

Can Regular Migration Channels Reduce Irregular Migration?

Lessons for Europe from the United States

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Lawful migration channels are often suggested as a tool to reduce unlawful migration, but often without much evidence that they work.
- There is evidence that lawful channels for migration between Mexico and the United States have suppressed unlawful migration, but only when combined with robust enforcement efforts.
- Massive demographic pressures for migration between Africa and Europe will continue to resemble past pressures between Mexico and United States. The evidence from the US suggests that lawful channels could be a critical tool for Europe, alongside enforcement to suppress unlawful migration.

Richer countries are under pressure to respond to and regulate high levels of irregular migration reaching their borders. A prominent recommendation is for richer countries to expand opportunities for lawful or regular migration.¹ Suppose they do. Will more regular migration simply raise migration overall, or will it substitute for and reduce irregular migration? The question underlies discussions around the Global Compact for Migration, a future international agreement on migration governance now being negotiated by United Nations Member States.

Interdicting and returning irregular migrants is the current, worldwide focus of efforts to regulate irregular migration. It can stop some, specific irregular migrants in the short run. But it comes at a substantial cost: migrants continue to pursue irregular (and often more dangerous) journeys, funneling more money to smugglers to make that journey happen. Simultaneously, the countries deterring migrants lose out on the labor many would have provided and that many countries need.²

1 E.g., Secretary-General of the United Nations (2018). *Making Migration Work for All*. A/72/643. New York: United Nations General Assembly.

2 E.g., Christina Gathmann (2008). "Effects of enforcement on illegal markets: Evidence from migrant smuggling along the southwestern border." *Journal of Public Economics* 92 (10–11): 1926–1941.

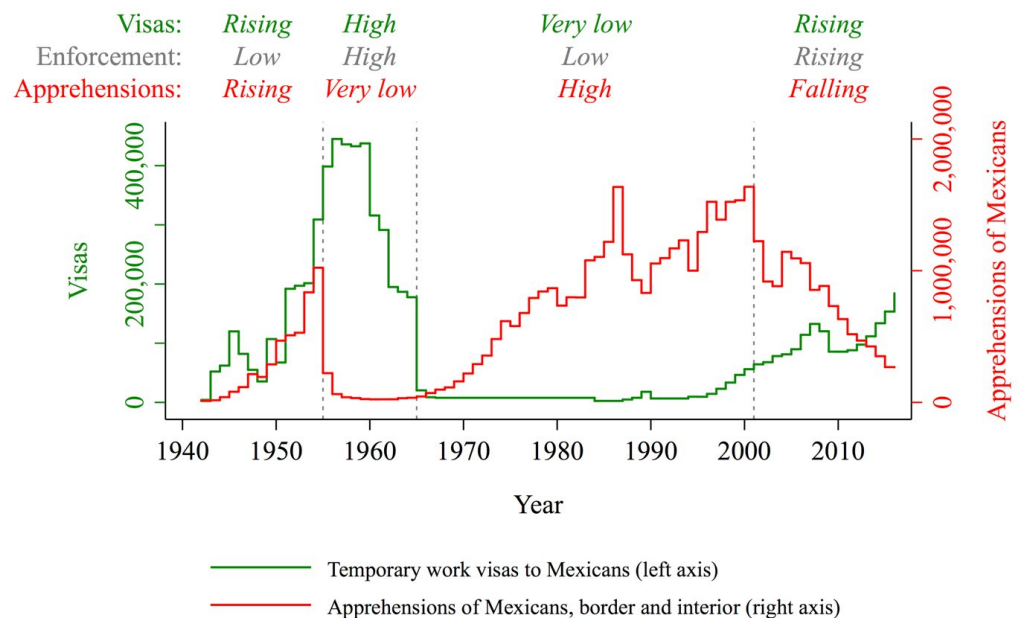
These costs are avoided by expanding opportunities for regular migration. But regular channels alone need not deter irregular migration. If new regular channels do not sharply alter the incentives of migrants and employers to avoid irregularity, new regular channels might simply add to migration overall. Greater regular migration could even, in principle, raise irregular migration by expanding the international networks of potential irregular migrants: some irregular migrants are assisted by family members who migrated previously and regularly.

