

## **Growth in High-Skilled Mexican Migration Northward: American and Canadian Destinations**

### **El crecimiento de la migración mexicana calificada hacia el norte: destinos estadounidenses y canadienses**

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#### ABSTRACT

As migration of university-educated Mexicans to both the United States and Canada has begun to increase, the greater opportunities Canada's expanding points-based selection system offers for the highly skilled to become permanent residents highlights a question: which factors may induce high-skilled Mexicans to prefer Canadian destinations versus American? Using traditional migration theories to frame interviews with a volunteer sample of 40 young university-educated Mexicans, this study confirms that reasons of proximity, climate, and culture often favor American destinations, while reasons of social acceptance, social welfare, and personal security favor Canadian. Importantly, urban-specific preferences matter. Those factors favoring U.S. destinations in general lead many to prefer southern-tier U.S. cities traditional for less-skilled Mexican migration. Those considering northern U.S. cities often prefer a Canadian choice. Canadian competitiveness in the northern urban market suggests that increased awareness of Canadian immigration opportunities could significantly boost skilled Mexican migration to Canada.

*Keywords:* 1. high-skilled migration, 2. urban destinations, 3. migration preferences, 4. United States, 5. Canada.

#### RESUMEN

Mientras comienza a aumentar la migración de mexicanas/os con educación universitaria a Estados Unidos y Canadá, las oportunidades ofrecidas por Canadá y su sistema expansivo de selección de puntos, con oportunidad de residencia permanente, subraya una pregunta: ¿qué factores podrían inducir a estas/os migrantes a preferir destinos canadienses sobre estadounidenses? Empleando teorías migratorias tradicionales y entrevistando a una muestra de 40 voluntarias/os universitarias/os, se confirma que la proximidad, el clima y la cultura suelen favorecer destinos estadounidenses; mientras que la seguridad personal, la aceptación y bienestar social, favorecen a Canadá. Las preferencias urbanas específicas importan: en Estados Unidos, dichos motivos generalmente favorecen a ciudades del sur, destinos tradicionales para mexicanas/os menos calificadas/os. Quienes consideran ciudades del norte, con mayor frecuencia prefieren un destino canadiense. Este hallazgo sugiere que Canadá tendrá mayor competitividad en el mercado urbano del norte incrementando la información sobre sus oportunidades migratorias, impulsando significativamente la migración calificada mexicana.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migración calificada, 2. destinos urbanos, 3. preferencias migratorias, 4. Estados Unidos, 5. Canadá.

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## INTRODUCTION

High-skilled migration attracts interest across the advanced industrial world (Shachar, 2006; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2008), including in the United States and Canada, but migration from Mexico is not generally included in the conversation. Historically, Mexican migration to both countries has featured those with low education and job skill levels, and research has focused almost entirely on them. In the U.S., the flow of low-skilled Mexican migration is large, often undocumented, and hugely divisive. It dominates immigration debates and is seen as a negative in the competition for skilled immigration. Canada has had great success recruiting high-skilled immigrants, but mostly from outside the Americas. Mexican immigrants to Canada represent a relatively small stream of less-skilled temporary workers, especially through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) (Basok, 2002; Verduzco & Lozano, 2003; Massey & Brown, 2011; Lara Flores et al., 2015).

High-skilled Mexican migration to the U.S. and Canada is relatively unexplored, but recent trends suggest it is ripe for investigation (Tigau, 2013; Tigau, 2020; Clemens, 2014; Peña Muñoz, 2016; Ruiz Soto & Selee, 2019). Due to rising educational levels in Mexico, the promotion of North American economic integration at all levels, and advancing globalization, high-skilled Mexican migration to both countries—while still only a trickle—has been increasing. What are these trends, and how do they compare to parallel trends in high-skilled migration to the U.S. and Canada from elsewhere? How may they be explained in terms of theories of international migration, and what does the relative size of the flows imply for the future? How do high-skilled Mexicans who seek employment abroad perceive the U.S. and Canada as potential destinations?

At first glance, the U.S. would have to have several major advantages over Canada in attracting high-skilled migration from Mexico. The U.S. is close, familiar, and linked to Mexico with a dense set of personal and economic networks. It offers unparalleled economic opportunities for the highly skilled and substantial Mexican American communities spread across the country.

However, Canada has the tools to compete. While its climate is less hospitable, it offers a more supportive social environment, particularly for immigrants (Reitz, 2012). While Canada and the U.S. have long accepted immigrants, in a recent Gallup poll comparison of “most migrant accepting” countries, Canada ranked first and the U.S. sixth (Esipova et al., 2020). Importantly, compared to the U.S., Canada’s immigration program is much larger relative to the population (Massey et al., 1998, p. 62). It creates many more opportunities for those with advanced education and other skills to apply for permanent residence status without pre-arranged employment. In the U.S., such opportunities are limited (Kerr, 2020). A major expansion of Canada’s immigration program is being implemented. The roughly 250 000 annual immigration

targets in place for several decades were increased, and in 2019, Canada admitted over 341 000 permanent immigrants, surpassing the 1% of population mark, with 58% in the economic and skill-selected categories, and a target of 421 000 was set for 2023 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2020). Furthering this expansion, in 2022, when 405 999 permanent residents were admitted, with 62% in the economic and skilled categories, a target of 500 000 was set for 2025 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2022). The OECD pointed out that “Canada has not only the largest in terms of numbers, but also the most elaborate and longest-standing skilled labor migration system in the OECD” (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019a, p. 13).

Another possible advantage for Canada may be the negative public discourse on immigration in the U.S., particularly regarding Mexicans. Previous studies of Mexicans in Canada have found awareness of their negative social image in the U.S. Even if it is based on stereotypes, they are eager to distinguish themselves from it in the eyes of Canadians (Whittaker, 1988; Tigau, 2013). Tigau’s (2015) analysis of the media in Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. showed that Canadian public discourse on skilled migration is the most receptive. In addition, social benefits in Canada are more generous than in the U.S., and its immigration and multicultural policies enjoy popular support. However, despite the emphasis on this type of immigration, skilled immigrants who arrive in Canada without pre-arranged employment often have difficulties finding employment based on those skills. This problem also applies to Mexicans, as Peña Muñoz (2016) found in his interviews in Toronto.

Both the U.S. and Canada ranked highly in an “attractiveness” assessment of OECD countries for immigrant workers with post-graduate degrees, developed from OECD sources (with support from the Bertelsmann Foundation in Germany) and using a scale considering both economic and non-economic aspects. Respectively, Canada and the U.S. ranked fifth and seventh. The U.S. would have ranked first but lost due to the limited opportunities provided by its immigration system. Other countries, such as Australia, ranked first, followed by Sweden, Switzerland, and New Zealand. Ireland came after Canada in sixth place (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019a, p. 5). A review by Ewers and Dicce (2018) found that the U.S. and Canada ranked highly in “attractiveness to foreign skilled workers” (second and fifth, respectively). Potential migrants recognize these national features. A 2017-2019 Gallup World Poll estimated that 750 million people worldwide would migrate to another country if they could. The “top desired destination” was the U.S. with 21%, followed by Canada and Germany with 6%. Additionally, among other countries chosen by two-thirds of all potential migrants. France, Australia, and the United Kingdom were each chosen by between 4 and 5% (Esipova et al, 2018).

