

Border Enforcement and Selection of Mexican Immigrants in the United States



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In an effort to control unauthorized immigration from Mexico, the United States has enhanced border enforcement since the mid-1980s. Increases in border patrol line-watch hours (time spent scrutinizing the border), vastly increased personnel, and new technologies have forced undocumented migrants to cross through deserts and other inhospitable areas. While stringent enforcement increases risks for all immigrants, the hazards more heavily affect undocumented immigrant women, who face greater physical dangers than men in crossing the border – including rape, robbery, and kidnapping – and greater psychic costs from being unable to return temporarily to Mexico. (Women are more likely than men to attempt multiple border crossings, because they often act as the caretakers of children or elderly parents living in Mexico.) In “Border Enforcement and Selection of Mexican Immigrants in the United States,” Fernando Lozano and Mary Lopez examine how these greater migration costs have changed the composition of Mexican immigrant women in the US.

The authors use the standard cost-benefit framework to examine the decision to migrate. Accordingly, potential migrants make this decision based on the expected net gains from migration, measured as the difference in earnings between the host and the source country minus the costs of migrating. Using US and Mexican Census data from 1980 to 2007, Lozano and Lopez examine how Mexican women’s migration decisions and labor market outcomes are affected by differential costs of migration. They compare outcomes of Mexican men and women immigrants to those of immigrants from other Latin American countries in order to predict how different immigrant groups would behave with an increase in migration costs.

Using their model, Lopez and Lozano examine theoretical predictions for Mexican women immigrants relative to Mexican men and to men and women immigrants from other Latin American countries. The authors find that the number of older Mexican women (those migrating to the US after the age of 37) decreased between 1980–2007. This decline contrasts with the increasing numbers of Mexican

male immigrants in this age group and of older men and women from other Latin American countries. In addition, the proportion of women among the highly educated Mexican immigrants (those with more than nine years of schooling) has increased at a slower pace than the proportion of women among the highly educated Latin American immigrants. In addition, using gender earnings gaps across cohorts, the authors find that recent Mexican immigrants face a smaller gender earnings gap compared to earlier cohorts. The authors also note that this across-cohorts decline in the gender earnings gaps is more marked for Mexican immigrants than for Latin Americans, even within similar occupations and education levels.

The authors’ research contributes to the limited number of studies in economics that recognize women’s unique migration experiences as different from those of men and the importance of understanding these differences and how they affect migration decisions and the gender wage gap. The authors argue that immigration policies that raise the cost of migrating more for women more than for men will result in fewer older and highly educated women migrating, thereby limiting Mexican women’s overall opportunities.

However, among women who do migrate, the change in the composition of Mexican immigrant women in the US relative to Mexican immigrant men as a result of greater migration costs has paradoxically resulted in a decline in the gender wage gap, suggesting that limiting the rights of the more educated might benefit the smaller group that succeeds in migrating. The authors suggest that governments consider the gender implications of their immigration policies, as well as ensure that all women’s rights, in particular, are protected when moving across borders.

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