This brief sketches an important historical episode in which, in order for lawful migration channels to effectively alter the incentives and ultimately suppress irregular flows, those lawful channels were coupled with enhanced immigration enforcement. Likewise, enforcement efforts in this case have only been broadly successful when coupled with expanded channels for regular migration. The net effect of new lawful channels would be, of course, different in different times and places.

EVIDENCE FROM THE UNITED STATES-MEXICO BORDER

Over the last generation in the late twentieth century, the US-Mexico border has witnessed the largest bilateral migration flow on earth. It has also witnessed a vast policy experiment stretching over the last 76 years. Large channels for regular migration have been opened, closed, and opened again, with shifting degrees of accompanying border enforcement. The experiment offers an important opportunity to learn about how regular migration channels can shape irregular migration in one setting, and how those effects can depend on accompanying enforcement measures.

FIGURE 1 . Regular migration channels have curbed irregular migration at the US-Mexico border—when paired with robust enforcement



Source: Data sources through 2012 given in Gutierrez et al. (2016) *op. cit.*, updated to 2016 with the DHS *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* and DHS *Immigration Enforcement Actions* reports for 2015 and 2016. “Visas” are low-skill seasonal work visas.

That experience can be roughly divided into four phases shown in figure 1. The figure compares the number of temporary work visas given to Mexican nationals each year (in green) to the number of unauthorized Mexican migrants apprehended by US immigration enforcement agents (in red). Each of the four phases saw a different mix of lawful migration channels and enforcement.

- *First phase, 1942–1953: Rising visas alongside low enforcement.* The US and Mexican governments in 1942 began a series of bilateral agreements to facilitate low-skill, seasonal labor mobility across the border. These agreements are collectively known as the “*Bra-cero*” (manual labor) Program. As the program grew, it was accompanied by increased apprehensions of irregular migrants. This was not primarily because immigration enforcement effort was rising, but because several features of the program raised employers’ incentives to hire on the black market. For example, an employer who liked a specific worker

one season and wished to rehire him the next could not do so, as workers were only assigned from a common labor pool. Instead, many such employers simply rehired the desired person on the black market. **The result was rising irregular migration alongside rising regular migration.**

- *Second phase, 1954–1964: Ample visas alongside tight enforcement.* In mid-1954 the US government struck an informal bargain with a number of major farm interests employing Mexican workers. The government would drastically step up immigration enforcement both at the border and at work sites. Roughly one million Mexican nationals were deported via a wave of raids and roadblocks officially named “Operation Wetback.” In return, the government greatly expanded the number of Mexicans employers could hire through the *Bracero* Program. Two of the most important channels were a new “spe-

If new regular channels do not sharply alter the incentives to avoid irregularity, new regular channels might simply add to migration overall.

cial” program allowing employers to hire named individual workers they trusted, and the new “mica” (or I-100) program allowing them to renew/extend a worker’s contract without the worker having to first return to Mexico. When these channels were opened in an environment of strict enforcement, employers shifted massively to hire workers through regular means and migrants had high incentive to move via regular channels. **The result was an immediate and near-total collapse in irregular migration.**

- *Third phase, 1965–2000: Few visas alongside low enforcement.* At the start of 1965 the US government unilaterally ended the *Bracero* Program.³ With immaterial exceptions, ending the program ended the availability

3 The government ended the *Bracero* Program after voicing controversial concerns about its effect on US farm workers. Michael A. Clemens, Ethan G. Lewis, and Hannah M. Postel (2018). “Immigration Restrictions as Active Labor Market Policy: Evidence from the Mexican *Bracero* Exclusion.” *American Economic Review*, forthcoming.

of nearly all low-skill US work visas to Mexicans for the next two decades. Combined with demographic change on both sides of the border—the number of young workers was rapidly rising in Mexico and falling in the United States—this created enormous pressure for irregular migration. Enforcement effort rose only modestly. From the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, the number of unauthorized migrants apprehended rose by more than a factor of 10, while the number of linewatch hours on the border only roughly doubled.⁴ **The result was one of the largest waves of irregular labor migration the world has seen.**