This paper probes the potential significance of skilled migration from Mexico to the U.S. and Canada. The next section describes recent existing trends in high-skilled Mexican migration to both countries. We then consider the theoretical framework for analysis, and we suggest that for our purpose, migration theories must be specified for high-skilled migrants and must also

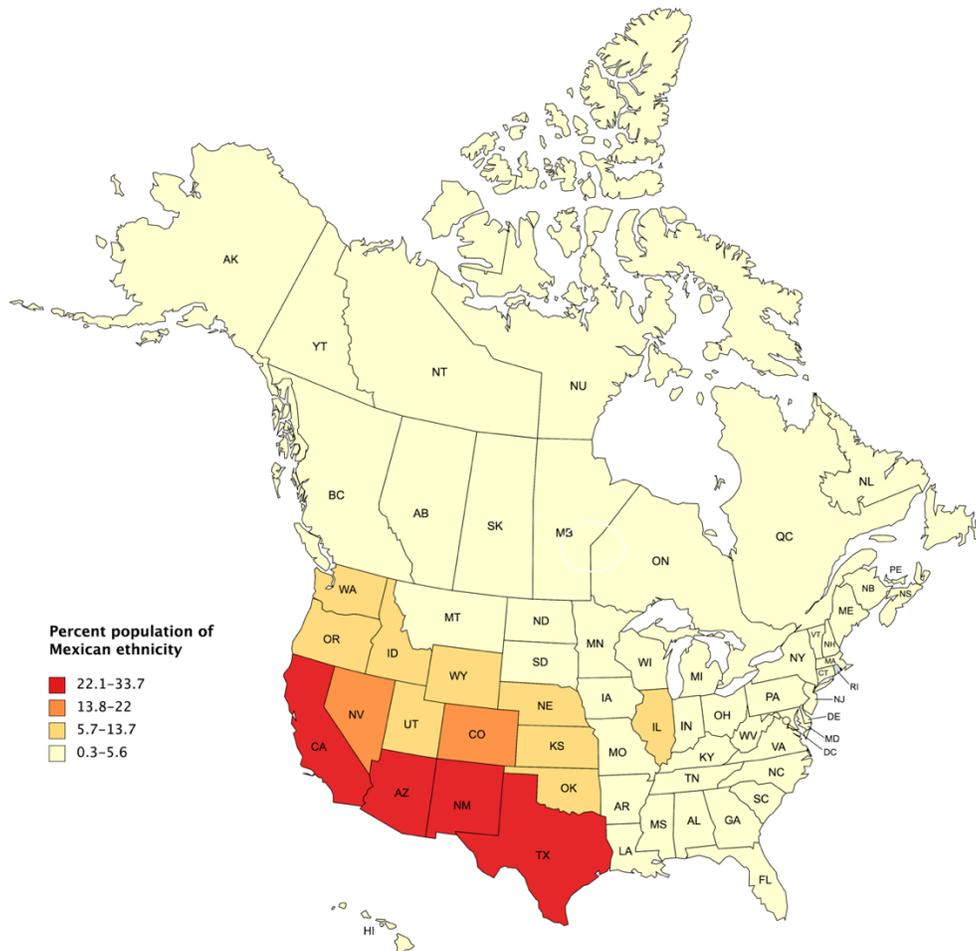
consider differences in urban destinations within each of the two destination countries. Urban destinations are important because potential migrants, both skilled and unskilled, usually choose not only a country but also a specific city or region, and the major immigration destinations of the U.S. and Canada vary significantly in terms of criteria affecting migration decisions. This framework then guides our description of the migration destination preferences of university-trained Mexicans based on interviews conducted in Mexico City. Findings suggest that viable social and economic forces support skilled Mexican migration to major cities in both the U.S. and Canada. Our concluding discussion indicates how future trends may depend on each country's immigration policies and recruitment efforts in Mexico.

#### RECENT TRENDS IN SKILLED MIGRATION FROM MEXICO TO THE NORTH

Compared to the 36 million persons of Mexican ethnic origin in the U.S., representing roughly 11.2% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b), the Mexican-origin footprint in Canada is tiny, only 0.3%. A map of Canada and the U.S. (Map 1) shows that all Canadian provinces have ethnic Mexican populations similar in size to those of almost all U.S. states outside the Southwest. Yet migration levels have remained low despite economic opportunities in Canada. This has been explained variously by U.S. proximity, social networks in the U.S., the lack of information about Canada, and a general dread of Canadian winter (Samuel et al., 1995).

Still, the number of immigrants from Mexico to Canada has increased steadily since 1961, from an average of 210 per year in the 1960s to roughly 3 700 per year between 2011 and 2019, with a peak of 4 500 reached in 2014. (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2016). Recent expansion of Canadian immigration boosted this number to 5 145 immigrants from Mexico in 2022 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2023). Mexicans represented 0.1% of total Canadian immigration in the 1960s, but in the most recent period this rose to about 1.3%. In Canada, the Mexican-born population was about 95 410 in 2016, and the Mexican-*ethnic-origin* population (including second-generation immigrants or above, as well as claims of single or multiple ethnicities) was 128 485—still only about 0.4% of the total but up from 96 055 in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2011b; Statistics Canada, 2023; Armony, 2018). Most (43.6% in 2016) live in Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2017). Among Mexican-born immigrants, 39.4% lived in one of those three cities in 2016, up from 34.8% in 2001 (Mueller, 2005, p. 41).

Map 1. Percent of Population of Mexican Ethnicity, American States (2018)  
and Canadian Provinces (2010)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2018a) and Statistics Canada (2011a).

While numbers are small, Canada is already the second most frequently chosen destination country for Mexicans (Serrano Herrera & Jaramillo Benítez, 2017, p. 42), after the U.S., and ahead of Spain and any country in the Americas south of Mexico. Data for 2015 showed 12 million persons of Mexican origin in the U.S., 94 000 in Canada, 47 000 in Spain, and 66 000 in the entire western hemisphere south of Mexico (Serrano Herrera & Jaramillo Benítez, 2017, p. 42).

