nationals without an [effectual](#) means for assuring their return was one unintended consequence of the policy design. Predictions regarding the effectiveness

of a contracting system with worksite enforcement overestimated the ability to regulate migration flows. According to social network theories, these resident migrants would then promote exponential increases in migration as they encouraged members of their sending communities to join them in the United States.

### **“Operation Wetback” a Mass Roundup and Deportation Campaign 1951-1952**

“Operation Wetback” was a bi-national operation intended to reduce the number of undocumented Mexican nationals residing in the United States during the era of the Bracero program, 1951-1952. The means by which this operation was to be executed were brutally direct. Law enforcement agencies dispersed into neighborhoods with high proportions of residents who were both of Mexican and Mexican-American [heritage](#), intending to expel undocumented residents. [These agencies](#) forcibly detained and herded



**Figure 2** Mexicans forcibly deported during campaign, 1951.

residents onto busses [if they appeared Mexican](#). These busses delivered their unwilling passengers south of the border to Mexico. The Mexican government had agreed to send the [deportees](#) back to their communities of origin by train. Estimates of the number of people deported range from two

hundred thousand, up to one million. The sudden forcible abductions, associated with the operation, had the related effect of motivating many undocumented residents to return to Mexico in order to avoid being captured.

One policy objective that successfully achieved by Operation Wetback was the expulsion of substantial numbers of undocumented residents. The program's success however, is called into question when we evaluate its associated costs. A program that involved the concerted efforts of huge proportions of the available INS staff, transportation costs for hundreds of thousands of migrants, as well as lost agricultural production can definitely be said to be costly from a financial standpoint. Furthermore, the concentration of INS agents on the southern border required removing agents from America's Canadian border, leaving it significantly understaffed. When we recognize the fact that many of the people deported by this campaign were U.S. citizens, who, because of their Mexican ancestry were believed to be undocumented residents, we see the costs in regards to civil liberties as substantial. Furthermore, the value of this policy was questioned when it was realized that it failed to have a sustained depressionary affect on undocumented migration rates. Following Operation Wetback, entries in un-patrolled areas, as well as migration via misuse of tourist cards and falsified documents, proliferated (Garcia: 1980).

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### **Immigration Control Reform Act 1986**

The Immigration Control Reform Act (IRCA) of 1986 recognized the substantial stock of undocumented residents within the country as it attempted to meet the need for Mexican labor. The program also attempted to assert control over population inflows from Mexico. This policy contained provisions for the legalization of migrants who had been working in the country prior to 1982, as well as an expansion of the H-2 temporary foreign worker program; it also established temporary residence for seasonal agricultural

workers (SAW), who had been in residence for three years. After two years, these seasonal agricultural workers would become eligible for permanent status. At this point they could seek work outside of agriculture; "...hence the act also authorized granting temporary residence to replenish agricultural workers" (De Laet: 2000). Such features recognized both the ineffectiveness of mass expulsions of the recent past, as well as the need for [introducing](#) such a demographic into the workforce on a more permanent basis. In an attempt to discourage future migratory inflows, the act made employers, who knowingly hired undocumented persons, subject to civil and criminal penalties. The authors of this bill reasoned that proper worksite enforcement would eliminate much of the incentive for Mexicans to migrate in search of work without proper documentation.

Huge numbers of undocumented residents applied for legalization under [the Immigration Control Reform Act](#). One million seven hundred thousand migrants legalized their status under general amnesty with 1.1 million additional persons under SAW (De Laet: 2000). These numbers do not include the large volume of persons whose applications were denied. [Regarding the increase of](#) the documented workforce by over two million residents, this policy proved to be successful from a numerical standpoint. The provisions for worksite enforcement proved to be seriously underutilized. Worksite enforcement has not increased in the years since the passage of the act, [in fact they have declined](#)<sup>4</sup>. This part of the policy was intended to be the primary mechanism for

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<sup>4</sup> [The General Accounting Office reports that more than 200,000 employers are believed to employ undocumented workers, yet only 53 were investigated in F.Y. 2002 \(Pritchard: 2003\)](#)  
[Over the last three years, the average number of completed employer investigations has declined by 70 percent when compared with the 1990's \(Pritchard: 2003\)](#)

detering future immigration. The lack of attention paid to worksite enforcement could be one of the aspects [that](#) explains the lack of success in detering future immigration.

Following the implementation of the [IRCA](#), [INS](#) apprehensions along the border declined [for three years in a row](#), from 1,767,400 in 1986 [to reach 954,243 in 1989](#). These decreases become more relevant when [one takes into account the](#) increases in staff patrolling the border resulting from the [IRCA](#). A decline in the stock of undocumented residents within the United States was another indicator often referenced in support of the effectiveness of the [IRCA](#). However, such an indicator fails to be relevant when [one takes](#) into account the two million plus persons who gained some amount of documentation during the application part of this program. The intended result of the program predictably decreased the stock of undocumented inhabitants simply by changing their legal status.

Arguments championing the effectiveness of the [IRCA](#) based on the decreasing numbers of [INS](#) apprehensions are challenged by alternative explanations as well as apprehension data post 1989. Some of the decrease in apprehension figures can be explained by the fact that undocumented traffic across the border was reduced as migrants chose not to make regular return trips to their sending community because they believed it would negatively affect their prospects of becoming documented under [IRCA](#) provisions. This downward trend in shuttle migration [became](#) even more pronounced following the increased border enforcement policies post 1993. Additionally, evidence suggesting increases in use of professional people smugglers could account for the decreases in [INS](#) apprehensions. Qualitative data in traditional source communities

within Mexico suggest that the [IRCA](#) did not decrease the propensity of residents to migrate without documentation, nor did they show that there were increases in the probability of apprehension or costs of migrating (De Laet: 2000). Statistical evidence also exists which calls the effectiveness of the program into question.

Analysis of population data gathered by the Census Bureau suggests that the annual flow of undocumented immigrants was 246,000 in the two years following the enactment of the [IRCA](#). This estimate does not differ statistically from the annual estimates of illegal immigration in the years prior to the [IRCA](#) (De Laete: 2000). Despite the substantial affect the [IRCA](#) had on the stock of undocumented residents within the United States, by 1989 the number had returned to the pre [IRCA](#) figure of 2-3 million. By 1994, this figure had continued to rise to 3.2 million. As of 1990, the depressionary affect of the policy on [INS](#) apprehensions numbers had dissipated as apprehensions reached 1,169,939. In subsequent years this trend continued, surpassing the pre [IRCA](#) rates (De Laet: 2000). While the [IRCA](#) did provide a legislative framework that had potential to be effective, specifically worksite enforcement, the failure to produce a sustained decrease in migration inflows shows that potential to be unrealized.

### **Concentrated Border Enforcement Strategy 1993-Present**

Citizens who were becoming frustrated with high amounts of undocumented traffic through densely populated regions in the American southwest, levied criticisms that Democratic president Bill Clinton was not taking a tough stance on undocumented immigration. A climate was produced in which an anti immigration policy focused on



border enforcement was born. This policy approach of increased border enforcement, which began in 1993 and continues to this day, has resulted in huge budget increases for the [INS](#). The [INS](#) budget has more than tripled in size since 1993 to reach 5.5 billion dollars in [fiscal year \(FY\) 2002](#). The [INS](#) is [currently](#) the second largest law enforcement agency in America, trailing only the FBI. In fiscal year 2000, the [INS](#) had 9,212 agents on the payroll, a figure that [increased](#) in 2003. Beginning with Clinton's term in office, these new resources were concentrated on policing the United States' border with Mexico (Cornelius, 2001).

Increases in spending have been oriented primarily toward preventing migrants from crossing the U.S./Mexico border, or apprehending those who do, within the border region. This approach employs [increased](#) physical barriers on the border, increases in [the number](#) of officers patrolling the border, as well as the installation of high-tech surveillance equipment. Massive expanses of fences, some made of steel army surplus materials and others made of vertical concrete posts, emanate into the desert from concentrated border settlements in California, Arizona, and Texas. [The Border Patrol, which has seen an increase in the number of officers as well as the number of hours spent patrolling the border, monitors these new fences among other new areas.](#) Since the 1970's the Border Patrol has dedicated [fifty-seven](#) percent of its total officer hours to

patrolling the borders of the United States. Ninety-one percent of these hours [are](#) spent



**Figure 3** Border patrol agent scans the horizon

patrolling America's border with Mexico (Hanson: 2002). Aiding these officers in their patrol of the border are new remote video surveillance cameras, underground sensors, as well as mobile infrared scopes (Cornelius: 2001).

[The](#) new concentration of human and technological resources was directed at strategic points in three border-states where illegal entries into the United States were highest. The implementation of these campaigns of increased vigilance was [often](#) staggered with several years time passing between the beginning of one campaign and that of another. Operation "Hold [the](#) Line", 1993, in El Paso was the first of such concentrated efforts. "Operation Gatekeeper" 1994, in San Diego, California, [followed](#). [Next](#), "Operation Safeguard" [1994](#), technically [began](#), but did not receive significant resources until 1999. [Finally, the geographical area of](#) Rio Grande Valley of Texas [established, "Operation Rio Grande" in 1997](#) (Cornelius: 2001). It should be noted that while these programs did raise substantial barriers to immigrants in certain strategic areas along the border, the entire 2000-mile border was not patrolled with uniform diligence. As enough time passed to allow the Border Patrol to run all of these operations simultaneously, migration routes shifted away from the highly populated and highly patrolled areas. The new isolated migration routes proved perilous for increasing numbers of migrants. Weather conditions in the arid regions where migrants are forced to make their crossing [required](#) them to endure extremes in temperatures as well as large distances between water sources. It [is](#) under such conditions that the deaths of immigrants due to causes such as hypothermia, dehydration, and heat stroke proliferated. In some regions the distances between water sources is so great that it is physically impossible for a human to carry ample amounts of water (Cornelius: 2001). The

difficulty inherent in these new routes led professional people smugglers, “coyotes”, to increase their fees at the same time when increasing numbers of migrants were in need of their services.

According to U.S. Border Control figures on apprehensions of illegal migrants along the Southwest border, there [was](#) an increase in apprehensions of illegal migrants during the years between 1994 and 2000. In the absence of figures on recidivism, it is hard to know if these figures point to successes of the anti immigration campaigns. The absence of a shortage in the illegal immigrant labor supply in the United States, since the implementation of these programs, [calls](#) their effectiveness into question (Cornelius: 2001). When [one takes](#) into consideration the fact that the number of undocumented persons residing in the United States has risen by “one million in less than four years”, this policy approach has not shown significant signs that it is effective in deterring undocumented inflows from Mexico ([New York Times](#), “Rapid Increase in Illegal Immigrants”). The government’s attempts to shift migration routes away from areas densely populated by [American](#) voters have been successful. This partial success, however, does not seem to [justify](#) the substantial costs, both fiscally and [with](#) regards to lives [lost](#) along the border.

#### **Proposed Temporary Worker Program of January Seventh, 2004**

On January seventh, 2004, President George W. Bush proposed a temporary worker program intended to supply willing workers to businesses in need by incorporating undocumented residents within the country as well as other foreigners. It allows for an unlimited number of three-year, once renewable, work visas for people

from any country. Employers from any sector can participate in this proposed program, if they follow the guidelines. Increased resources for the Border Patrol and jobsite enforcement are also outlined within the policy.

In order to hire a migrant, an employer must first advertise the job on a government website. If after a specified period no American worker can be found, the government will approve the employer to hire a foreign worker. The foreign worker must apply for the specific vacancy and be granted a visa in time to fill the position. An additional fee will be assessed if the applicant is already in America.

Migrants stand to gain some short-term benefits by participating in this program. The first benefit is would be their ability to work legally within the country for up to six years. Their visa would also allow them free movement across borders, saving them from a dangerous and costly, clandestine migration. In addition to the ability to visit their family in Mexico, the visa allows for the worker's family to reside in the U.S. However, the visa privileges do not allow the family members to obtain legal work. Workers with these visas are not given an advantage when applying for a green card and the plan has no other provisions for permanent legalization of the participant. Workers face significant obstacles to participating in this program. The first is the extra fee charged if the applicant already resides within the U.S. Such a feature is likely to be a significant deterrent to a working-class demographic. Second, the worker must provide written proof of a job offer, then wait to be approved for a job specific visa, all before the employer fills the position. This presents a formidable logistical obstacle for applicants outside of the country. Finally, given that this is an employer-initiated program, an

employee cannot seek a visa if his or her employer is not willing to participate in the program (Cornelius: 2004).