- *Fourth phase, 2001–present: Rising visas alongside rising enforcement.* In the late 1990s the US government massively stepped up border enforcement, with efforts including a tripling of linewatch hours. Since 2001 an unauthorized migrant’s probability of apprehension during entry has almost doubled.⁵ It also took steps to facilitate US employers’ access to the H-2A (seasonal farm work) and H-2B (seasonal non-farm work) visas created for low-skill work in 1986, including a new fast-track processing option in 2001. Expansion in the use of the H-2 visas to hire Mexicans has directly coincided with a collapse in irregular migration pressure. **The result has been the lowest incidence of irregular migration at the border in a half-century.**

To be clear, a variety of forces combined to produce the large swings in irregular migration at the US-Mexico border.⁶ But under a reasonable reading of the historical evidence, the regular migration channels at this glob-

4 There is little evidence of any deterrent effect of increased linewatch hours on irregular migration during this period: Derek Cornwell (2009). “Exploratory Time Series Analysis of Apprehensions and Linewatch Hours on the Southwest Border.” Working Paper, Office of Immigration Statistics, Washington, DC: Dept. of Homeland Security.

5 Department of Homeland Security (2017). *Efforts by DHS to Estimate Southwest Border Security between Ports of Entry*. Office of Immigration Statistics, Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security.

6 These include demographic change on both sides of the border, economic shocks on both sides, and structural change in the economies of both sides. See for example Gordon H. Hanson and Antonio Spilimbergo (1999). “Illegal immigration, border enforcement, and relative wages: Evidence from apprehensions at the US-Mexico border.” *American Economic Review* 89 (5): 1337–1357.

ally important border tended to substantially suppress irregular migration—when combined with robust enforcement.

EUROPE IS PARTLY RELIVING THE US EXPERIENCE OF THE 1980s

The demographic and economic realities unfolding today in Africa and Europe are partially recapitulating the United States-Mexico experience.

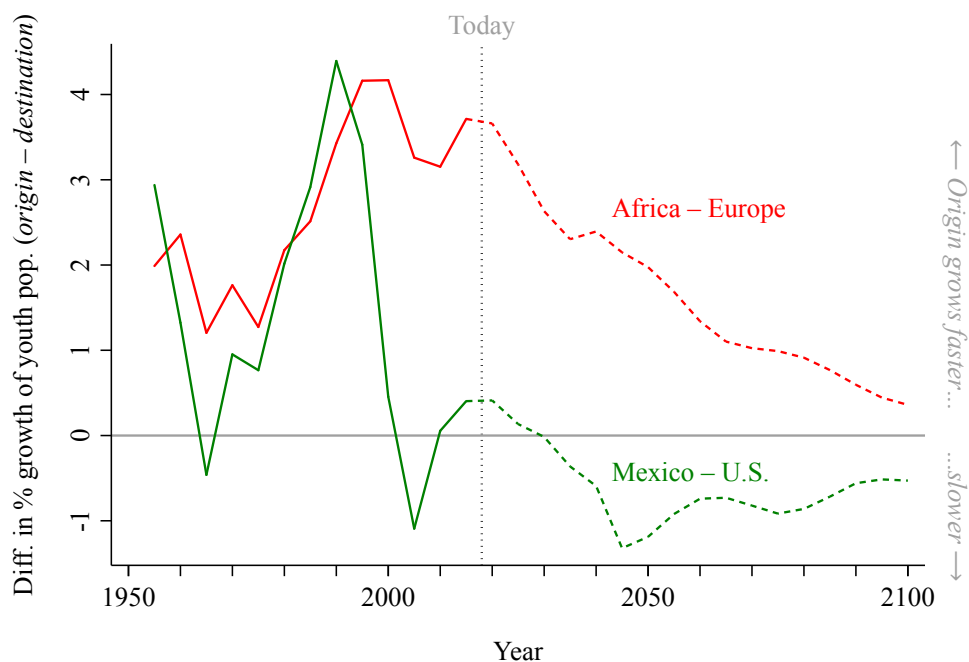
Demography was a deep driver of the two waves of Mexican migration seen in figure 1. In the 1950s, the number of young US workers fell for the first time in history—an aftershock of earlier, Depression-era low fertility—while the number of young workers in Mexico rose as Mexico began its demographic transition. In the 1980s and 1990s the demographic wave crested in Mexico at just the mo-

ment that the number of young US workers fell for the second time in history, as Baby Boomers aged into their 30s.