Similarly, to permanent immigrants to Canada, those from Mexico are highly skilled. Their educational profile has been increasing over time and is now similar to that of the general immigrant population in Canada. From 1978-1992, Mexican immigrants were mainly from the family class, and most had secondary education or less (Samuel et al., 1995). As for 2003-2013, the proportion of working-age Mexican immigrants who recently became permanent residents

(ages 25-59) with a bachelor's degree was 51.2%. On the other hand, the proportion with any post-secondary education was 73.4%. These figures closely match the overall immigrant population, 52.2% and 73.2% respectively, based on IRCC data (Van Haren & Masferrer, 2019, p. 6).

Some of the recent increase in Mexico-Canada migration is attributable to increased economic migration, boosting educational levels (Van Haren & Masferrer, 2019, p. 5). Another significant factor in the increasing proportion of skilled immigrants is the emergence of new and important professional networks, enough to motivate more skilled immigrants from Mexico to choose Canada. Conversely, the visa requirement for Mexican travelers, imposed from July 2009 to December 2016, reduced the refugee component.

Also, the number of skilled Mexicans migrating to the U.S. is likely increasing, though data are limited and do not permit direct comparison with Canada. Ruiz Soto and Selee (2019) showed that in the U.S., the number of Mexican immigrant adults (aged 25 or older) with college degrees rose from 269 000 in 2000 to 678 000 in 2017, with the largest populations in California and Texas. Of the 2017 cohort, two-thirds—roughly 450 000—were either naturalized citizens or permanent residents (i.e., green card holders; 30% were unauthorized). Similarly, in 2016, the Mexican-born immigrant adult population in Canada was 74 785 (Statistics Canada, 2016a), and 23 435 had a bachelor's degree (Statistics Canada, 2016b), making the Canadian figure about one-half that of the U.S. on per capita basis (see Table 1).

This U.S.-Canada disparity is far less than that for Mexican immigration to the two countries generally (Table 1). Many of the college-educated Mexicans in the U.S. would have received their education in the U.S., and the proportion of all Mexican immigrants is affected by variations in the numbers of less-skilled immigrants in the country. Despite such data limitations, Clemens (2014) concluded that “skilled migration will undoubtedly be a gradually increasing part of the landscape of [Mexico and the United States] in the long-term” (p. 12).

Table 1. Mexican Skilled Immigrants\*, and Overall Mexican Immigrant Population, Relative to Total Population; U.S. (2017) and Canada (2016)

	Total population	Mexican skilled immigrants	Mexican skilled immigrants as percent of total population	Overall Mexican immigrant population as percent of total population
U.S.	325 100 000	450 000	0.14	3.6
Canada	34 460 000	23 435	0.07	0.27

\*Permanent residents and naturalized citizens with bachelor's degrees.

Source: Statistics Canada (2016a; 2016b), U.S. Census Bureau (2017), Ruiz Soto & Selee (2019).

An increase in Mexican skilled migration to the north is expected because of the substantial increase in the size of the skilled population of Mexico, a result of population growth and growth in the proportion of the population attaining higher education. Since 1970, the Mexican

population base has more than doubled, from 51 million in 1970 to 126 million in 2018 (World Bank, 2020b). Over the same period, the proportion of Mexican population with post-secondary schooling rose from under 2% to 15% (World Bank, 2020a). Zúñiga and Molina (2008) argued that the increase in skill levels within Mexico exceeded the domestic employment demand, with the surplus resulting in increased emigration. Their projections indicated the surplus would not be permanent, as domestic demand for the highly skilled would increase. In any case, the trend toward internationalization of education (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and emphasis on international languages means the transferability of educational qualifications is increasing, as shown by the foreign credential assessment processes in Canada, as these are applied to Mexico. The broader economic integration represented by NAFTA (now USMCA) also facilitates migration through visa availability under the treaty and by creating cross-national academic and professional social networks.

It is unclear whether Mexican skilled migration growth to the north is more or less than what might be expected based on underlying education and population trends. In addition, while business cycles affect migration flows, the relative incomes across countries have not changed greatly. Relative Mexican incomes have remained well under half those in the U.S. and Canada (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019c, p. 750). Consequently, economic incentives for mobility appear to be unchanged.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: APPLYING MIGRATION THEORY TO SKILLED MEXICANS IN NORTH AMERICA

Migration theory provides a framework to analyze university-trained Mexicans in North America. Two important issues await empirical examination. First, in applications of theory to Mexicans in North America, most attention is given to unskilled migrants, so any implications for the university trained, including the potential impact of the skill-focused Canadian immigration policy, must be made explicit. Second, urban and regional destinations of Mexican migrants in the U.S. have shifted from the southwest borderlands toward the northeast urban areas, suggesting Mexicans in search of opportunity increasingly consider destinations less restricted by traditional concerns of distance and weather. This raises the question of how shifting priorities of skilled Mexicans could affect the relative attractiveness of northern U.S. and Canadian urban destinations.

##### *How Does Skill Level Affect Destinations for Mexican Immigrants?*

Many forces influence Mexicans at all skill levels to migrate to the U.S. or Canada. In a classic article, “An Evaluation of International Migration Theory: The North American Case,” Massey et al. (1994) grouped theories of international migration by thematic tradition: 1) classical economics, which emphasizes monetary benefits to individuals expected from migration. 2) the so-called “new” economics of migration, which takes account of a broader range of forces affecting the economic well-being of households and their interdependent members. 3) social capital

theories which include analysis of how personal assets beyond specific human capital and job skills, including social networks, shape migrant opportunities and outcomes. 4) theories of world systems and globalization which argue that migration flows between a particular origin and destination nations are influenced by their respective positions within a larger economic structure. Although the theories were not applied specifically to skilled Mexican migration to the U.S. and Canada, they have important implications for such analysis.

Many of the above theories point to the U.S. as the most likely destination for skilled Mexican migrants. Firstly, its geographical proximity and familiarity reduce both monetary and psychic migration burdens while lowering the costs of maintaining family and household ties. Another element could be the climate factor since more hospitable winters in the U.S. southern tier translate into a tangible benefit for many if not most potential migrants. As for the presence of Mexican American communities, this may be less significant for university-trained migrants in terms of meeting basic needs. Although they may provide a greater sense of local cultural connection, a recent study by Tigau (2020) found relationships in the Mexican community are quite complex, mainly because, unlike undocumented immigrants, Mexican professionals are a minority who enjoy mobility privileges. This creates tensions, especially in traditional migration areas like Texas, where there are considerable status differences among Mexican migrants. Her study also showed that choosing traditional destinations may be detrimental to credentials validation, as skilled Mexicans are part of a historically less-qualified ethnic group, hence suffering significant stigma.

Higher earnings are expected for skilled immigrants in the U.S., particularly in major urban centers linked to the global economy. Research (Borjas, 1993; Aydemir & Borjas, 2006) suggests that because earnings inequalities are greater in the U.S., high-skilled migrants may expect to be among those who benefit at the upper end. This pattern is also seen in migration analyses between both countries (Borjas, 1993, pp. 37-40). Canada more often loses top talent to the U.S. than the reverse, except when the Canadian government steps in with counteracting incentives. For all these reasons, high-skilled Mexicans may be expected to choose U.S. cities over Canadian ones.