With the exception of agricultural interests, no other sector of the economy has expressed a need for temporary workers. The task of retraining temporary employees is costly for businesses in need of non-seasonal labor. The recruitment mechanism outlined by the program is not likely to be more efficient than the migrant networks often used to fill vacancies<sup>5</sup>. Unless employers fear legal repercussions for employing undocumented workers, or those using fake documents, it is not likely that employers would choose to participate in this program. This is not likely to happen. Employer sanctions have been at the government's disposal since the 1986 [IRCA](#), but they have seldom been used.

Before this plan can go into effect it must first pass through congress. It remains to be seen in President Bush will be willing to build support for his plan in attempt to carry it safely through congress, or if it was an attempt to build support among Latino voters in the run up to an election.

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<sup>5</sup> [In some sectors employers have shown a strong preference for using the social contacts of their undocumented employees to find prospective employees. Applicants produced by these means are perceived to be hard workers, reliable, available, and accountable to the person who recommended them \(Rosenfeld and Tienda: 1999\)](#)

## ***Chapter 2***

## **Chapter 2: Interviewee Characteristics**

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The Mexican migrants bound for the United States whom I interviewed represent a wide range of ages. The youngest migrant I interviewed was 18 years old, and the oldest was 54 years old. While the survey group did encompass an age span of 36 years, a majority of the migrants were concentrated towards the younger end of the spectrum. Fifty-seven percent of the migrants were 31 years of age or younger, while only 15 percent were 39 years or older. I conducted all my interviews at La Casa del Migrante, a facility for adult male migrants located in Tijuana, Mexico.

As a whole, the survey group averaged four point two successful previous migrations, with a low of zero and a high of more than 40 trips. The youngest migrants surveyed, ages 18, 19, and 20 years, had never before successfully journeyed to the

United States<sup>6</sup>. The migration rates of their elders illustrate that the number of successful entries increased with the age of the migrant. The number of previous migrations for these men between the ages 21-23, ranged from zero to six, with an average of two. Twelve percent of this group were attempting their first migration, while eight percent had successfully migrated six times before. On average, migrants between the ages of 34-54 had the highest number of successful migrations. Their number of previous migrations ranged from one to over 40, with an average of 11 crossings. Thirty percent of this group made the journey over 10 times, with 15 percent completing 30 or more successful migrations. The respondent, aged 50, who had made over 40 shuttle migrations, hailed from Querétaro. He explained his migration habits as, “A trip to Kansas for three months to work, then Querétaro for ten days. Then I return to Kansas, to do it all over again.” While his frequent trips to Querétaro support his personal relationships with his wife and eight children, his work preparing chilies in Kansas supports his family financially.

The age of the migrant does not seem to dictate his intended destination. No patterns appeared suggesting a certain age group preferred particular destinations nor did a pattern emerge indicating a relationship between the age of the migrant and his place of origin.

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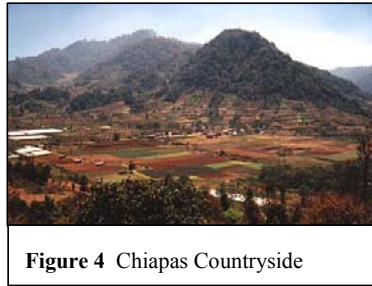
<sup>6</sup> Accompanied by their father, two Mexican children, aged nine and 11 years, were present during the time period of the interviews. They had not made the decision to initiate their own migration journeys. For this reason they were not included in the sample.



### Origins of Survey Group

The survey group includes representatives of 18 different states in Mexico. The region with the highest concentration represented in the group was the central part of the country. In addition to this centralized cluster, there were also migrants from as far south as Chiapas and Yucatán, and as far north as Chihuahua and Baja California. Aside from Baja California, the group lacked men from the five other states along the American border. This absence is not surprising because migrants from these states are more likely to choose a point of crossing within their own state for reasons of convenience and familiarity.

Interviewees originated in cities and towns representing a wide range of developmental levels. The survey group included migrants from the Federal District and Tijuana, which have high levels of economic development, as well as areas with largely agrarian based economies such as Chiapas. Men surveyed also hailed from resort towns with lucrative tourist based economies, specifically Mazatlan and Acapulco. A majority of the participants, came from states that are not considered highly developed.



**Figure 4** Chiapas Countryside

**Comment [ALS1]:** Fill this in and insert Map found as a jpeg on lap top desk top

The variation in origins and ages of the migrants in my sample was similar to that of the migrants who visited the shelter in December 2001. The proportion of the migrants from the states represented differed by no more than seven percent for any particular state. With a difference of no more than five percent, the La Casa del Migrante records match my collected data in 88 percent of the sending states. The groups matched

within two percent or less for 50 percent of the sending states. The ages of those in the sample group are similar to the ages of La Casa del Migrante's guests in said month. The proportion of migrants from 18-25 was 15 percent higher in the group I interviewed than among the migrants who stayed in 2001. The proportion of migrants in the final three age groups differed by no more than 10 percent. During the same month in 2001, La Casa del Migrante received migrants from 27 of Mexico's 31 states. My survey group had migrants representing 18 different Mexican states. La Casa del Migrante's figures include all Mexicans who stayed at their facilities. They do not differentiate between those who are heading north and those who intend to go elsewhere. Additionally, they do not differentiate on the basis of nationality when collecting age data<sup>7</sup> (Amaya: 2001).

### **Destinations of Survey Group**

Over 77 percent of the migrants I interviewed were heading to a U.S. location within California. Of these men, half were traveling to Los Angeles or Orange County. Twenty-two percent of the group were going to locations outside of California; Boston, Massachusetts was the destination city furthest east. One of the interviewees planned on traveling to Canada, after stopping in Los Angeles. The large proportion of migrants en-route to west coast locations is understandable in light of the fact that they were found in Tijuana. One would expect that migrants bound for states in the Midwest, or on the east coast would choose to enter the U.S. through Arizona, New Mexico, or Texas.

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<sup>7</sup> The ability to compare my data with that of La Casa del Migrante was limited to these characteristics by the breadth of categories the shelter collected from their guests.

### **Reasons for Migrating**

When I asked about their primary reason for migrating, a large majority of the study group indicated a desire to obtain employment in the United States. Eighty-five percent of the survey group mentioned working in the U.S. during some part of their response, with 65 percent stating it as their sole motivation. Many of the respondents acted as if the answer to the question was understood. They were migrating as one man said, “To work, and nothing more.” After I posed this question regarding their motivations for this trip, many stared incredulously before responding that they were in pursuit of work. Their confused response to such an elementary question betrayed a sense that they had taken for granted that a person’s primary reason to migrate would be to obtain employment. They did not think it likely that a person would migrate for reasons other than to gain employment. Despite the perceptions of the interviewees afore mentioned, there were men within the survey group who were motivated by other factors.

One key motivating factor was the desire to be with family members who were located in the United States. Twenty-five percent mentioned family reunification as their primary reason. Of this group, over half mentioned obtaining work as a secondary reason for their migration. By contrast, it is notable that of this subgroup, 40 percent cited family reunification as the sole reason for their migration. Ten percent of the survey group mentioned something other than work or family reunification. Common to these responses was a personal history of successful migration as well as an appreciation for life in American society. A forty-year old migrant from Sinaloa, who had previously made thirty successful migrations, explained his reasons for migrating to Salt Lake City, “It is a beautiful city, man. It’s very tranquil. There is very little violence in Salt Lake,

and not many people have drug problems.” Such a response suggests that some migrants desire marginal increases in quality of life that are not purely financial.

Conspicuously absent from the responses was a pursuit of social services. Not a single person mentioned welfare, the public healthcare system, disability compensation, or the public school system. Those migrants who did mention safe neighborhoods were making reference to a public good. Less than half of the men believed it likely that healthcare benefits would be included as part of their employee compensation. [These](#) findings contradict notions of undocumented migrants who purposefully seek to take advantage of government provided social service.

## ***Chapter 3***

### **Chapter 3: Pre-Migration Employment and Motives for Migration**

The men whom I interviewed came from a variety of occupational backgrounds and had been compensated for their labor at very disparate rates. Consistent with most previous studies of Mexican migration to the United States a large majority of the sample group was employed in Mexico before beginning their migration<sup>8</sup>. Only 12 percent had been unemployed prior to leaving their hometown, although underemployment was a problem for some of these men, as discussed below. It is notable that being in school was the reason for joblessness among 80 percent of this subgroup. Schooling into their late teens implies that these men came from a family that was able to forgo the potential income of sending their son to work, and that they were able to afford private tuition and

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<sup>8</sup> See Binational Study 1997. U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform and Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations, *Binational Study of Migration between Mexico and the United States: Final Report*. Washington, D.C. and Mexico: U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform and Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations.

school supplies<sup>9</sup>. While this may be taken for granted in an American context, it is significant in Mexico because educational expenses can easily consume a considerable share of a working-class family's disposable income.

Forty percent of those employed mentioned construction as their primary



**Figure 5** Agricultural Workers in Mexico

occupation, and over one-third of these respondents had worked in specialized trades such as plumbers, bricklayers, or carpenters. Agriculture was the second

most frequently mentioned type of employment, accounting for 17 percent of the interviewees.

One man from Michoacán owned a small ranch that he had worked with his family. Discouraged by the meager existence he was able to produce laboring on his own land he migrated to the United States without papers. He set out to earn enough money to buy a larger plot of land upon his return. The interview took place during his eleventh migration attempt, having successfully completed ten previous migrations. At the age of 54, with over eighteen years since his first migration, it was beginning to appear as if his \$6.75 an hour wage from his factory work in El Monte, California was never going to be enough to buy the *rancho* that he hoped would be large enough to support his family. Despite this, when asked his reasons for migrating, Otilio responded with an air of wistful determination, “I am going north to earn money. Then I will return to Tacamboro and negotiate a deal for a larger ranch.” Otilio was not fortunate enough to be among those

<sup>9</sup> Public schools in small towns in Mexico are generally of a very poor quality. Families who can afford to do so, send their children to attend local private schools.

select migrants who have been able to return to their home communities with enough savings to establish successful businesses.

Reflecting Mexico's steady transition to a service based economy in recent decades, 11 percent of my interviewees had worked in the tourist industry of their hometown. For the most part, this entailed working as wait staff or in some security-related position. The remainder mentioned a specialized service occupation such as upholstery and bakery work, while others recounted menial tasks in the service sector.

Terms and stability of employment varied greatly among my respondents. Some were able to secure consistent work for twelve months a year, while others complained that the demand for their labor was highly variable. In some instances, the inconsistency mentioned was the result of seasonal demand in the agricultural sector, while others experienced low demand for their services in local trades. The highest weekly compensation rate reported was \$600.00, earned twelve months a year by a twenty-nine year old who had been working as a security guard in Toluca, Mexico. At the bottom end of the wage distribution was a 36-year-old man from Michoacán who reported receiving about \$20.00 a week during harvest season. He spent the rest of the year searching for odd jobs, a search that often produced little work.

Regional economic disparities, differences in age, and skill level largely explain the range in pay rates. Miguel said earnestly; "Man, if I could get a job that paid \$100.00 a week, I could stay in Oaxaca. I don't want to go, but I have to." But some of the men Miguel had been fraternizing with in La Casa del Migrante had left their homes because they were not happy with wages that exceeded \$100.00 a week. This juxtaposition highlights the fact that the root cause for this migration is the pursuit of marginal



increases in one's quality of life. Occupations that permitted the migrants surveyed to work for twelve months out of the year represented 66 percent of those employed. These fully-employed migrants had the highest average wage compensation: \$133 per week. A majority of these men worked construction and other specialized trades such as plumbing. Among those who worked construction there was significant variation in compensation from \$25 to \$375 per week. The majority of those working construction were paid between \$85 and \$100 a week.

Interviewees who reported being employed for only a portion of the year prior to their departure for the U.S. were 24 percent of the sample. The largest single occupation within this subset was agricultural work. Seasonal demand for labor limited active employment from 3-6 months out of the year, with weekly earnings of \$20-60, averaging \$42. The highest-paid migrant who had partial employment worked on a fishing boat. This man was paid \$100 a week to tend nets, sort fish, and maintain the boat. When asked if he thought it was good money, he responded in the affirmative, but added that it was too dangerous. He recalled co-workers whose limbs had been severed by lines. "It was good money," he said, "but not worth the risk." Other migrants mentioned working in small retail stores, where a seasonal lack of business prevented them from working year-round.