These two episodes meant that the demand for youthful labor was highest in the north just when its supply was highest in the south. Both can be seen in the green line of figure 2, which shows the difference in the

Demographic pressure between Africa and Europe today looks similar to Mexico and the United States in the 1980s. But unlike the Mexico-US experience, this pressure will last much longer.

FIGURE 2. Demographic pressure for migration between Africa and Europe matches past pressure between Mexico and the United States—but will last much longer



“Africa” denotes the sub-Saharan Africa region as defined by the World Bank; “Europe” denotes the countries defined by the World Bank as being in Europe and having “high income.” “Youth population” means people age 15–29. Source: UN World Population Prospects 2017 database and forecasts.

growth rate of the youth population (age 15–29) in the US and Mexico. A value above zero means that Mexico’s working-age youth population grows faster than the US’s in that year. Today, migration pressure is much lower with the youth population growing only half a percentage point faster in Mexico than the United States—and is projected to fall further.

But a striking difference between the 1950s and the 1980s–1990s stands out in figure 1. In broad terms, the US and Mexico cooperated to create substantial lawful channels to alleviate that pressure during the first episode, in the 1950s. They did not do so in the 1980s and 1990s. When the lawful channels of the 1950s were opened and combined with robust enforcement, they almost completely displaced irregular migration. When those channels existed but were *not* combined with robust enforcement,

or when those channels were eliminated, irregular migration quickly and massively rose.

This historical experience can inform policy dilemmas in Europe now. Figure 2 juxtaposes the Mexico-US experience on the same statistics for sub-Saharan Africa and high-income European countries. Relative population growth between Africa and Europe today looks similar to Mexico and the United States in the 1980s, at the time of peak pressure for irregular migration. But unlike the Mexico-US experience, this pressure will last much longer: at least another generation or two, as sub-Saharan Africa's demographic transition is far from complete. Sub-Saharan Africa will see a projected 800 million new, additional workers in the labor market over the next 30 years. This increase is 24 times the current sum total of workers in the entire United Kingdom.⁷

Migration pressure will thus continue to be extremely high between Africa and Europe. This is not a sign of development failure in Africa, but rather of development

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success—given that the fundamental cause of this demographic wave is recently soaring rates of survival for infants and children across the region. This should be celebrated. But it will create profound policy dilemmas for European governments seeking to minimize irregular migration between the two regions.

WHAT EUROPE CAN LEARN FROM THE US EXPERIENCE

The lesson that European policymakers should draw from this comparison is certainly not that the US's past (and present) is Europe's destiny. Instead, in considering their own unique challenges, European countries should simply consider the tools US policymakers de-

ployed that alleviated or exacerbated irregular migration in the past.

For decades, US policymakers chose not to employ regular channels for employment-based migration as a tool to reduce irregular migration, alongside enforcement efforts. The effects of this decision reverberate today in the continuing human tragedies associated with irregular migration and in the vitriolic and corrosive politics surrounding the several million irregular migrants now living in the United States.

In retrospect, US policymakers' choice was not a choice between regular migration and no migration. That choice was made impossible by overwhelming demographic, economic, geographic, and historic realities. Their choice was in large measure about the terms on which migration would occur.

There is little hard evidence as to whether regular migration channels can essentially substitute for irregular migration. Much more research remains to be done on this question, and the answers will differ greatly in different settings. A reasonable conclusion from the US-Mexico experience is that under large demographic and economic pressure, substantial lawful channels for economic migration have been *necessary* to curb irregular migration. They have not been *sufficient*, and have only been broadly effective when combined with robust border enforcement. Likewise, under enormous demographic and economic pressure, immigration enforcement measures have had limited effect unless combined with substantial and flexible lawful pathways.

This evidence suggests that expanded lawful channels can be a critical ingredient of an overall strategy to suppress and displace irregular migration. Given the political unpopularity of some existing lawful migration channels, a policy priority for this century is to invest in creating new *kinds* of lawful channels—with more tangible benefits to the voting public.⁸

7 Gordon Hanson and Craig McIntosh (2016). "Is the Mediterranean the New Rio Grande? US and EU immigration pressures in the long run." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30 (4): 57–82.

8 One proposal for innovation of this kind is described in: Michael A. Clemens (2017). "Global Skill Partnerships: A Proposal for Technical Training in a Mobile World." CGD Policy Brief. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

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