Some theoretical considerations favor Canada, where social assistance, including for newly arrived immigrants, is more readily available. Such supports are most relevant for persons at lower income levels, but even high-skilled immigrants, particularly those from minority backgrounds who do not have pre-arranged employment, may find themselves working in occupations below their skill level on both sides of the U.S./Canada border (Batalova et al., 2016; Reitz et al., 2014). For persons concerned by this prospect, help covering basic needs such as health care may be reassuring. The overall calculation of employment security may also be affected by expectations of being discriminated against or receiving poor treatment. For example, some may believe that anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment is stronger in the U.S., though research has not found that the consequences for immigrant earnings are necessarily more negative in the U.S. A heightened sense of antagonism of Mexicans toward the U.S. would favor

Canada. However, this may diminish with more favorable immigration policies under the Biden administration.

The theme of globalization in migration theory suggests a connection between “global cities” and the world economic system that engenders significant labor market polarization, with increased labor demand at both ends of the skill hierarchy. Massey et al. (1994, pp. 726-727) observed that both U.S. and Canadian cities may be affected by the labor market and immigration implications of globalization, pointing out that the three U.S. cities identified by Friedmann (1986) as “primary” global cities—New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles—ranked 1, 2, and 4 in immigration, and the three “secondary” global cities—Miami, Houston, and San Francisco—ranked 3, 5, and 7. Friedmann (1986) identified only one Canadian city, Toronto, as a secondary global city. Its 81 368 immigrants in 2016 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016, p. 25) would have placed it fourth among North American cities after New York, Los Angeles, and Miami (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2017).

However, while much analysis of global cities in the U.S. emphasizes low-skilled immigration (Sassen, 2001), Canadian cities are distinguished by the relatively high-skill nature of arrivals. In a comparison restricted to university-educated immigrants, Toronto would rank higher—perhaps even first or second (to New York). So, from the perspective of globalization theory, Toronto and, to some extent, Montreal, and Vancouver, exemplify cities serving as magnets for skilled immigrants, including those from Mexico.

#### *The Shift North and the Evolving Priorities of Mexican Immigrants*

Migration patterns of less-skilled Mexicans in the U.S. have shifted over recent decades. Today, there are large settlements of Mexicans throughout the country, including in the more distant and colder north. These changes are due to economic conditions not necessarily directly linked to globalization (Massey et al., 2010) and increasingly involve urban-origin Mexicans, as Hernández-León (2008) showed for the city of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon. Before the 1980s, around 70% of migrants came from what is known as the “historical” migrant region and settled in the four border states with Mexico (see Table 2), with Illinois receiving a significant number as well. Over the following decade, regions of both origin and destinations changed, as Massey et al. (2010) describe:

During the 1990s Mexico’s central region rose in prominence as a source for US migrants and by 2006 accounted for roughly a third of all undocumented migrants. Although the majority of migrants from the central region went to traditional destinations in California, Texas, Illinois, and the Southwest, the flows also diversified to incorporate new destinations in the Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast, with significant streams into New York-New Jersey, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida (p. 150).

Table 2. Percentage of Origins and Destinations of Immigrants  
from Mexico Before and After 1980

Origins	Before 1980 (%)	By 2006 (%)	Destinations*	Before 1980 (%)	By 2006 (%)
Historical Region Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, Colima, Nayarit	70	45	Borderlands Texas, Arizona, California, New Mexico,	86	61
Central Region Mexico City, Guerrero, Hidalgo, State of Mexico, Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, Querétaro, Tlaxcala	10	37	Great Lakes Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin	5**	12.5
Border Region Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas	20	11	Southeast D.C., Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia	NA	10
Southeastern Region Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatán		7	Northwest Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington	NA	8.5

\* Other regions not included in table. Numbers may vary due to rounding.

\*\* Data correspond to the state of Illinois only.

Source: Own elaboration based on Massey et al. (2010, pp. 133-138).

Between 1990 and 2010, 15 states with relatively small Mexican immigrant populations showed a tenfold increase, including in the North, East, and Southeast regions in the U.S. (Rosenblum et al., 2012). For example, in Georgia, the number increased from 20 000 to nearly 300 000. In Minnesota, from 4 000 to 65 000, and in Delaware, from 1 000 to nearly 20 000 (Rosenblum et al., 2012, p. 38). Based on percentages of the total population, persons of Mexican origin remain most prevalent in Texas, California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Colorado. But based on *numbers*, top destinations include not only Illinois but also Florida, Washington, Georgia, North Carolina, and New York (Table 3). For instance, Illinois was home to almost 1.6 million Mexican Americans in 2010, up substantially from 2000, and had more than twice as many Mexican Americans as Colorado. Other states, such as Illinois, Florida, and Washington, have more Mexicans than New Mexico or Nevada. Smith's (2006) study of Mexicans in New York emphasized migration sources in the city of Puebla.

Table 3. American States Ranked by Mexican American Population (2010)

Ranked by Percentage of Mexican Americans			Ranked by Numbers of Mexican Americans		
State/Territory	Mexican American Population	Percentage	State/Territory	Mexican American Population	Percentage
Total U.S.	30 742 375	10	Total U.S.	30 742 375	10
Texas	7 704 044	31.7	California	11 231 410	30.7
California	11 231 410	30.7	Texas	7 704 044	31.7
New Mexico	526 314	26.1	Arizona	1 631 468	26.1
Arizona	1 631 468	26.1	Illinois	1 535 659	12
Nevada	524 959	19.9	Colorado	736 652	15.1
Colorado	736 652	15.1	Florida	592 395	3.2
Illinois	1 535 659	12	Washington	563 256	8.6
Oregon	353 561	9.4	New Mexico	526 314	26.1
Utah	246 844	9.3	Nevada	524 959	19.9
Idaho	140 968	9.2	Georgia	490 440	5.2
Washington	563 256	8.6	North Carolina	458 493	4.9
Kansas	230 315	8.2	New York	422 292	2.2

Source: Own elaboration based on U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

Other studies amplify these trends. Light's *Deflecting Immigration* (2006) showed how local governments in the Los Angeles region used housing policy to redirect Mexican migration. Garip (2016) differentiated Mexican migration to the U.S. in terms of several separate migration streams, prominent at different points in time and for various reasons. Massey et al. (2010, p. 150) suggested that the increased salience of the immigration issue in the U.S. is partly attributable to the increase in the number of affected areas.