The final category of interviewees consisted of migrants who were only able to find work of a highly sporadic nature. Day-labor with little regularity, accounts for nine percent of my sample. With an average daily wage of \$12, these men did odd jobs for retail businesses or farmers who were in need of a day laborer due to a temporary increase in workload. Augustine, a migrant from Michoacán, described seeking

employment on a strawberry farm: “Some days they would let me work, and other days they would say “No”. I got sick of the inconsistency.” Augustine’s comment illustrates the severe instability of employment for farm laborers in many parts of Mexico.

Interviewees who had not been employed in Mexico before migration due to their status as students are interesting because of two characteristics. First they had a relatively high level of education: All of them had been attending school until the age of eighteen, one at a university level. Their second interesting attribute was the absence of any comment on the job market in their hometown. There was mention of family reunification, and a belief that the United States was an attractive place to live, but no comment about the lack of desirable work in their home community. Nevertheless in response to an earlier question, all of the migrants in this group mentioned “obtaining work” as one of their primary reasons for migrating. Thus obtaining employment was important to them, but it apparently went without saying that their home communities could not offer anything attractive to men of their educational level. It is possible that a local culture of emigration had produced a climate in which there was universal understanding that men with that level of education would surely migrate in search of better returns on their investments in education.

### **Motives for Migration**

The stated reasons for migrating to the U.S. among interviewees varied somewhat among the three employment categories. A complaint unique to the day-labor group was inconsistency of employment in Mexico. However, a majority of responses centered on the desire to obtain employment that would pay more than their current job. When I

asked a follow-up question, respondents stating that they hoped to live better as a result of migrating refined their response and mentioned a search for increased wages.

Those with partial employment said the desire to earn more money was their primary motivation for migrating. Other responses included the risk to their physical-well-being in their Mexican occupation. One migrant left his job as a waiter in Mexico because he missed his friends, who had migrated to Thousand Oaks, California.

Overall, 66 percent of the interviewees said they had migrated in search of increased wages. The response of one migrant from Baja California is illustrative, “I am going [to the U.S.] to earn more. Why would I stay and work for \$10.00 a day when I could get \$15.00 an hour in the U.S.? I mean in Mexico people would be happy to be paid \$6.75 an hour to work at McDonalds, but Americans, they won't even think about it. Most people think it is below them. They consider it work for Mexicans.” This response emphasizes the importance of the U.S.-Mexico wage differential in driving the migration decision. If one were unaware of the features of the complex decision to migrate, it would be easy to assume that the decision was made merely by a cost-benefit summation regarding earnings potential. This is not the case. As this migrant's response illustrates, the costs associated with the migration, threats to his safety during a clandestine border crossing, or having to leave his native culture were all dwarfed by the perception of substantial increases in his earnings potential. The incredulous tone with which he poses his rhetorical query is all the more powerful in light of his perceptions of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. A belief that one will be moving to a region where discrimination is likely experienced must be taken into account as a perceived cost when making the migration decision.

A quantifiable indicator of perceived marginal increases can be found by measuring the difference between the migrant's weekly Mexican wage and the wage they believe they will earn in America. Every migrant I interviewed perceived an increase in earnings potential in America. The average perception of weekly wages that could be earned in America was four and a half times greater than those they earned in Mexico. Ninety percent of the migrants believed their American wage would be at least double their Mexican wage. Sixty-seven percent were under the impression their wage would be a minimum of five times greater, and 24 percent believed if they could make it across the border their wages would be at least 10 times greater. Given that the prevailing wage differential between the U.S. and Mexico is about eight to one, a majority of these perceptions do not seem like wild exaggerations.

## ***Chapter 4***

## **Chapter 4: Social Network Connections of Migrants**

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I asked interviewees about their access to people within the United States. Access to these people is perceived to be the foundation of a majority of information gathering potential from the social network theory perspective. Ninety percent did have some type of relationship with a person or persons, already living in America. This cluster of men incorporated the gamut of migration experiences represented in the survey group. The complete range of previous migration experience was represented within this group. Migrants who had contacts within the United States hailed from all of the 18 Mexican states represented in the survey group. Both the youngest and oldest migrants included in the group, had U.S. contacts. In the largest segment of this group, 44 percent of the migrants had immediate family members as contacts within the United States. A substantial portion had brothers in the U.S. while others have wives, but are now separated from their spouses because of deportation. Thirty-three percent of those I

interviewed told me they had friends within the United States. The remaining 22 percent had contacts within the United States who were of an extended family nature. Seventy-two percent of migrants with contacts knew more than one individual within the country.

Seven point five percent of the interviewees had no contacts within the United States. No strong association between the lack of contacts and the migrant's age was apparent. Of this group 66 percent were able to gather information on previous trips to the United States. As a group, they averaged three point five previous trips to the United States.

\_\_\_\_\_ The fact that 90 percent of the migrants I interviewed had contacts within the United States is notable, as is the fact that 67 percent of the survey group actively communicated with these sources. One hundred percent of the survey group had made the first stage migration decision to leave their communities of origin. The fact that less than 10 percent of the group made the decision to migrate in the absence of any personal connections suggests there may be a relationship between having network contacts and the likelihood of migrating<sup>10</sup>. Specifically, it suggests that migrants with network connections are more likely to make the first stage migration decision than those without any contacts. It would be hasty to suggest that the 25 percent of those with contacts, who had not communicated, were unaffected. Knowledge of a familiar person in a foreign land serves to reduce the psychological costs associated with migration. This strong presence of migrants with network connections supports current arguments posed by social network theorists. In forthcoming pages, I will add to the social network

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<sup>10</sup> See discussion of "Migrant Networks" in chapter 2 of Worlds in Motion (Massey, et.al: 1998).

framework as I explore the quality and content of information that passes through these channels.

### **Means and Frequency of Communication**

Communication with U.S. contacts is an aspect of central importance to an international exchange of information. While 90 percent of the survey group had connections to someone living within the United States, only 67 percent of the group - communicated with their contacts in America. One-quarter of the men with acquaintances in the United States did not communicate with them. Among those who did communicate with their U.S. contacts, there was a wide range in frequency of contact. Some communicated daily over the phone, while others spoke with their U.S. contacts once a year during return trips home. Twenty-nine percent of the migrants corresponded with their U.S. contacts between one and seven times a week. Migrants communicated via telephone with spouses or other members of their immediate family. Fifty-five percent of the migrants were in touch with their U.S. sources typically once or twice a month. All of these respondents stated that the majority of their communication was via the telephone. The final 15 percent of the group kept in touch with their U.S. contacts between once every three months, and once a year. None of these contacts were classified as "friends". This contact group was comprised of immediate and extended family. These migrants did not mention letter writing but did talk about face-to-face communication. This sort of communication was limited to those who interacted with their contacts once a year. The migrants related how their relatives would return to their Mexican home once a year from the U.S. Study participants were able to interact with



those relatives who had up-to-date, first-hand knowledge of the United States only during their yearly trip home. Respondents who did not interact face-to-face relied on the telephone.

### **Communication Constraints**

Inquiries into the means of the communication are useful in identifying particular information sharing constraints. The respondents included migrants who communicated in person, through letters, and over the telephone. Each of these means of communication has characteristics that encourage, or inhibit the open exchange of accurate information. The seven percent who were able to communicate in person were afforded an opportunity to interact with minimal time constraints. Furthermore, those in the survey group had contacts who were family members, so it would be reasonable to assume that they were able to converse in a comfortable and safe home environment. In addition to the information shared verbally, the recipient has the advantageous ability to note the contact's body language as a means, though it may be imperfect, of gathering information that could supplement responses. The low proportion of communication conducted through these means was likely to be the result of associated high costs. An obvious cost can be found in the substantial investment of time and travel costs. Financially strapped migrants are not likely to return home by plane, but a return trip by bus is an investment of several days of travel time in addition to the bus fare. Despite the costs, prior to 1993, such a shuttle form of migration was common as a means of sustaining family relationships. Traditionally migrants would return to family for December holiday celebrations in their hometown. The increased vigilance of the border

region, beginning in 1993, has proven to be another substantial barrier to this form of communication. Undocumented migrants are less likely to choose to return home for visits because they fear a difficult and dangerous re-entry. This has caused a decline in shuttle migration forcing bi-national relationships to be sustained through alternate means.

Written correspondence was an alternative mentioned by seven percent of those who communicated with U.S. sources. This particular means has the distinct advantage of being economical in terms of time and money. International postage is markedly cheaper than the cost of a return trip or international telephone rates. While it may be less of an investment, written correspondence does not does not afford the potential for commensurate levels of communicative interchange. Correspondence does not occur in real time, and those engaged have the opportunity to give premeditated rather than candid responses. These men are neither able to note voice inflection nor body language as a means of understanding responses.

Communication via telephone was clearly the favored means of communication.

Eighty-five percent of those communicating with U.S. contacts did so by telephone. This form offers the participants the advantage of being able to interact with no significant time delay, and enables them note vocal inflection. Financial constraints on telephone communications are highlighted by the fact that international calling rates average \$0.08 (U.S.) per minute plus \$0.20 (U.S.) charge if the call is initiated from a payphone<sup>11</sup>. This rate should not be considered inconsequential given the precarious economic position of

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<sup>11</sup> This is the going rate per-minute for calls placed through prepaid phone cards to most locations in Mexico. These prepaid cards, available at grocery and convenience stores, allow migrants to communicate with people in Mexico even if they lack access a personal long-distance service.

the survey group. Availability of telephone service is another communication constraint.

With this survey group, it cannot be assumed that the interviewees or their contacts have telephones in their own homes. In such cases, participants may be forced to use



**Figure 6** Many Rely on Payphones

telephones in environments that may impede an honest and sustained exchange of information. Furthermore, some of those surveyed mentioned that they were not able to

communicate with their U.S. contacts because they did not have access to a telephone. A 44 year old man from

Michoacán expressed his frustration in the following manner, “It is only when I am in Tijuana that I can actually hear my mom’s voice over the phone. In Michoacán I have no phone, we have to use letters.”

Despite recent exponential increases in electronic mail usage, less than three percent of the survey group mentioned using email to communicate. Those who did, used it only as a supplemental means of communication. Problems of accessing the necessary technology to utilize this means of communication are likely to explain its absence from other responses. Such characteristics are likely to be supported by a growing literature on the “digital divide” between different socioeconomic groups<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup>The inability of migrants to utilize internet based forms of communication is consistent with recent work by sociologists who describe barriers that economically disadvantaged social groups experience when attempting to access technology in general, and the internet in particular (Attewell: 2001).

**Topics of Communication**

The number of topics on which the migrants were able to gather information varied, based on the medium of communication. Migrants communicating with their U.S. contacts through written correspondence engaged 35 percent of the topics I asked them about, while those using the telephone discussed 55 percent of the topics about which they were questioned. Clearly, the group that had the highest levels of communication were those migrants who were able to talk with their U.S. contacts in person. This group engaged 100 percent of the topics about which I asked. I will discuss the topics in the following paragraphs.

While attention may be focused on the circulation of information and the policy implications, it is necessary to look to the nature of this information as a means of recognizing implicit constraints borne of social convention, rather than the comparatively more objective means of communication. From the first stage perspective, all of the migrants with contacts were relying either on family or friendship-based connections. Social conventions prevent prospective migrants from asking questions that are not likely to come up in friendly conversation. They may experience an increased degree of freedom to question based on the nature of their relationship, or the fact that discussing undocumented migration is more acceptable in the working class Mexican culture, but even these privileges have limits. For that reason, I have divided the topics I inquired about into two different groups, “general” and “specific”. The differentiation is based on the level of trust needed to discuss these topics. The proportion of migrants who discussed the topics included in these two groups declined as the topics became more specific.

In the “general” category, a majority of the migrants received information from their U.S. sources for all of the questions. The migrants as a whole seemed to be successful in gathering general information about the occupations of their U.S. sources. Sixty-two percent of the survey group gathered information about the nature, function, and role of their source’s occupation. The proportion of migrants who learned about the pay these successful migrants had received was also 62 percent. Communication concerning particulars of every day life was higher for the group. Sixty-five percent received responses from their sources about their contacts’ housing, food, weather, neighborhoods, and other pertinent information. Eighty-six percent of those who had U.S. contacts discussed one or more of these topics, while 44 percent discussed all of these topics. Only 16 percent failed to engage any of the topics in the first group.

The second category, “specific”, showed a decline in the breadth and number of topics discussed by prospective migrants and their U.S. based contacts. A majority of the interviewees in this category did not discuss the employment structure in which they worked. Forty-two percent of the migrants were able to learn about those who supervised the activities of their friends or family. It is of interest that 62 percent of the group discussed work and pay, but only 42 percent discussed supervision. It is quite possible that the 58 percent of respondents who did not entertain this topic were unable to gather information about the way in which their contact was treated by their employer. A similar trend was present in the related topic of working conditions. Forty-six percent of the group were aware of their contact’s working conditions. By contrast, this means that 54 percent of those with contacts were not able to get answers to questions like, “Do they allow you breaks?” “Is there water available while you are in the fields?” or “Do you

have to work with any harmful chemicals, and if you do, is safety equipment provided?”