While these shifting migration patterns suggest distance and climate are not insurmountable barriers for Mexicans, we may ask why the process seems to stop at the Canadian border. In the absence of research, we can only speculate. New settlements of Mexicans in non-traditional areas appear to be “seeded” by secondary migration of Mexicans, who in turn encourage others, including some arriving directly from Mexico. Such secondary migration is unlikely to involve a cross-border move, which would not be sanctioned by Canadian immigration regulations and involves costs with little benefit. Second, some undocumented cross-border movement by Mexicans into Canada may be occurring despite the lack of economic rationale, attracting little attention because numbers are small relative to other immigration populations. The fact that the spread of less skilled Mexicans across U.S. regions has not led to settlement in a Canada does not necessarily indicate any general aversion of Mexicans towards settlement in Canada.

Diverse destinations may be chosen even more among high-skilled Mexican migrants, though less information is available. Ruiz Soto and Selee (2019) found that in 2017 out of 678 000

university-educated Mexicans residing in the U.S., 60% settled in Texas or California, with many concentrated in border areas: San Diego-Tijuana, El Paso-Ciudad Juarez, McAllen-Reynosa, and Brownsville-Matamoros. The others may be distributed more broadly in the country. The authors speculated that high-skill Mexicans may be attempting to escape rising levels of violence. They also noted a pattern in Canada: under-employment of the highly skilled, with some immigrants working in construction and food services.

#### UNIVERSITY-EDUCATED MEXICANS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S., CANADA, AND THEIR CITIES AS MIGRATION DESTINATIONS

##### *Sampling and Method*

To learn more about the preferences of high-skilled Mexicans still residing in Mexico to potentially migrate to U.S. cities versus Canadian cities, interviews with a sample of 40 young university-educated Mexicans in Mexico City were conducted between July and November 2019. The sample was a non-probabilistic quota sample designed to represent men and women equally in private and public universities and was composed of volunteers responding to media posts. Respondents were or had been studying at one of 17 Mexican post-secondary institutions, both public and private. A wide variety of disciplines and professional fields were represented. A slight majority (52.5%) had completed their studies. The rest were evenly divided between undergraduate and graduate studies.

The structured interviews included items on future academic and professional goals, the possibility of emigration, and the attractiveness of the U.S. and Canada as possible destinations, emphasizing particular cities within each country. Manual coding and qualitative content analysis were employed to identify patterns in interviewee responses. Given the informal recruitment of such a small sample, statistical reliability cannot be assumed.

All respondents were asked about their general perceptions of both countries to evaluate their attractiveness and potential urban destinations. Then, each rated specific urban areas within each country<sup>3</sup> in terms of the extent to which they would “feel at home” there. In the final part of the interview, they compared several features for two potential urban choices: a) jobs, b) salaries, c) universities, d) public services, e) cultural activities, f) security, g) weather conditions, h) social acceptance, and i) feeling at home. They also were asked about the potential for discrimination in those two choices on various grounds. For this part, the sample was divided into two groups, each

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<sup>3</sup> The list of cities was based on the following considerations. In the U.S., cities in different states with a large Mexican community were included (Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Miami), and those with Spanish names (San Antonio, San Francisco). In Canada, the three cities with the highest numbers of Mexican immigrants (Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver) were included. In both countries, capital cities (Washington, D.C., and Ottawa) and the largest urban areas were included (Quebec, Calgary), regardless of the number of immigrants. Finally, a couple of options with small Mexican populations were added (Boston, Portland, Pittsburgh, Edmonton, and Victoria).

comprising 20 participants. Half of the sample (subsample A) was asked to compare them at the national level, and the other half (subsample B) was asked to contrast their top urban choices within each country. The coding of responses to open-ended questions was duplicated, with essentially consistent results.

Overall, respondents expressed their opinions positively toward Canada as a country, preferring it by a wide margin over the U.S. as a potential location. However, when questions were posed about specific cities to move to, preferences shifted significantly toward the U.S. The American advantage was primarily the attractiveness of southern-tier cities in California and Texas, where Mexicans have the strongest ties. Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver were mainly competitive compared to northern U.S. destinations such as Chicago and New York. Understanding these trends and the thinking behind them are significant keys to projecting the future of the northward migration of skilled Mexicans.

#### *Migration Experiences, Social Networks, and Plans*

Interestingly, migration was part of the personal history of many respondents. Some had relocated to Mexico City from other Mexican states to study or work, and others had an immigrant background, as previous generations had migrated to Mexico from different countries, mainly Western European. Fourteen had migrated abroad before, most often to the U.S. or Canada as part of exchange programs, internships, or master's level studies. When asked about future migration plans, 85% stated an interest in going abroad, especially to complete their studies, although many said they would not reject an offer of employment or education if one materialized.

Certain specific "push factors" were mentioned, especially the unpleasant features of the current situation in Mexico, such as violence and the attendant political and economic uncertainty. An international business graduate said: "I would like to move to somewhere else; it has been on my mind more and more often lately. Mostly because of the current situation in the country, the insecurity is excruciating and now I have kids and I have to look after them" (J. Orozco, personal communication, November 22, 2019). A woman in the field of nutrition agreed: "insecurity would (...) be a key factor. The situation we see today is worrisome, and we would move in order to provide better conditions for our children" (D. Melchor, personal communication, November 15, 2019). As these comments illustrate, having a job offer or an academic opportunity sometimes may or may not be significant. In fact, at least seven interviewees said they had considered migration aside from any academic or professional goals. One woman said she would be willing to take any job as long as it was in a country she liked.

Networks linked respondents to both countries. Family networks led most strongly to the U.S., an obvious consequence of a much greater Mexican presence. Of all respondents, 52.5% had family members in the U.S., 5% had family in Canada, and 17.5% had family ties in both countries. As for friendship networks, it linked respondents to the U.S. and Canada more equally. 20% had friends in the U.S., 27.5% had friends in Canada, and 40% had friends in both countries.

*Contrasting Images of the United States and Canada*

While most respondents said they would consider moving to either the U.S. or Canada—80% and 70%, respectively—the general perceptions of Canada were far more favorable. Fully 90% (36 of 40) of respondents had a favorable view of Canada “as a place to live, work, and study” (the wording used in the question). As for the U.S., 17.5% (7 respondents) had a favorable view of the country. Whereas 22.5% (9 respondents) had an unfavorable view of the U.S., and one person expressed an unfavorable opinion of Canada.

Commentary across the full sample indicated that while many admired the U.S. as a large, cosmopolitan, powerful, and rich country, they were aware of drawbacks and challenges. This included the impact of anti-immigrant sentiment, which intensified under the Trump administration and extended to a more general concern about the legacy of the history of U.S.-Mexico relations. A respondent with a philosophy and human rights background observed, “I am a Mexican, so that really determines my opinion about the U.S. (...) Our relationship with that country is of subordination, and not collaboration, which would be the ideal” (H. Calderon, personal communication, October 26, 2019). Another respondent with a background in psychology cited current American politics: “While I think (...) it offers really good job opportunities, right now it is not the best place to be as a Mexican” (F. Salamanca, personal communication, October 27, 2019).