Less than half of the group, 44 percent, were able to talk with their contact about the place where they hope to work. It would be hasty to suggest that the remaining fifty-eight percent of those who were not able to talk about the place they hoped to work did so because they did not feel comfortable broaching the topic with their contact.

Compared to the previous group, there was a decline in the number of topics discussed. Sixty percent of those questioned discussed one or more of the topics, while only 32 percent discussed all the topics in this group. The proportion of those in the group who did not discuss any of the topics with their U.S. contacts was 40 percent, which is over twice the number of participants.

### **Communication Barriers**

A crucial topic to cover when assessing the costs and benefits of attempting an undocumented migration is the actual act of entering into the receiving country. This topic has gained increased relevance as efforts to secure the border have been increased in the last decade. Social conventions within American society which might inhibit the exchange of information sharing, in regards to entering the United States without documentation, are not necessarily present within Mexican communities, particularly those with a long history as a sending community. This reality eliminates one barrier to information flows. One constraint which is likely to be present in any context is a reluctance to share experiences that were particularly traumatic, or cast the person in an unflattering light. The number of migrants who have been injured or died while attempting to enter the country has increased as a result of the organized diversion of

migration routes into increasingly inhospitable conditions. These routes are in regions notorious for bandits, extreme temperatures and long distances between water sources. Under these conditions, many of the migrants' experiences could qualify as either traumatic or embarrassing, thus making them only willing to share topical or nonspecific advice on crossing behaviors. Additionally, these accounts may be too lengthy to share given the financial and geographic constraints on information sharing. The absence of graphic or detailed accounts of migration experiences could have the affect of leaving the prospective migrant's perceptions of the risks of undocumented entry as present, but acceptable. It could also allow the migrant to form an unrealistic perception of the costs of undocumented entry.

#### **Advice on Crossing the Border**

A majority of the group with U.S. contacts had been able to gather some sort of information about their contact's crossing experience. Sixty-nine percent of the group indicated that their U.S. contact had relayed something about their experience crossing the border. Within this subset the type of information they received varied greatly. Some of the migrants I interviewed suggested that their source only spoke in vagaries, while others shared specific details. One migrant's contact portrayed the journey as easy, "My brother told me that it took him seven hours total to cross the border walking, but he said that was long. My grandmother is 100 years old and it only took her half an hour to cross the border." A man from Sinaloa described the difficulties he encountered while trying to gather information about the crossing experience of his brother and uncle, "They talk about what happens when they make it to the United States. They talk about how they

prosper and the lives they enjoy. They do not talk about the actual crossing.” A thirty-three year old man from Baja California was able to obtain the following information about his brother’s experience crossing the border, "My brother had to walk for three days, and he said he was very



**Figure 7** Well Lit Fences Increase Difficulty

hungry. At night he said the cold temperatures were unbearable. Several times he wanted to stop and return to Mexico.” This person was able to get a candid account of his brother’s experience, but not all were privy to such accounts. Only one-third of the group mentioned that their sources had revealed that the crossing was dangerous, with an even lower 28 percent indicating that their contacts had said that the crossing was difficult. Only five percent of the group heard specifically that the border crossing was not dangerous, and 70 percent were told the crossing was not difficult. The U.S. Border Patrol was mentioned by only 17 percent of the group’s sources. But the most surprising figure was that only five percent of the group had heard anything from their sources regarding migrants dying at the border<sup>13</sup>. Sixty-five percent of the group received some information from their U.S. contacts regarding the price of smugglers. Partially due to the costs, as reported by their sources, only 16 percent planned to hire the services of a professional people smuggler. When I asked, specifically, if they had received any advice on the border-crossing portion of their migration, only ten percent of the group had received advice from their contacts

<sup>13</sup> This is surprising given the fact that migrant deaths have risen steadily from 61 in 1995 to over 400 in 2003 (Matrinez: 2004)



## ***Chapter 5***

## **Chapter 5: Expectations of Costs and Benefits in America**

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[In](#) pursuit of marginal [increases](#) in [their](#) quality of life, [migrants focus heavily on](#) benefits. [Benefits](#) can take forms other than monetary compensation. [While discussing employment prospects in the United States, I asked the](#) sample group [if](#) they thought they [would](#) receive a healthcare package [from their employer](#) as part of their compensation. Only a slight majority, 53 [percent](#), indicated that they did not [assume](#) their employer [would provide healthcare](#). This group included first time as well as repeat migrants. It also included [men with](#) a wide range of social contacts. [Forty-seven percent of the group](#) believed [their employer would provide healthcare](#). Twenty year old Raphael from Chiapas stated, “Some people do and some people don’t. I think I will be able to get healthcare working as a landscaper.”

Another benefit I discussed with the [migrants](#) [was the possibility of advancement](#) as a product of their hard work. [Perceptions of a fixed opportunity structure would serve](#)

to limit perceived benefits of migrating. It would also put a cap on their maximum marginal increase in living standards. Eighty-seven percent of the [interviewees](#) believed [their employer](#) would [promote them](#) if they did their job well. This group encompassed the entire range of migration history and access to social networks represented in the



**Figure 8** Migrant Supervises Other Migrants

sample group. Migrants seeking the variety of occupations mentioned by the sample group indicated they believed they [would](#) be promoted. Some mentioned becoming supervisors or managers while others [considered](#) starting their own small business as a [distinct](#) possibility. None of the aspirations [presented](#) seemed outlandish. Twenty-three year old Ignacio was en-route to a job bussing tables that his friend had arranged for him. “I think that I will be able to progress. I have many friends who have worked hard in the restaurants for a while. When a spot opens up, if they work well, the boss will say ‘You work well, you can be a waiter.’” Ignacio said that he planned to follow in the footsteps of his friends. Michelangelo, a twenty five year old migrant from Michoacán, indicated that he hoped for something other than a promotion in recognition of his hard work. He said, “I am returning to my old job cleaning statues, and I think that if I work hard my boss will probably help me get my papers.” Here we witness a migrant who hopes to be able to use his good work ethic to inspire his employer to help him with the documentation process.

Thirteen percent of the interviewees declared that they [do](#) not believe there [is](#) a possibility of being promoted [when](#) they produce good work. Every respondent in this group [said](#) they hope to find [employment in](#) construction. However, this sentiment was not shared by the all migrants that planned to work construction. Two-thirds believed promotion was a possibility. Construction workers who did not believe they could be promoted, expected to earn little more than the California minimum wage, while those who did believe promotion was a possibility expected to earn more than \$11 an hour. This difference of opinion is likely to be the product of specific construction site occupations. The lower wages are likely to be earned by those responsible for construction site clean-up, while the higher wages, and promotion aspirations, belong to men seeking positions as carpenters or installers of dry-wall.

### **Perceptions of Possibility of Amnesty**

As noted in the first chapter, I completed the final interview January 4, 2004, which was three days before President Bush announced his proposed immigrant worker visa program. In order to gain an understanding of the degree to which the sample group was migrating in hopes of obtaining some sort of legalization, [I asked the](#) participants if they thought there would be some sort of amnesty, or other law [that](#) would aid Mexicans in obtaining legal work in the future. For a variety of reasons, 40 percent responded that they did not believe such legislation was on the horizon. One migrant responded, “Even though Americans don’t want to do hard work, there will not be another amnesty. There is too much discrimination.” They also believed that Governor Schwarzenegger would actively block such legislation in California. Finally, they thought it unlikely because of

American's fear of terrorism. The remaining 60 [percent](#) of the sample group believed there would be some form of a legalization measure in the future. Several migrants commented that it would be a long time in coming while others speculated that amnesty would only be applicable to agricultural laborers.

When I asked if this conviction was one of the factors that motivated their current northward migration, 37 [percent of those who believed there would be some new legislation](#) responded affirmatively. One man embarked on a dreamy response in which he told me how he hoped to procure a work visa. The 63 [percent of respondents](#) who said that it had no bearing on their decision to migrate, answered the question in a dismissive tone. Such legislation did not seem very [important](#) to them. Like their counter-parts who did not foresee any new legislation but migrated anyway, they were convinced they would be able to obtain employment even without official documentation. A couple of migrants had no hope of [participation](#) in such programs because [they had](#) spent [time](#) in correctional facilities.

### **Perceptions of Cost of Living**

In order to gain a more complete understanding of the marginal quality of life increases the sample group seeks, it is necessary to consider their expectations regarding the cost of living in America. Four percent of the group expressed a belief that there would be no substantial change in their cost of living. Sixty-three percent of the group indicated it would be more expensive to live in the United States. One migrant shared what he believed to be the mixed blessing associated with the cost of living increase, "It will be more expensive for sure. In America you only have supermarkets, and in them

everything is expensive. But one good thing is that you can save money on water, because it is safe to drink from the tap.” Among those who believed it would be more expensive, 26 percent alleged it would only be a little more expensive, while 37 percent felt the expense would be substantial. The items mentioned by these two groups were identical; responses only differed in the degree to which these items would affect their disposable income. The price of food, utilities, and rent were mentioned most often when discussing increased costs of living. The interviewees took time to explain that rent was more than an issue of increase because many migrants did not pay rent in their hometowns. Their families owned homes. Thirty-three year old Manuel explained his strategy for coping with high rent, “The rent is very expensive, so we try to make it cheap. We pack a lot of people into a single house. It is crowded but at least we have a place to stay. It is not so bad because we have easy access to electricity and working toilets.” Many migrants consider basic services that Americans often take for granted, to be perks that ease the pain of spending money on rent. Many in search of family unification recognized the increase in living costs, but gave it little consideration. Twenty-eight year old Cesar explained simply, “It will be a bit more expensive, but I don't care because my family is there.” Expenses mentioned by these two groups were identical. Responses differed only in the degree to which costs of living would negatively impact their disposable income.

Twenty-one percent of the sample believed their costs of living would be cheaper in the United States. A man from Yucatán, who hopes to earn \$9 an hour painting houses, explains his perspective, “It is more cheap in the U.S. In Mexico, you get paid a little so it costs a lot to live, but in the U.S., you get paid a lot so it costs little to live. The

food seems cheap, everything seems cheap.” Thirteen percent believed life in America would be very cost-effective, while 18 percent felt they would realize a slight decrease in expenditure. This group defended their belief with an observation that wages in the U.S. are higher than those available in Mexico. A 40-year-old man from Querétaro explains this logic from an urgent perspective, “Because there are no jobs in my hometown, this cannot be considered a question of comparative expense.” Another man referenced the help a migrant community can offer, “When sharing the costs with fiends, it is not very expensive.”

Those who claimed it would be cheaper appear to be approaching the question by evaluating their cost of living as a proportion of their earnings, while those convinced that it would be more expensive to live in the U.S. were speaking in terms of absolute cost of living. This is further supported by the fact that all these interviewees were migrating in order to obtain employment. It would be illogical to migrate in search of increased wages, if those wages were not enough to compensate for the increased cost of living in the receiving community.

### **Availability of Disposable Income**

Questioning this group about their ability to save money or send funds back to their family in Mexico allows us to understand their perceptions regarding disposable income<sup>14</sup>. Both migrants who indicated it would be more expensive to live in the United States as well as those who believed it would be cheaper were questioned to this end.

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<sup>14</sup> Mexican migrants send between \$6 and \$8 billion dollars in remittances annually to recipients within Mexico (Summary of Recommendations, The U.S.-Mexico Migration Panel: 2001)

There were a couple of men who indicated that they would not be sending any money to Mexico because their entire family was in the U.S. Eighty-four percent of the respondents said they thought they would be able to save or send money to recipients in Mexico. The respondents answered in a confident tone; several even went so far as to respond with a trouble-free, "Of course!" This group included substantial numbers of men who had responded that they believed the cost of living would be higher in the US.

Eleven percent of the respondents doubted they would be able to save or remit any money. Though this group was small, it was very diverse. At 24 years old, Daniel was en-route to Los Angeles to work at a car wash. He was convinced that he would not have significant disposable income earning a \$6 hourly wage. One of the youngest migrants in the group, 19-year-old Pablo, did not plan to venture far from the border on his first trip north. Pablo was heading to San Diego, "To work, and nothing else." He had no idea how much he would be paid. This is not surprising because he indicated that he was willing to do any sort of work. Given all of this uncertainty, Pablo could not confidently declare that he would be able to save or send money back to his home-state of Guanajuato. Jorge did not believe he would be able to save money, or send any home, despite the fact that he hoped to make \$360 a week landscaping in Santa Ana, California



## ***Chapter 6***

## **Chapter 6: Perceptions of Job Availability in the United States**

I asked the migrants if they had ever heard of a person who returned from America because they were not able to find work. This question offers a clear indication of perceptions of employment opportunities for undocumented migrants in the U.S. Almost 70 percent of interviewees indicated that they had never heard of a person return because of a lack of employment opportunities. Twenty-nine year old Carlos responded, “I’ve never heard of this. Not a chance, everyone can find work.” Andreas from Ensenada said, “Those who come back do so because they didn’t like the United States, not because they couldn’t find work.” Frequently, those who had heard of someone returning offered an explanation which sought to marginalize the returnee. Twenty-five year old Daniel explained that his brother had returned because he had been arrested too many times. While Augustine from Michoacán said an acquaintance returned because, “They did drugs and didn’t work hard. Those people don’t succeed.” Given the

character of these responses, it is evident that most of the interviewees assumed that they would be able to find work in the U.S.

[I investigated perceptions](#) of the difficulty of obtaining employment once a person has entered the United States by [posing](#) the [question](#), “How easy is it for a Mexican to get work in the United States?” Ten percent of those interviewed stated that they did not have a well formed opinion because they had never sought employment in America.

[Twenty-three percent of](#) the [interviewees](#) identified the search for employment as “difficult” or “extremely difficult”. Nevertheless, respondents in these groups still believed it was possible to obtain employment. Thirteen percent of the survey group rated the difficulty level as medium. [The majority of those questioned, 55 percent](#), stated that it was easy for an undocumented migrant to obtain work in the U.S. Not a single migrant I interviewed felt that it was impossible for a migrant to find a job in the United States.

Several members of the survey group qualified their answers by differentiating availability of employment based on legal status. One migrant commented, “Mexicans can't get work on big construction projects because one needs papers. [Those](#) jobs are hard to get. It is possible to get work on smaller construction or remodeling projects.” He went on to explain that the crucial difference between the two projects was a pay scale that differed by as much as five dollars an hour. When



**Figure 9** Many Migrants Find Work on Small Construction Projects

commenting on the prospects of finding a job, other migrants pointed out that a friend or family member who lived in the area made it much easier to find work quickly. English language skills were referenced by some migrants. Those I interviewed revealed how being able to speak and read English made it much easier to obtain good paying jobs.

One migrant explained [that](#) getting a job was easy because he read the classified ads in the newspaper then presented fake papers to employers. [A](#) second migrant [explained](#) how his ability to speak English enabled him to use the services of job placement agencies.

### **Role of Social Networks in Obtaining Employment**

[To gain a](#) better [understanding of](#) the functioning of social networks in helping migrants obtain employment, [I asked](#) participants if they already had a job waiting for them in the United States. In [cases where](#) they did not already have a job, [I](#) asked about [the subject's plan](#) to find employment. Forty-eight percent of the migrants questioned contended that they had a job waiting. Seventy-eight percent of this subset indicated that a family member or a close friend had arranged [the](#) job. The remaining 22 [percent](#) were returning to jobs or employers [for whom](#) they had worked during their most recent stay in the United States.

Fifty-two percent of the of the survey group were en-route to their destination city without an assured job upon arrival. The two types of strategies mentioned by this cohort included; seeking out employment alone, without the aid of locals or acquaintances, and soliciting the help of family or friends living in the town in which they plan to settle. The [percentage of people](#) stating either of these two options was almost [equal](#). When [one](#)

[combines](#) migrants whose family or friends have [arranged work for them](#) in advance of their arrival, [with](#) the migrants who plan to seek [assistance](#) in finding employment from friends or family upon their arrival, [one sees](#) that 65 [percent](#) of the survey group used some form of social network connection to obtain employment.

### **Perceived Costs of Seeking Employment**

One of the perceived costs factored into the migration equation are lost wages as a result of seeking out a new source of employment. This figure is a product of the daily wages that one [forgoes when](#) seeking new employment, multiplied by the number of days in transition. [Considering](#) that these migrants will be traveling away from their home communities, it is important to recognize that during the interim they will have to rely on savings to cover their costs of living. It is here that social networks [may](#) reduce the costs of migration by aiding the arriving migrant with temporary assistance. [I questioned](#) the sample group about the amount of time they will have to wait to start working after their arrival [as](#) a way of further assessing their perceived costs. While 48 [percent](#) of the respondents indicated they believed there was a job waiting for them, they [felt](#) that there [might](#) be some lag time before they could begin working. Given this reality, the responses of this subset [have](#) been included with the sample group as a whole. Ten percent of the group, predominately first time migrants, reported that they had no idea how long it would take them to find work. The remaining 90 [percent](#) of the group believed they would have to wait between zero and [30 days](#). One-quarter of the survey group did not think they were going to have to wait a single day to begin working. While [the](#) majority of this group previously [indicated](#) they had [a guaranteed](#) job, there [remained](#)

a sizeable proportion of migrants who did not yet know [their future employment](#).

Another quarter of the group believed they would be able to obtain employment within one to [three](#) days, while fifteen percent were under the impression it would take between four and seven days. Migrants who believed they would be able to find employment within eight to fourteen days, comprised fifteen percent of the sample group. A final ten percent of the group [felt](#) that it would take them [one](#) month to find employment. [Given this demographic's ability to save extra money, this is a substantial amount of time to remain unemployed.](#) It is likely that these migrants are able to continue their migration despite [these](#) perceived costs because every man in this portion of the sample has active social network contacts; half even mentioned having family in their desired destination.

## ***Chapter 7***

## **Chapter 7: Perceptions of Difficulty and Danger Associated with Undocumented Crossing**

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I asked the survey group about their awareness of the concentrated border enforcement activities beginning during President Clinton's term. The portion of this policy shift most directly affecting the San Diego/Tijuana region is Operation Gatekeeper, which has been operational since 1994. As previously mentioned, this orientation expanded the budget for patrolling the border with increased numbers of agents and new technology. Thirty-three year old migrant, Andreas described features of the new policy orientation by noting, "It is a lot more difficult to cross now. There are many more agents patrolling the line. They even have cameras where there are no agents." Another migrant accurately described surveillance airplanes which monitor the border as one of the new measures taken by the [Border Patrol](#). [This](#) detailed knowledge



they shared prompted further questioning regarding their sources. Both men became aware of these facts from newspaper clippings displayed on the walls of La Casa del Migrante. Furthermore, their perceptions were not representative of the quality or content of the majority of the migrants I interviewed.

Migrants were asked if they were aware of Operation Gatekeeper, or any United States government program focused on preventing entry of undocumented migrants. Fifty-two percent of the migrants stated they were not aware of any such program. The 48 percent of the sample who did have some knowledge of Operation Gatekeeper were then asked if the program had affected the difficulty of migrating without documentation.

Fifty-eight percent said that it had increased the difficulty of crossing to some degree.

Thirty-three year old Manuel from Nayarite, stated that Operation Gatekeeper made entering the United States without papers, “Impossible”. After five unsuccessful attempts to cross the border during his current trip, he has decided to give up his hopes of returning to work the vegetable fields of Fresno. Border enforcement efforts had proven successful in raising the cost of migrating to a point that was greater than the benefits this migrant stood to gain by working in the U.S. Unlike Manuel, only half of the migrants aware of this policy indicated that the increase in difficulty was significant, while the remainder stated the increases were of limited affect. Twenty-six percent of those who had an awareness of Operation Gatekeeper declared that the government’s actions had not made crossing the border any harder, several even suggested that it was “easy” to cross. The final 16 percent who indicated an awareness of Operation Gatekeeper indicated they were aware of the intended affect of such a program, but they did not know if it would make crossing the border any more difficult.

### **Perceptions of Danger**

An immigration control policy, like the “post 1993 orientation” which places a large emphasis on border enforcement, is concentrating heavily on affecting perceptions of danger associated with clandestine border crossings. While concentrated border enforcement is designed to apprehend crossers, a more important function is the active deterrence of potential migrants. For such a deterrent effect to occur, migrants must be convinced while in the sending community that the potential costs, whether they be physical or financial, are less than their potential gains. With this in mind, I questioned the survey group in regards to their perceptions of the level of danger associated with their undocumented crossing.

Forty-five percent of the respondents indicated they believed that it was very dangerous to cross the border without documentation. One migrant explained his perceptions of the danger with a powerful simplicity, “It is extremely dangerous to cross



**Figure 10** Memorial for Deceased Migrants

right now. This is the most dangerous it could get.” Twenty-five percent stated they believed it was of a medium level of danger, while 30 percent believed there was little or no danger. A 40 year old man from Sinaloa explained, “It is not very dangerous when one compares it with living in Mexico. One must take chances. It is more dangerous to be hungry.” In their responses the men made a point to differentiate between their

perceptions of difficulty and those of danger.

When the responses were broken down by migration experience and access to social networks, the perceptions of danger varied little across the assorted groups. Half of the first time migrants reported that there was little or no undue threat associated with crossing the border without documentation. Thirty-six percent of repeat migrants with access to social contacts responded that there was little or no danger. For repeat migrants with no active social network contacts the proportion returned to 50 percent. Those migrants who perceived the crossing to be very dangerous were 33 percent of first time migrants, 45 percent of the repeat migrants with social contacts, and 50 percent of repeat migrants with no social contacts.

### **Sources of Danger**

The migrants I interviewed identified similar threats, but perceived different levels of danger. The migrants who did not believe undocumented migration was dangerous offered no speculation as to possible sources of danger. For both groups, “dangerous” and “very dangerous”, the migrants named factors related to the terrain and isolated nature of current routes as the primary source of danger. In particular, migrants noted that extreme cold temperatures during the night have killed many migrants. There were also numerous replies that mentioned a lack of water sources and a fear of getting lost. A migrant who thought the crossing process would be, “Only a little dangerous.” gave a very complete description of the variety of



**Figure 11** Migrants Begin Desert Crossing

dangers associated with the border terrain when he stated, “Extreme weather and other natural conditions are dangerous. You could drown along the coast. There are temperature problems inland, and there is a lack of food and water in the desert.” The second most reported item that concerned migrants was the prospect of being assaulted by gangs or bandits in the borderlands. They feared that criminals who hide along popular trails would take their money, assault them, and even murder them. Other commonly mentioned sources of danger were wild animals and the possibility of apprehension by the Border Patrol. Several migrants mentioned racism as one of their concerns. When I continued my questioning the men made direct references to a rising trend of anti-immigrant vigilantism along the U.S./Mexico border. These migrants stated they had heard reports of migrants who were attacked and killed by ranchers and other property owners.

### **Perceptions of Increased Danger over Time**

The possibility exists that the participants perceived these dangers to be an innate feature of an undocumented migration. In order to investigate the effect that increased Border Patrol activity has had on the perceptions of danger associated with crossing, it was necessary to investigate a perception of increased danger over time. I asked the interviewees if they believed that crossing the border was more dangerous now than it used to be. Of the sample as a whole, 55 percent believed crossing the border was more dangerous now than it had been in the past. A 44 year old man with a 20 year migration history commented, “Yes, it is harder to cross now. There used to be fewer agents, and no fences.” This portion of the group perceived an increase in the cost of migrating.

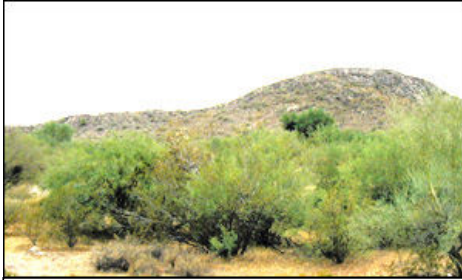
Without solicitation, a large majority of the sample group volunteered to identify the factor they believed to be responsible for the increased danger associated with crossing. Similar to the general inquiry regarding the danger of crossing, many of the migrants mentioned bandits, isolated crossing routes, and temperature extremes. A large portion mentioned increases in the number of agents patrolling the border, then continued to deduce that it was likely because of fears of terrorism or something related to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The Border Patrol was perceived as a danger to many migrants because agents would prevent them from entering the U.S. One migrant made an interesting foray into commentary on California politics when he explained, “Right now there is more security along the border. It is hard because of Governor Schwarzenegger and his relationship with Pete Wilson. The Governor’s left arm [Wilson] is very anti-immigrant.”