Respondents expressed concerns about broader social conditions in the U.S. including racism, violence, guns, and drugs. The psychologist cited above said, “important issues, such as gun violence and racism, makes [the U.S.] a hard place to live in” (F. Salamanca, personal communication, October 27, 2019). For a graphic designer, polarization and conflict on these issues were defining features: “I think [the U.S.] is a very diverse country, very polarized. There are racist expressions but also people very vocal on inclusion and acceptance” (P. Revueltas, personal communication, November 17, 2019). He went on to express resentment of American hypocrisy in the country’s view of Mexican social problems:

I think [the U.S.] has serious problems of violence, and they tend to wash their hands, as if Mexico [is] the violent country, when that is far from the truth. I am not saying we have the same levels of violence, but they also have a big problem with drugs and guns (P. Revueltas, personal communication, November 17, 2019).

Finally, some thought these social issues were getting worse over time. A woman in the field of communication observed: “I used to have a positive opinion [of the U.S.] but in the past years this has changed. It is just a country that scares me and fascinates me at the same time” (M. Arjona, personal communication, October 6, 2019).

Several more general cultural issues surfaced as well. Some respondents rejected the American lifestyle, which they thought was excessively superficial, egocentric, and materialistic. One said:

[Americans] are very nationalistic and all they care about is themselves. It’s like they have a very narrow vision of the world, and they can only see what is happening inside their country.

They have very talented people, very capable and educated, very intelligent, and at the same time, there is so much ignorance (S. Escobar, personal communication, November 7, 2019).

Positive views of the U.S. centered on job opportunities and the Mexican presence in certain locations. One respondent, a mechanical engineer, said:

I feel very close to New Mexico and Texas. Just like many Mexicans, I see the influence of Mexico in those places, (...) because of the population they have. I think in terms of food or traditions we are very much alike (C. Ariza, personal communication, September 5, 2019).

This point, while it expresses a connection with overall perceptions of the U.S., it suggests the country's attractions can be region-specific.

On the other hand, commentaries on Canadian virtues emphasized diversity and multiculturalism. Twelve respondents referenced this aspect and spoke highly of Canadian openness to immigration. Their comments on Canada showed a comparison between both countries, explicitly or implicitly. One woman in international relations said diversity in Canada is on a "smaller scale," but Canadians are "more tolerant" than Americans. Another woman in the same field was explicit:

I have a much better perception [of Canada] than the United States; it has a much better image. I do not know if it is due to their current political situation with Trudeau, that he looks more left-wing than Trump, but in their foreign policy, it is more flexible, more friendly with Mexicans (M. Vico, personal communication, September 5, 2019).

A systems engineer made a similar U.S. comparative comment related to violence:

To be honest, I tend to compare [Canada] with the United States, and that is perhaps the reason why I have a much better opinion of Canada. I like it, I like it a lot! (...) You do not hear that much about violence [in Canada] as you do with the U.S. (D. Melchor, personal communication, November 15, 2019).

The U.S. was not referenced when Quebec culture was the topic. The mechanical engineer quoted above mentioned:

I identify with Quebec because of my French lessons. I love the location, the multicultural and bilingual education, their living style. (...) I have thought of migrating to Quebec just because I love their French culture and have many friends over there (C. Ariza, personal communication, September 5, 2019).

This suggests certain regions of Canada have specific appeal, just as in the U.S.

The extreme Canadian weather was a concern, although a few stalwarts regarded Canada's winter weather as an asset, attractively framing the natural landscape. But comments on "coldness" in Canada went beyond weather and shaded off into cultural matters. One woman in marketing said the Canadian Anglo-Saxon culture was more impersonal and serious than the Latino culture. Yet the systems engineer thought that in cultural terms, Canada would offer a warmer society than the U.S. By that, she seemed to mean the social programs and public services. As stated,

Even though it has colder weather than the United States, I would say Canada is a warmer country, although still not as warm as Mexico. I think as a family you would have a better income in Canada, and there is less inequality (R. Samper, personal communication, November 9, 2019).

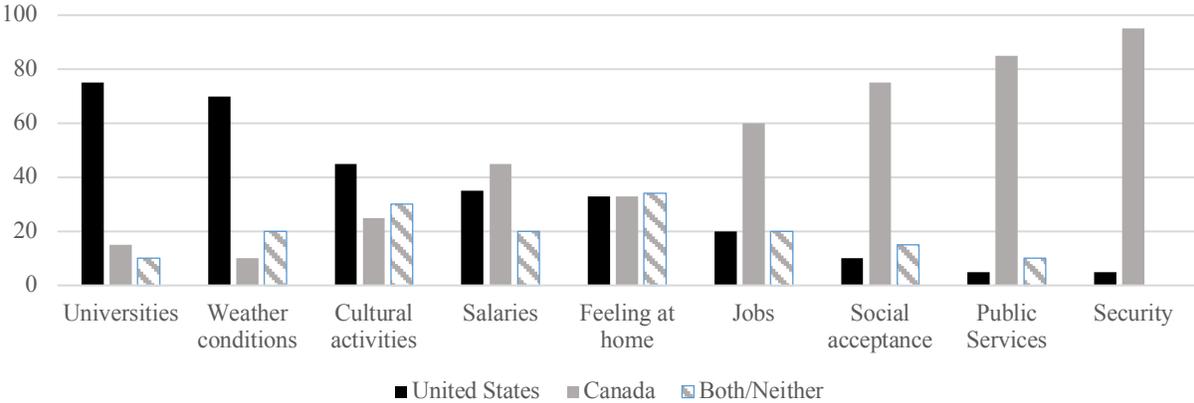
While views of Canada were positive, they were relatively vague. At least nine respondents confessed to having limited information and were hesitant to express their opinion. As one put it, there is “not much information about Canada out there,” or at least “I don’t know much about it” (D. Vives, personal communication, October 4, 2019). At the same time, there may be some growing awareness of Canada as a migration destination because of the increased flows documented earlier. An actuary said: “There are many good opportunities [in Canada]. Lately I have seen many people migrating to Canada, like friends or people I used to work with. It has become more and more important I think” (M. Valdivia, personal communication, November 15, 2019).

Additionally, a chemical engineer said:

I never considered Canada for anything really, but suddenly, at work, so many people are talking about Canada and saying they want to go there. So that has caught my attention. I am now considering it, I heard it’s a good place. From my perspective it’s like Canada has fixed all the problems that the U.S. is unable to (G. Gómez, personal communication, October 26, 2019).

For the subsample comparing specific features at the national level (subsample A), each country’s characteristics were perceived quite differently. Canada was rated more positively on personal security, social acceptance, public services, and work quality, while the U.S. was rated more positively on universities (especially important for those considering studying abroad), weather conditions, and cultural activities. The two were rated equally on salaries and feeling at home (see Graph 1).