Forty percent of the survey group stated that they believed it was no more dangerous to cross now than it had been in the past. Although these responses were less colorful, they were significant because this is a substantial portion of the survey group. The group failed to be convinced of increased danger associated with clandestine crossings despite the fact that the budget for the INS has more than tripled since 1993 which has been used in part to pay more than 11,000 agents (Cornelius: 2001). Five percent of the survey group replied that because they had not attempted to migrate previously, they did not know if there had been an increase in risk. In addition, this portion of the survey group was not affected by the increase in resources directed at the border. Current policy design is not intended only to affect those with migration experience; it is intended to convince all potential migrants of an increased risk

associated with crossing the border. Variation in perception of greater risk was minimal when the different subsets of the sample group were compared<sup>15</sup>.

### **Perception of Death Tolls**

Concentrated border enforcement in highly populated areas along the border, has lead to a dramatic shift in migration routes. Migrants must now follow paths through isolated and inhospitable terrain. This shift has produced dramatic increases in migrant



**Figure 12** The Arid Terrain of Paths Through San Diego's East County

fatalities. This reality is a concrete example of increased actual risk. The effectiveness of such circumstance as a deterrent is dependent on the awareness among migrants of death tolls. As a group, 67 percent were aware of someone who had been injured or

killed while crossing the border. It is interesting to note that 33 percent of the group had not heard of any accidents given that an average of over one migrant died daily in 2003, and the issue has been raised in the Mexican Chamber of Deputies as well as the Mexican media (Martinez: 2004). The deterrent effect is largely dependent on the migrant's relation to the victim. As a means of investigating the potential for deterrence through

<sup>15</sup> Fifty percent of first time migrants and repeat migrants with access to active social networks, believed that currently it was more hazardous to cross than it had been in the past. Repeat migrants who believed there was an increased risk and had no access to active social networks reported a slightly higher proportion. The remaining 50 percent of first time migrants did not believe there would be an increased risk. This included 33 percent who stated they did not know if it was any harder. Fifty percent of repeat migrants with contacts, and 42 percent of repeat migrants without contacts reported no perceived increase in risk associated with a clandestine crossing.

information, I will consider the amount of information these migrants possessed in regards to the specifics of the accident.

Seventy percent of the men who had some knowledge of a person injured or killed while crossing the border could claim no personal connection to the victim. In many cases they became aware of the deaths through the news media, general conversation in their home towns, or during their migration. Several migrants revealed that until they read information available to them at La Casa del Migrante, they had not been aware of any people dying while crossing the border. Such statements are alarming given the high numbers of incidents. These responses indicate that information regarding the frequency of deaths while migrating were not a factor in the perception of costs when the migrant was in the process of making the first stage migration decision. Nineteen percent reported knowing the victim only as a casual acquaintance. The final 11 percent knew of a close friend or family member that experienced an accident or death while migrating. Forty-eight year old José shared his story:

I was not able to support my family because I was earning only \$60 dollars a week, for three months of the year, at my job as a baker. My wife decided to go back to live with her parents and she would take our daughter, but there would be too many people if our son was to go to live with them also. Not wanting to leave my 10 year old son, I decided that he would come with me to look for work in America. One cannot progress in Mexico, you know. My son was young, but he was a good boy. We did not start to have trouble until we came to the mountains. We had to cross there because we knew it was the only place where we would be

safe from the Border Patrol. During the day it was cool, but when it became night it got too cold. My son was tired, we were both tired. He was sick from all the traveling and he started to get very cold while we were walking, so I began to carry him on my back. Walking didn't help because the sweat just made us colder and we had no warm clothes. He stopped talking to me, so I stopped. He was so cold, and so little. I tried. I tried to keep him awake, but we were both so cold. He was just too little. My son died in my arms, and I could do nothing.

Despite his painful awareness of the dangers, José is still willing to accept the risks in order to seek work that will offer a wage that will sustain his remaining family.

Eighty-nine percent of the migrants were able to share a reasonable amount of information about the injuries or deaths they described. They were able to identify the cause, location and other details about the incident. The range of circumstances included accidental deaths from encounters with the Border Patrol, accidents involving nature such as landslides, and losing their way. Deaths reported as a result of the perilous crossing route included drowning in rivers and the ocean, dehydration and heat stroke. There

were also numerous reports of people dying from the extreme cold at night in the inland mountains. According

to these accounts, the perils of crossing also came in human form. Several migrants mentioned murderous bandits. Others spoke of American vigilantes who killed



**Figure 13** Vigilantes Hold Migrants at Gun-Point



migrants<sup>16</sup>. One person even reported hearing accounts of a Border Patrol officer killing a pregnant woman. Apart from the freak accidents reported, it is conceivable that a majority of these accidents could befall any of the migrants recounting these events. Such a realization is one of the elements factored into perceived risks associated with crossing.

### **Evaluation of Information**

Evaluation of information inputs used to compute the migration equation [is](#) of central importance. Access to large amounts of information that is believed to be unreliable will not prove useful in shaping perceptions of costs and benefits associated with migrating. [I asked interviewees questions about](#) their [assessment](#) of the [validity of](#) information received from sources they encountered while migrating. Specifically, I asked if they believed what they learned about crossing the border and the U.S. job market. While [these](#) questions were posed to allow a detailed response, [the](#) majority of migrants chose a simple “yes” or “no” response. Sixty-eight [percent](#) of the sample indicated they [did trust reports](#) from other Mexicans about crossing the border. [In fact,](#) [most gave unqualified endorsement of such information.](#) Several interviewees qualified their affirmative responses by stating that they only trusted information from those who migrated previously. [Others said](#) they believed a majority of the information [they received](#), particularly [from those who have successfully migrated.](#) A third subset believed all of the information they received. A [thirty-four](#) year old migrant from

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<sup>16</sup> [Vigilantism along the U.S./Mexico border is a well documented phenomenon. There has been an increase in incidents of private citizens actively patrolling the border, arresting migrants, and there is even documentation of vigilantes abducting and murdering migrants \(Hoover: 2003\).](#)

Cuernavaca, with a history of 15 previous successful migrations, highlighted the importance of information gathering during the migration process when he stated, “Yes, I believe the things people tell me. We are in a border town, and people know what they are talking about.” Other migrants did not put [as](#) much faith in [collected](#) information.

Twenty-two percent of migrants surveyed did not believe the information they received from Mexican sources regarding migration. There was [however, widespread](#) agreement that the topic was omnipresent in social interactions throughout the migration journey, but this group [felt](#) those offering information were not speaking with authority. One migrant commented, “The people you talk with tell big lies. They say it will take two hours to cross the border and get into San Diego, but that is not true. It will take two days.” This 23 year old was able to evaluate this information based [on](#) his experience during four previous migrations. A different migrant offered his opinion on the condition of migrants without access to social networks, “Many people going north think it is going to be easy. They have their eyes closed. They may think they are okay, but if they don’t have family to consult, they are in trouble.” The final ten percent of [respondents were unsure](#) if the information gathered [could](#) be trusted.

Another [significant](#) topic that [I](#) investigated was the evaluation of information regarding the availability of employment. I asked the sample group if they believed reports from people regarding employment availability. [Seventy-eight percent of the sample group](#) accepted the information [concerning](#) the American job market as accurate. Ten percent more migrants trusted information about the U.S. job market than trusted information about crossing the border.

The manner in which interviewees responded to this question was markedly different from the [way they answered the](#) previous inquiry. [When they said, “Yes.”](#) It was [in a relaxed “matter of fact” tone unlike the dismissive tone with which many replied “Yes.” to the previous question.](#) [Not](#) a single affirmative response indicated only [a](#) partial acceptance. [One](#) migrant confidently stated, “They know.” [A twenty-nine](#) year old migrant from Toluca revealed that he trusted the information he received because he [believed](#), [“The](#) majority of people had been to the U.S. already.” This assumption is an interesting one, particularly in light of other responses where migrants clearly differentiated between information they received from [people](#) they knew had been to the United States previously, and those who had not. This man’s response suggests that he chose not to investigate this relevant point, [but to](#) assume that if [people were](#) willing to share information, it was [most likely](#) because they had already completed successful [migrations](#) and were speaking from personal experience. [The remaining twenty-two percent responded in three ways.](#) The largest subset was migrants who did not [trust](#) the information they received, while the smallest [subset consisted of those](#) who qualified their answer by stating that they did not believe any information unless they knew it was coming from [an individual](#) with personal experience in the U.S. [The final subset of](#) migrants [chose](#) not to update their information as they [encountered](#) other migrants. One [such](#) migrant explained his approach by stating, “We don’t need to talk about these things, we just know.” While his response does not help to explain how this particular migrant gathered information, it is notable that he did not make an effort to gather more information during his migration.

Jesus, a 21 year old migrant who had already completed [four](#) successful migrations, [volunteered an interesting response](#), “I do not talk with people about the subject.” He went on to explain that it had become increasingly difficult to obtain employment in Los Angeles in recent years. He blamed this trend on the increasing number of Mexican migrants [in](#) the Los Angeles area. [He](#) refused to engage the topics because he feared it would promote more migration to his adopted community [thus](#) increasing the difficulty of finding employment. This constraint on information sharing comes from an unlikely source. This migrant purposefully withheld a vast amount of information he had gained during his years in America, in hopes of negatively affecting migrant flows to Los Angeles.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Similar behaviors have been documented which show recent Mexican immigrants expressing anti-immigrant sentiment in an attempt to associate themselves with a mainstream American culture that they perceive as opposed to undocumented migrants.

## ***Chapter 8***

## **Chapter 8: Second Stage Decision Making**

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Eighty percent of the migrants I surveyed either planned to cross the border alone, or with an acquaintance they had met in the border region. The routes most commonly mentioned were through the mountains or desert. A large proportion mentioned no strong preference between traveling alone or with a recent acquaintance. Five percent surveyed stated that they would wait until they received copies of their entry documents. Thirty-five year old Luis from Morelos, planned to make the trip alone, and attempt to pass through a legal point of entry. During two of his past five migrations, he was able to pass through San Ysidro without papers, posing as an American. He did not plan to use

any false documents. His gang tattoos and thick accent made him an unlikely candidate to sneak past Border Patrol agents who were on “Orange Alert”.<sup>18</sup>

Twelve percent of the sample group told me that they had arranged their crossing using a coyote. This subgroup included men from various parts of the country. All migrants in this group had migrated previously, and a little over half of the group had used a coyote previously. Juan, who had completed fifteen successful trips since 1989, said he did not have to use a coyote for the majority of his early migrations. He indicated that as the number of agents increased, he began to rely on the aid of hired smugglers.

Prior to leaving their sending communities, the migrants reported they believed the fee for a coyote was \$1600, on average. A high of \$2000 and a low of \$1000 were reported by this group. Forty percent of this group learned that the actual price was higher than they had expected. The increase in price averaged \$350. Half of this group was troubled by the unexpected increase. The money needed to pay these fees came from friends and family in both the U.S. and Mexico. However, one migrant managed to save the money he needed while working construction in Los Angeles. While one family had the money available, other support networks needed between ten days and two months to gather the necessary funds. Sixty percent were using a specific coyote that was recommended to them.

When asked if the northward migration was more expensive than they had anticipated, 60 percent said that it was. At 80 percent, an awareness of Operation Gatekeeper was higher in this group than it was among those who were crossing without

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<sup>18</sup> A period of high terrorism alert, “Orange Alert”, began on December 23, 2003. This increased the level of scrutiny at official points of entry to their highest levels. Given these circumstances it is not likely that Luis would have passed INS profiling.

the aid of a coyote. The entire group indicated that it was harder to enter the United States since the implementation of program increased border enforcement. Sixty percent believed it was dangerous to cross the border clandestinely.

### **Second Stage Decision**

After exposure to information during their journey, the migrant is forced to make a second stage migration decision. Given what they now know, are they still going to attempt to cross the border? Once the migrant arrives at this stage, he must still face the formidable challenge of crossing the border. An unsuccessful attempt allows the migrant the opportunity to gain first-hand information about the strength of border enforcement. If migrants are apprehended and returned to Tijuana, they are forced to re-visit their second stage migration decision. It is the hope of policy makers that a single apprehension will be enough to convince migrants to return home. However, if they decide to continue this decision will be revisited after every unsuccessful migration, or until the migrant successfully enters the United States. At the time of the interviews, the interviewee was asked for the number of times they had unsuccessfully attempted to



**Figure 14** Unsuccessful Migrants

cross the border during their current trip. Reports ranged from zero to five. Forty-five percent of the sample group had not yet made an initial attempt to cross the border. Twenty-five percent reported one unsuccessful attempt, and 20 percent failed twice. Eight percent of the group had made three



unsuccessful attempts. [Two percent unsuccessfully](#) attempted to cross the border five times.

### **Changes in Perceptions of Difficulty**

The assertion that migration is a multi-staged decision making process, is based largely on the idea that migrants' perceptions have the potential to change as they draw nearer to the border, and come into contact with different sources of information. [I](#) asked members of the sample group if their perception of the level of difficulty had changed since they had begun their current migration. Thirty-eight percent indicated their perceptions had not changed since leaving their point of origin. This group contained a slightly higher proportion of repeat migrants than the group that indicated their perceptions had changed.

Sixty-two percent of the group indicated their perceptions had changed. Two percent [believed](#) it was going to be easier than they had previously thought. At twenty-five, Juan has made four successful migrations to Los Angeles. His aunt and uncle live in America but he has not been in contact with them. He does not trust information he has received from other people at the border and has not yet attempted to cross during this particular migration. When I asked Juan if his notions regarding the difficulty of crossing the border had changed during his trip he responded: "Yes, they have. [I](#) have learned that it is easier than I had previously thought." He did not reveal the basis on which he formed this opinion.

[The](#) remaining 60 percent stated that during their migration they [learned](#) that it was [more difficult](#) than they previously thought. Cido, a 29 year old from Toluca, has

never before been to the United States and does not have any contacts in the country. His response exposed the degree to which his [basic beliefs](#) had changed since he left Toluca. [He stated](#), “Yes, I think it is more difficult. I thought it was going to be very easy. I was not prepared for the [Border Patrol](#) or the cold weather. I thought that getting to the border was going to be the hardest part. [Once](#) I got here, I thought all I had to do was walk across.” Cido laughed nervously

after sharing this confession, [and](#) then continued to explain that he had attempted unsuccessfully to cross two times in the last week. [Although discouraged, he did not intend to return to his hometown.](#)



**Figure 15** Migrant Points to Source of Detailed Information

Return migrants [also](#) indicated that it was going to be more difficult than they had

expected. After failed attempts, many simply said that it was harder than it used to be. These men sought to reconcile [the](#) increase in difficulty. [They](#) speculated that the increased vigilance [was due to](#) terrorism, the current war in Iraq, and the increased number of [people](#) making [northward](#) migrations. One repeat migrant offered a detailed description of the causes of the increased difficulty in crossing the border [when he said](#), “I think it is harder. Before it was very easy to cross in San Ysidro, now it is very hard.

They have surveillance planes that fly very low along the border looking for crossers.

Once they are seen by the plane it tells agents on the ground [and they](#) catch the crossers.”

This degree of detail was uncommon, so [I asked](#) the interviewee where he had obtained

the information. He referenced a bulletin board in La Casa del Migrante. The bulletin board displayed articles on the perils of crossing without papers, [including](#) a newspaper article [that](#) detailed this account of surveillance planes along the U.S./Mexico border.

Given that [60](#) percent of the sample indicated that they now thought it was going to be more difficult to cross than they had expected, and over half of the sample had already failed to cross the border at least once during their current trip, it was necessary to inquire if they planned to continue. [An](#) overwhelming [proportion of those surveyed answered](#) that they had not been deterred. Over 90 percent of the migrants said they intended to continue north. These men offered very little explanation; Guadalupe seemed to speak for the group when he responded, “Of course I will continue. It is the only reason we are at the border.” Eight percent of those who came to the border to migrate were having second thoughts at the time I interviewed them.

Eight percent of the men I interviewed indicated that they were not fully committed to continuing their migration at the time of the interview. The reasons for this uncertainty varied, yet not a single migrant indicated that [he](#) had made the decision prior to attempting to cross the border. With the possible exception of Jorge, these men had not chosen to continue their undocumented migration during the second stage of [the](#) decision making process. Because these accounts constitute an important minority of the sample they will be discussed individually.

Fifty-four year old Otilio, a rancher from Michoacán, had been able to cross the border 10 times since 1986 using his papers. He had worked for \$6.75 an hour in a small factory in El Monte, California, during his previous trips. Otilio said crossing clandestinely was “very dangerous” and shared a story about his brother-in-law who had

been killed by bandits. During his most recent trip from his *rancho* to the border, Otilio lost his papers. Conscious of the dangers, he attempted to cross the border twice, but was unsuccessful. He believed that it was not easy for a Mexican to get work in the U.S. and knew that he would be returning to a job that paid \$6.75 an hour. Fully informed of both the costs of migrating and the benefits it would produce, he decided to try to get another copy of his papers. He said he would return to Michoacán if he could not obtain his papers. Otilio was not deterred by information that he received prior to attempting to cross the border without documentation. Only after two apprehensions did Otilio come to believe that his minimum wage job in El Monte was not worth the possibility of encountering bandits on his next undocumented attempt. Information gained during previous migrations produced perceptions of benefits that were not better than the perceived costs of migration. In this case, cost seems to be defined as effort expended by a 54 year-old man in order to cross the border without documents.

Puebla was a long way from the U.S./Mexico border. Twenty-four year old Jorge was willing to travel such a great distance because he hoped to find landscaping work in Santa Ana, California. He expected to make as much money landscaping for a day in California as he earned working construction for a week in Puebla. This was Jorge's first migration and he had learned that crossing the border was going to be harder than he had thought prior to leaving home. This belief was galvanized after he was apprehended and returned to Tijuana twice. Despite the information he had received he remained undeterred. He feared that he will have to return home if he runs out of money. Until then, Jorge remained driven by the prospect of wages five times greater than those in his hometown. If the U.S. border enforcement policies are successful in preventing Jorge

from entering the U.S., it will not have been because of information flows regarding the difficulty of crossing.

When Manuel was younger he worked in the fields of Fresno, California. He said the money was good and he enjoyed the experience of visiting another country. At the age of 33 he had grown tired of his job as a bus-driver in Mexico, despite the fact that it paid \$500 a week. Feeling a familiar wanderlust, he decided to return to the United States. During his migration he learned of Operation Gatekeeper, and heard stories about the gangs of thieves who inhabit the borderlands. Conscious of these dangers, Manuel



**Figure 16** Just One of Manuel's Obstacles

made an unsuccessful attempt to cross without documentation. After his fifth unsuccessful migration, Manuel was convinced that crossing the border

clandestinely was “impossible”. U.S. Border Patrol successfully convinced

Manuel that he would not be able to enter without documentation. This can only be recognized as a partial success from a policy perspective. Hector was not deterred by information he received, instead he had to engage in five separate encounters with paid agents. This type of deterrence is costly to the U.S. government, and it represents a failure to change well established perceptions regarding undocumented migrations in sending communities.

Thirty-five year old Hector was visibly shaken when he arrived at La Casa del Migrante on the afternoon of our conversation. He and a friend left their families in

Cuernavaca to find work in the United States. Hector had worked in the U.S. previously but his companion had not. They were both in search of construction work in Orange County. Outfitted in worn work boots, dirty blue jeans, thin sweatshirts, and light jackets, the two men successfully crossed the border and hiked into the mountains of San Diego's east county. Hector explained what happened that night as the temperature dropped below freezing:

My friend and I left around dusk and started walking towards the mountains. By the middle of the night it was starting to get very cold. My head hurt from the cold, and my friend was complaining. He had never crossed through the mountains. I told him that he knew it was going to be hard, but he responded he didn't know it was going to be so cold. As we continued to walk it kept getting colder and colder. My friend started to sound crazy as he repeatedly said "Why did I ever leave home?" I began to get scared both for my friend and because of the cold. He stopped asking why he left home and began to simply whine. This continued until he totally lost it. He started to whine and scream, crying out for his mother. Calling for his mother, that is how cold it was. We were going to die, so I forced my friend to get up and we began to look for the Border Patrol. We walked along a road until they found us.

While Hector acknowledged that he narrowly escaped death, he said his problems were not resolved. He went on to say that he wanted to try to cross the border again, but his friend refused. Hector felt guilty, and agreed to accompany his friend a majority of the way to Cuernavaca. His friend was scared to make the return trip on his own. Neither Hector nor his wife could find any work in Cuernavaca, so he could not return. He was

troubled as he relayed this story because he believed the only way to reconcile his family's lack of income was to face the mountains again upon his return to the border. Hector is a prime example of a man willing to accept huge potential costs. He is well aware of the dangers of attempting another crossing, yet given his starting point his potential increases in standard of living are much greater. Given that he has knowingly come so close to death, it seems that reducing the potential gains is the only way to deter Hector.

### **Cost Threshold**

While over 90 percent of the group indicated they were going to continue to migrate, it would be premature to assume that they would continue their migration at all costs. In order to get a better idea of their cost threshold, I asked what would cause them to return to their hometowns. Forty-eight percent of the group indicated that nothing would cause them to return to Mexico. A commonly offered response to this question was a simplistic retort, "Nothing". Other migrants used phrases such as, "I cannot go back" "I will not return to Mexico" and, "I will continue always", as an indicator of their firm resolve.

The most commonly mentioned hypothetical reason that would cause migrants to return home was a family emergency. This subset of respondents revealed that if a close relative were to fall ill, they would return home to support their family. The most frequently mentioned family member was the mother. Fifteen percent of the sample said they would prefer to remain in their home community if there were more opportunities to earn higher wages. Thirty-two year old Guadalupe indicated that his previous five trips

to Colorado might have been prevented if he could have found work in his native state of Yucatán. Guadalupe earns \$75 a day painting houses in Denver, but he explained; “I don’t want to leave my town. If I could earn \$20 a day I could stay in Yucatán.”

Another man explained the lack of available credit in his hometown as his reason for leaving. He shared that he was only going to leave his hometown long enough to save money to start a business when he returned.

Only five percent of the interviewees said the cost of migration might cause them to abandon their hopes of migrating. This group indicated that they would go home if the costs of sustaining themselves while waiting in the border region exceeded their savings. Such a scenario would probably cause nearly the entire sample group to return home, but only five percent considered this the most likely reason they would have to give up their migratory aspirations.

Recognition that nearly half of the survey group would not abandon their plan to migrate for any reason, combined with the fact that more than 90 percent of the respondents planned to continue despite their knowledge of the dangers, highlights the respondents’ resolve to obtain marginal increases in the quality of life at almost any cost.



## ***Conclusion***

### **Conclusion: A Majority Motivated to Migrate**

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Numerous studies of Mexican migration have found that migrants often have access to a wide variety of social contacts within the United States. These contacts potentially could have provided information about the migration process, life in the United States, and possibilities for employment. Social network-mediated information was available to 90 percent of the migrants whom I interviewed. Sixty-seven percent actively pursued information through these channels before leaving their home communities.

The impact of such communication was evident in their responses to my questions. Those who obtained information only through letters from their U.S. contacts were able to engage 35 percent of the topics I asked about. Because of the means of communication, these migrants did not have the ability to listen to their contact's voice or observe their body language. Migrants communicating with their contacts via the

telephone engaged 60 percent of the topics they were questioned about, illustrating the advantages of real-time communication. Clearly the most effective means for gathering information about migration and U.S. work experience was face-to-face interaction. Those who communicated with their U.S. source in this manner engaged all of the topics about which I inquired.

The usual occasion for face-to-face communication was a return trip by the U.S.-based contact to the migrant's hometown during the Christmas holiday season. While this may have been the most efficient means for information sharing, it was not the most frequently used. Only seven percent of those with active U.S. contacts questioned their source in person, while 85 percent used the telephone. The tradition of shuttle migration that had been a popular and efficient form of information-sharing declined drastically after the U.S. immigration policy shift of 1993. It is ironic that the most effective means of transmitting information to sending communities was cut off by a border enforcement escalation. The effectiveness of the current U.S. border enforcement strategy depends on the dissemination of information to migrant-sending communities. While the most effective means for informing themselves about border crossing obstacles and costs was not being widely used among my interviewees, the other means of communication were not used to their fullest potential to exchange information. This is not a failure in a conventional sense; it is one resulting from the human character of this information transfer.

It is easy to view migrants only as rational actors seeking information upon which they can base a migration decision, but such an approach fails to recognize constraints on information sharing that are of a social nature. Potential migrants are prevented by social

norms from freely asking questions about sensitive subjects such as mistreatment by U.S. employers or horrifying experiences in crossing the desert. Over 60 percent of the men who had U.S.-based contacts were able to investigate general topics such as living conditions, wages, and types of employment. But when asked if they discussed more in-depth issues such as working conditions, employer supervision, and possible places of employment, the proportion dropped to 43 percent. The fact that less than half of those with access to personal information sources in the U.S. were able to find out if their contact was being treated well by their boss or had to work in dangerous conditions suggests some of the limits of information-gathering through social networks.