Graph 1. Country Preferred for Each Attribute, Among Prospective Mexican Skilled Migrants



Source: Own elaboration based on interviews conducted by the authors (subsample A, N=20).

Respondents were asked which country would be more receptive to them as immigrants. Specifically, the question was in which country they would encounter more discrimination or have more difficulty getting a job fitting their qualifications. In this case, their perceptions were extremely different. Virtually all respondents thought they would suffer more discrimination based on nationality in the U.S. The overwhelming majority considered their culture and skin color as possible discrimination factors. Also, the U.S. was more often seen as a difficult country to find a job fitting one's qualifications.

### *Choosing Urban Destinations Cross-Nationally*

While the general perception of each country matters to prospective migrants, in the end, they choose specific cities, so perceptions of these matter considerably. This issue was approached in two steps. First, respondents were asked to rate specific cities within each country. Second, they were asked about their preferences among those top cities, disregarding national boundaries and thinking only of what the specific cities had to offer. This yielded a list of top urban choices across North America.

In the U.S., Los Angeles was the first choice of nearly one in three respondents. It was among the top three choices for three in four respondents (see Table 4, A). After Los Angeles, the most often mentioned were San Antonio and San Francisco, each mentioned in the top three by over two in five. Mexicans expect to “feel at home” in American cities with large Mexican American populations, possibly because they have relatives or friends there. They were also cities many respondents had visited. A few northern cities were mentioned, particularly New York and Chicago. These three American metropolises—New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles—have notable migration histories and receive large numbers of migrants from many places. It was not surprising that respondents considered them favorably.

Table 4. Rating of U.S. and Canadian Cities as Places to “Feel at Home,”  
Among Prospective Mexican Skilled Migrants

A. U.S. cities' rating			C. North American cities' rating		
	Percent rating as top choice (%)	top three (%)		Percent rating as top choice (%)	top three (%)
Los Angeles	29	74	Los Angeles	29	54
San Antonio	20	43	New York	14	26
San Francisco	14	51	San Antonio	11	29
New York	14	31	Toronto	11	46
Chicago	9	43	San Francisco	9	29
Miami	6	20	Chicago	6	17
Boston	3	11	Montreal	6	20
Washington	3	11	Vancouver	6	29
Pittsburgh	3	9	Washington	3	9
Portland	0	6	Quebec	3	9
			Calgary	3	6
			Miami	0	17
B. Canadian cities ratings			Boston	0	0
	Percent rating as top choice (%)	top three (%)	Portland	0	0
Toronto	37	86	Pittsburgh	0	0
Vancouver	26	71	Ottawa	0	9
Montreal	23	66	Victoria	0	3
Quebec	7	53	Edmonton	0	0
Calgary	6	9			
Ottawa	3	14			
Edmonton	0	17			
Victoria	0	10			

Source: Own elaboration based on interviews conducted by the authors (N=35.5 non-response).

In Canada, Toronto took the top spot, chosen as the place where prospective migrants would feel most “at home” by over one-third of respondents (see Table 4, B). Toronto was among the top three choices for 86% of respondents. Vancouver and Montreal were also highly rated. Having already visited or lived there, respondents mentioned the qualities of the city and perceptions of job opportunities. Some were attracted by the French language and Montreal’s culture; by the same token, Quebec City was listed among the top three cities by half the respondents.

When choosing cities without regard to the international border, Canada lost out. For instance, Los Angeles, New York, San Antonio, and San Francisco remained at the highest positions. Canadian cities were included as a second or third option (Table 4, C, second column). Regardless of Canada's prevailing positive image as a country and the many complaints respondents made about American society and policies toward Mexico, U.S. cities still topped the list of destinations where they said they would "feel at home."

Still, Toronto, which remained the top Canadian option, was ranked on about the same level as San Francisco and Chicago and quite close to New York. For nearly half of the respondents, Toronto was in the top three possibilities across both countries. Also, Montreal and Vancouver were in the top three (20% and 29% of the time, respectively) roughly as often as New York or San Francisco (26% and 29% of the time, respectively).

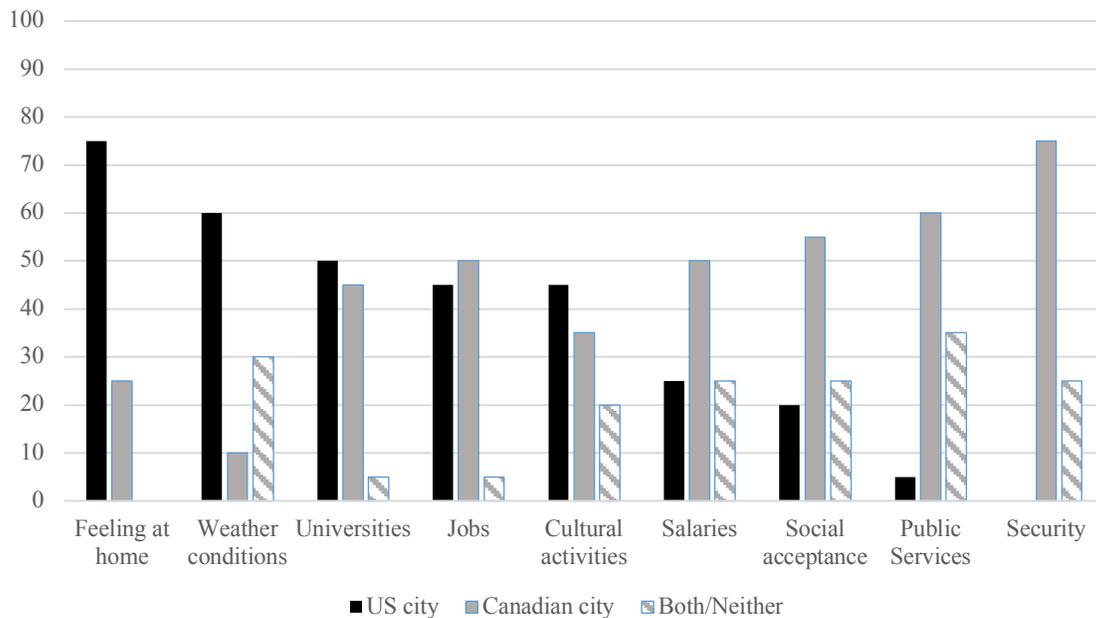
After Canadian options were introduced, Chicago lost the most competitiveness. It was mentioned in the top three for 43% of respondents when the choices were restricted to U.S. cities, but only by 17% when Canadian options were included. In effect, Canadian cities displaced Chicago from top consideration. To a lesser extent, San Francisco and San Antonio were similarly displaced. San Francisco was in the top three choices for 51% of respondents when only U.S. options were considered but dropped to 29% when Canadian cities were included. San Antonio dropped from 43% to 29%. By contrast, New York lost very little.