My interviewees continued to gather information after they had made the initial decision to migrate. I asked the sample group if their ideas regarding the difficulty of crossing the border had changed since they left their hometowns. Sixty percent of the sample group indicated they believed it was harder than they had previously thought. Fifty-five percent of the respondents stated that they believed that crossing the border was more dangerous than it had been in the past. These perceptions of difficulty reflect, to some degree, an awareness of the increased U.S. efforts to secure the border. A higher proportion of the sample, 67 percent, was aware of a person who had been injured or died during a migration attempt. Eighty-nine percent of these migrants were even able to report detailed information about the victim.

Despite the fact that a majority of my interviewees were aware of the increased difficulty and danger of unauthorized border crossings, and had knowledge of someone who had been injured or died while crossing, over 90 percent of these men indicated they

were going to continue to attempt to cross the border clandestinely. In short, possessing information about the increased levels of danger did not serve as a deterrent.

Among the nine out of ten interviewees who vowed to persist until they gained entry into the United States, there must have been an expectation that marginal increases in their standard of living would have exceeded the perceived costs and risks. Every single migrant whom I interviewed believed they could earn much higher wages in the United States. On average, my interviewees expected to earn four times their Mexican wage. Nearly one out of four believed the increase would be ten times the wage they left in Mexico. Perceptions of the likelihood of obtaining employment were equally optimistic. Seventy percent of the sample indicated that they had never heard that a person had to return from the U.S. because they could not find work. In the face of such large perceived differences in employment opportunities and compensation, stronger obstacles at the border to entering the U.S. labor market pale in significance. No matter how detailed or direct the information they possess about border-crossing obstacles once they get to the border, even a superior information input doesn't deter illegal entry. However, accurate information about the wage differential reinforces their determination to keep trying until they succeed in gaining entry.

This study was limited to the perspectives of men who had already made the initial decision to migrate. While it was possible to investigate the types and consequences of information that migrants received from their U.S. sources, it was not possible to investigate the role this type of communication played in the behavior of Mexicans who had access to U.S. contacts but who decided not to make the trip to the border. Future research should incorporate interviews of non-migrant Mexicans in their

hometowns. But the findings of this exploratory study suggest new possibilities for research on the individual-level functions of migrant social networks as well as the role of information as a deterrent to unauthorized immigration.

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## *Appendix A*

**Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions**

---

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Questionnaire**

**Name: Nombre** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age: Edad** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender: Género** \_\_\_\_\_

1: Where is your hometown?

**¿Cual es su ciudad de nacimiento? OR ¿De dónde es originario?**

---

2: Are you on your way north?

**¿Va para Estados Unidos? ¿Va para el norte? ¿Va de camino al norte?**

---

3: Where are you going?

**¿A dónde va?**

---

4: Why?

**¿Por qué?**

---

## **Migratory History**

5: Have you ever been to the north before?

**¿Ya había intentado irse al norte antes? ¿O ya ha estado en el norte alguna vez?**

---

**If yes, continue to #6; if no go to #11.**

6: What were you doing there?

**¿Qué hizo la última vez que estuvo ahí?**

---

7: How many times have you been north before?

**¿Cuántas veces se ha ido al norte?**

---

8: Did you go with or without papers?

**¿Las veces anteriores, entró a Estados Unidos con o sin papeles?**

---

9: To what city did you go?

**¿En qué ciudad estuvo?**

---

- 10: Why did you go there, instead of some other city?  
**¿Por qué se fue a esa ciudad y no otra?**
- 

### **Perceptions of Costs**

- 11: Have people given you advice on how to cross the border?  
**¿Alguien le ha dado consejos sobre como cruzar la frontera?**
- 

- 12: Who advised you?  
**¿Quien lo aconsejó? ¿Quien le dio consejos?**
- 

- 13: How do you think you are going to cross the border?  
**¿Como piensa cruzar la frontera?**

\_\_\_\_\_ solo (sin amigos o familiars, sin coyote)  
\_\_\_\_\_ con coyote  
\_\_\_\_\_ con familiars  
\_\_\_\_\_ con amigos  
\_\_\_\_\_ con coyote y familiars  
\_\_\_\_\_ con coyote y amigos  
\_\_\_\_\_ otro (especifique)  
\_\_\_\_\_ no sabe

If without a coyote, go to 21.

If planning to use coyote, continue.

14: Before leaving home, how much did you think the coyote was going to cost?

**¿Antes de dejar su casa, cuánto creía o calculaba que le iba a costar el coyote?**

---

15: Is this still how much you think you will have to pay?

**¿Hay alguna diferencia entre lo que usted creía que iba a pagar y lo que le piden ahora?**

---

16: Was this price surprising?

**¿Que le parecio el precio del coyote?**

---

17: How did you gather the money to hire the coyote?

**¿Como consiguio el dinero para pagarle al coyote?**

---

18: How long did it take you to gather the money?

**¿Cuanto se tardo en conseguir el dinero para pagarle al coyote?**

---

19: Was a particular coyote recommended to you?

**¿Le recomendaron a algun coyote en particular?**

---



- 20: Is it more expensive to get to the United States than you had thought before you left?

**¿Es mas caro entrar a Estados Unidos de lo que pensaba antes de venirse para aca?**

---

- 21: Do you know of "Operation Gatekeeper" in San Diego? (If necessary: It is a program of increased vigilance of the Border Patrol in the sectors where people enter the U.S. without papers.)

**¿Sabe algo, o ha oido hablar, de la "Operacion Gatekeeper" en San Diego? (Si es necesario:) Es decir, los intentos mas fuertes de la patrulla fronteriza en estos sectores para impedir la entrada de los "sin papeles".**

\_\_\_\_\_ No tiene conocimiento.

\_\_\_\_\_ Si, sabe algo.

---

- 22: How difficult is it to enter the United States without papers, since these Border Patrol operations have existed?

**¿Qué tan difícil es entrar en los EE. UU. Sin papeles, DESDE QUE EXISTEN estas operaciones de la patrulla fronteriza?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Nada difícil, igual como siempre.

\_\_\_\_\_ Algo mas difícil.

\_\_\_\_\_ Mucho mas difícil.

\_\_\_\_\_ Imposible, o casi imposible.

\_\_\_\_\_ No sabe, no responde.

---

- 23: How dangerous do you think it is, these days, to cross the border without papers?  
**¿En su opinion, que tan peligroso es cruzar la frontera sin papeles ahora?**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Muy peligroso**  
\_\_\_\_\_ **Algo peligroso**  
\_\_\_\_\_ **Poco peligroso**  
\_\_\_\_\_ **Nada peligroso**

---

- 24: Why is it dangerous?  
**¿Por que cree que es peligroso?**
- 

- 25: Is it more dangerous now than it used to be? (If yes) Why?  
**¿Usted cree que es mas peligroso ahora de lo que era antes? ¿Por que?**
- 

- 26: Do you know anyone who has been injured or who has died trying to cross the border?  
**¿Conoce a alguien o ha oido de alguien que haya tenido un accidente o que haya muerto al cruzar la frontera?**
- 

- 27: (If yes) Who was that?  
**¿Quien era esa persona?**
-

28: What exactly happened to them?

**¿Que fue lo que le sucedio exactamente?**

---

29: Do you think there will be a new amnesty for Mexicans (or a law that helps Mexicans to obtain work) in the United States?

**¿Piensa Ud. Que habra una nueva amnestia (o una ley que ayude a los mexicanos para poder trabajar en) en los EE. UU.?**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Si.**

\_\_\_\_\_ **No.**

\_\_\_\_\_ **No Sabe.**

---

30: (If yes) Did this possibility affect your decision to go to the U.S. this year?

**¿ La posibilidad de una ley asi, (you have just described it), lo motivo a venir a Estados Unidos este ano?**

---

### **Perceptions of Benefits**

31: Did you have a job in Mexico?

**¿Tenia trabajo en Mexico?**

---

32: How much did it pay per month? How many months a year?

**¿Cuanto ganaba al mes? ¿Cuantos meses trabajaba al ano?**

---

33: Why did you leave this job to go north?

**¿Por que dejó su trabajo para venirse al Norte?**

---

34: How easy is it for a Mexican to get work in the United States?

**¿Que tan fácil es conseguir trabajo en los EE. UU., para un Mexicano?**

---

---

---

35: Do you already have a job lined up in the north?

**¿Ya tiene trabajo en Estados Unidos?**

---

**If not, go to #38.**

36: If yes; who set you up?

**¿Como lo consiguio?**

---

37: What type of work will you, or do you, hope to do?

**¿Que tipo de trabajo buscara?**

---

---

---

---

---

**If they do not already have a job,**

38: How will you look for work?

**¿Cómo piensa encontrar trabajo?**

\_\_\_\_\_ buscando solo  
\_\_\_\_\_ con ayuda de parientes  
\_\_\_\_\_ con ayuda de otros del mismo pueblo  
\_\_\_\_\_ con ayuda de amigos  
\_\_\_\_\_ otro (especifique \_\_\_\_\_)

---

39: How much time do you think it will take to find work?

**¿Cuánto tiempo piensa usted que tardara en encontrar trabajo?**

\_\_\_\_\_ ( días, semanas, o meses – especifique)

---

40: How much can a person hope to earn for such a job per week?

**¿Cuanto puede ganar alguien en ese trabajo? ( cuanto puede  
ganar alguien en ese trabajo cada semana?)**

---

41: Can one receive healthcare in your line of work?

**¿Puede ganar seguro para la salud (health care) seguro medico,  
en sutipo de trabajo?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Si.  
\_\_\_\_\_ No.

---

42: If you do good work do you think you will be promoted?

**¿Si trabaja bien, cree que habria posibilidad de que lo ascendieran, lo promovieran?**

---

43: How much more expensive will it be to live in the US compared to your hometown?

**¿Que tanto mas caro le sera vivir en Estados Unidos comparado con su pueblo o con su ciudad?**

---

44: Despite this, do you think you will be able to save money or send money home?

**¿A pesar de lo caro, cree Usted que podra ahorrar y mandar dinero a su casa?**

---

45: Do you know of anyone who has gone to the U.S. to work but returned because they could not find work?

**¿Conoce usted a personas que se hayan ido a EE. UU. Pero que se regresaron a México porque no encontraron trabajo?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Si.  
\_\_\_\_\_ No.

---

## **Communication**

46: Do you know anyone who is living in the US?

**¿Conoce a alguien que este viviendo ahorita en EEUU?**

---

47: What is your relationship to them?

**¿Cual es su relacion con ellos?**

---

48: Do you communicate with them?

**¿Se ha comunicado con ellos?**

---

49: How often?

**¿Que tan seguido?**

---

50: By what means

**¿Como se comunica con ellos? ¿A traves de que medio?**

---

51: Do you discuss the work they do?

**¿Cuando platican, comenta con ellos sobre su trabajo?**

---

52: Do you discuss the pay they receive?  
**¿Sus amigos o familiares hablan con usted sobre su sueldo?**

---

53: Do you talk about the supervisor/boss?  
**¿Le hablaron sobre el patron?**

☐ **Si.**  
☐ **No.**

---

54: Do they talk about their working conditions?  
**¿Le hablaron sobre las condiciones del trabajo?**

☐ **Si.**  
☐ **No.**

---

55: Do you discuss their living conditions in the U.S.?  
**¿Habla con ellos sobre sus condiciones de vida en estados unidos?**

---

56: Have these people told about their experience crossing the border?  
**¿Le han contado de sus experiencias al cruzar la frontera?**

---



57: What did they tell you?

**¿Que le dijeron?**

---

58: Did they talk about the costs of coyotes?

**¿Le comentaron sobre el costo de los coyotes?**

---

59: Did they talk about the place where you hope to work?

**¿Le platicaron de como es el lugar donde usted espera trabajar?**

---

### **Evaluation of Information**

60: When you speak with people about going north do you think they know what they are talking about?

**¿Cuando habla con las personas sobre irse al norte, usted cree que saben de que esta hablando?**

---

61: When you speak with people about the job situation in the US do you think they know what they are talking about?

**¿Cuando platica con las personas sobre su trabajo en EEUU, usted cree que ellos saben de que les habla?**

---

## **Decision Making at the Border**

62: How many times have you attempted to cross the border during this trip?  
**¿Cuántas veces intento cruzar la frontera desde que empecé este viaje?**

---

63: Have your ideas regarding the difficulty of crossing the border changed as you have traveled north?  
**¿Sus ideas sobre que tan difícil sería cruzar la frontera han cambiado desde que se vino para acá, al norte?**

---

64: Are you still going to cross the border?  
**¿Todavía planea cruzar la frontera?**

---

65: What would cause you to go back home?  
**¿Qué cosas harían que usted pensara en regresar a su casa?**

---