In sum, while Canada as a country was viewed very positively compared to the United States, American options dominated when attention shifted to choices at the urban level. Cities in California and Texas exercised a strong magnetism on the admittedly small sample of university-educated Mexicans. Canadian cities, especially Toronto, were mainly competitive with northern U.S. cities such as New York and Chicago, and to some extent San Francisco and San Antonio.

The perceptions of characteristics discussed above that mattered in comparing these *countries* as destinations differed when the alternatives were respondents' *specific top-rated cities* within the U.S. and Canada. They were asked to compare their top urban choices within each country (subsample B) using the same characteristics they had used to rate the countries generally. While many comparative contrasts remained the same, there were interesting shifts, "feeling at home" being the most striking one.

Whereas respondents had indicated that they felt equally at home in the U.S. and Canada as countries, when comparing the top-rated city in each country, 70% of interviewees mentioned American cities, and about 25% mentioned a Canadian city (Graph 2). At the urban level, the Canadian option improved most for universities. The rest of the comparisons remained the same. For instance, Canadian cities were preferred for personal security, public services, and social acceptance, while American cities were preferred for weather conditions. As for job opportunities, they were rated roughly equally.

Graph 2. Country of Top-Choice City Preferred for Each Attribute,  
Among Prospective Mexican Skilled Migrants



Source: Own elaboration based on authors' interviews (subsample B, N=20).

Despite negative feelings about the U.S. generally, leading respondents to say they would not be any more likely to “feel at home” in the U.S. than Canada, many stated they expected to “feel at home” in the specific city within the U.S. they would most likely choose as a destination. These cities were often Los Angeles, San Francisco, or San Antonio, all cities with large Mexican American communities, close to Mexico, and with Spanish names. The weight given to these concerns and other characteristics, perhaps explained by weather conditions, favored the U.S., and may explain the final urban choice. For example, Canadian cities may be chosen for academic purposes because while the U.S. is known for top universities, those selecting a specific Canadian city may do so expecting to complete their post-secondary education there.

We examined whether the more frequent expectations of discrimination in the U.S. changed when comparing the top-cities in both countries, as mentioned by each interviewee, and found they were reduced, but only somewhat. The difference in expectations of discrimination in the top-chosen cities in each country was less extreme than the difference in expectations of discrimination overall in each country. Nevertheless, the expectation of discrimination was greater in the U.S., even when comparing the favorite cities.

#### *Further Analysis of Migration Decision-Making*

To this point, findings suggest that despite misgivings about American society and their prospects for living within it, many Mexicans are drawn to specific American cities where they

feel a sense of familiarity, often because of a substantial Mexican presence. They also have considerations at the national level, such as weather. At the same time, the findings suggest that Canadian cities are competitive with northern American cities, particularly Chicago and New York.

We had a special interest in cases where the top U.S. and Canadian choices were the top two cities chosen by respondents overall. There were 15 such cases, and they are worth examining because the choice between countries was the most salient. In 11 of these, a U.S. city was first of the two, and in four, a Canadian city was first.

When a U.S. city was chosen, respondents often mentioned the Mexican presence or family reasons. Both Los Angeles and San Francisco were selected three times over a Canadian city because of their more substantial Latino presence, because of family connections, or because respondents sensed those cities were friendlier and more welcoming. One interviewee said he felt a strong connection to San Francisco because of its name and history. San Antonio was chosen for a close relative living there. New York was different: chosen twice over a Canadian city because of previous visits and because it is a large, cosmopolitan city, like Mexico City.

In the four cases where a Canadian city came out first, respondents mentioned specific attractive features of the city, often based on previous traveling history. For example, Toronto was picked over Chicago once because they had already visited there, even though the respondent had family in Chicago, so a city's attractiveness overshadowed social connections.

## CONCLUSIONS

As educational levels increase in Mexico, the potential for skilled migration from Mexico to the U.S. and Canada is increasing. While the history of migration from Mexico is mostly a story of low-skilled workers moving to the American Southwest, current data reviewed above show that migration of university-educated Mexicans to the U.S. and Canada has increased over recent decades, suggesting skilled migrants represent a new and distinct stream in the flow northward. The analysis presented above concludes that while less-skilled Mexican migration has been overwhelmingly to the U.S., university-educated Mexicans find Canada an attractive option partly because its immigration policy offers more opportunities for permanent skilled migration, even for those without pre-arranged employment. Some features of Canadian society may also be attractive, such as social benefits, personal security, or cultural policies.

Exploration of the potential for skilled migration to Canada and the U.S., based on interviews with a small sample of university-educated Mexicans in Mexico City, revealed an openness to migration in general and a willingness to consider migration to both countries. The enormous American advantages of size, proximity, climate, familiarity, large Mexican communities, and established migration networks from Mexico all have relevance for skilled immigration. At the same time, the American social and political climate, including the persistent and increasing

efforts to reduce immigration from Mexico, as well as broader issues related to crime and drugs and aspects of American culture in general, clearly deter some.

Canada seems to have a very positive national image based on a reputation for fairness and openness to immigration and characteristics such as personal security, cultural diversity, and public services. These perceived assets, combined with the Canadian immigration system, appear to be a significant advantage. Both countries offer economic opportunities, which drive many or most migration decisions. Admittedly, respondents knew much less about Canada, and this may reduce its consideration as an option. While network and family links to the U.S. are stronger, they also exist in Canada. Moreover, those of Mexican origin now in Canada have a much higher average level of education than their counterparts in the U.S. This is likely to enhance professional and academic networks and increase the attractiveness of Canada.

Some prospective Mexican migrants favor urban destinations in northern U.S. cities, and Canadian cities emerged as the most competitive in relation to these destinations. There was a significant focus on northeastern U.S. cities, such as New York and Chicago, and Canadian cities of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. These were rated highly by respondents who chose those cities. For those considering northern destinations, the climate was less important. On the other hand, for many, the prospects of low crime levels and gun-related violence, openness to cultural diversity and the lack of stigmatization of Mexicans, lower levels of economic insecurity, and robust public services available in Canada had considerable appeal. For some, Quebec's francophone culture represented an attractive additional option.

Our findings suggest prospective skilled migrants from Mexico view Canada positively but have much less information about it than the U.S. The opportunities to apply for permanent residence status in Canada without previous connections to the country are not well known. To compete for prospective migrants, Canada should address this relative lack of information and strengthen public diplomacy at the urban level. Future research could explore regional variations within Mexico in characteristics affecting high-skilled migrants' destination preferences.

In the end, the competitiveness of each country in recruiting high-skilled migrants may depend on the development of specific recruitment efforts and here, employers, educational institutions, and governments will play an important role. While the U.S. is looking for ways to reduce immigration, the Canadian government has set its sights on increased numbers. As a result, Mexico represents a significant potential recruitment target.

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