

Rebecca Burse, Economic Realities of Living in Adams County

While many people come to the United States from Latin America seeking work, they also bring with them many expectations. As I began the American Mosaic Semester, it was my belief that these people come to the United States with the expectation of making a great deal of money and either sending that money to family at home or returning to Mexico themselves with large sums of money. I suspect that although the conversion rate from the dollar to the peso is favorable (approximately 10:1), the cost of living in the United States, and Adams County, in particular, makes it extremely difficult for manual laborers to save any significant amounts of money while here. It is also my belief that these individuals come to the United States for a short period of time, usually less than five years, and return to Mexico to live or they come periodically for a couple of months at a time over the course of several years.

The aim of my research was to find out why individuals came to the United States initially and how much money they thought that they'd be able to make versus their actual income. I was also interested in finding out whether or not they send money to relatives at home, and whether or not they eventually plan on returning to their native country to live and why. I think that it is necessary to examine conditions in the native land (Mexico), as well as the conditions of the country that a person is planning on moving to in order to have as clear a picture as possible of the factors that caused them to migrate to the United States.

I have learned through three different studies by Douglas S. Massey, Professor George J. Borjas, and Leslie Hess, Kathleen Kelly, and Sara Juraschek on this subject matter that it is not merely a simple case of someone who is relatively poor in Mexico wanting to come to the United States in order to become more economically comfortable. There are Apull@ factors and Apush@ factors, both of which must be taken into account when studying theories of migration. The most significant pull factor that I have come across is the desire for a better life somewhere other than the current residence. Another pull factor is having family already in the United States and a desire for family reunification. Although there are two major pull factors, there are several different push factors that influence migration. These factors include an increase in violence, environmental degradation, and economic situations (AREfugees, Migration and Population@, 3) in the country of origin, which in this case is Mexico. Ehrenberg and Smith state in Modern Labor Economics that

in general, the >pull= of good opportunities in the areas of destination are stronger than the >push= of poor opportunities in the areas of origin@ (341). While it may be simple to define what the push and pull factors are, there are complex relationships that occur between the two that must be taken into account when deciding whether or not to migrate.

In the 1950=s and 1960=s, and even presently, there was a lot of rural to urban migration in Mexico and also Mexico to U.S. migration, partially attributable to Arural modernization@ programs that increased peasant landlessness (Griffith and Kissam, 19). The threat of becoming landless or actually losing their land was the prime factor that determined migration for the majority of these people at the given time. The most common reasons for migration from Mexico tend to be lack of employment and low wages (Gomez-Quinones, 91). These reasons are supported by the rural modernization that was happening. The people who were moving out of the rural areas were most likely farmers themselves, living off of the land. Leaving the land meant that they had to find other employment in the cities. With an influx of new residents from the rural areas, cities would not have had enough jobs for all of these people. In order to survive economically, it was necessary for many of these people to migrate, whether within Mexico or to the United States. Some of these people probably planned to settle in the areas to which they had migrated, while others viewed this move as a temporary situation. Studies have found that people are attracted to areas where the earnings of full-time workers are the highest (Ehrenberg and Smith, 341). At this point in time, the wages in the U.S. were higher than the wages in the urban areas of Mexico. Even though it may have initially cost an individual or family more to relocate in the United States than somewhere else in Mexico, they may have hoped that higher wages in the U.S. would outweigh their initial financial output.

Studies have shown that although thousands of people come to the United States each year from Mexico, many do not come with the intention of settling here. What they are hoping to do in most cases is to accumulate monetary and other resources in order to invest these resources when they return to Mexico (Massey, 1). Households may send family members to the United States in order to make money that they will later invest in productive activities, such as irrigation or paying for schooling, or to buy expensive items, such as cars or other large appliances (Massey, 1).

The fact that the average Mexican immigrant to the United States can expect to earn only about seventy percent of what the average native-born American makes, as of 1997 (Ehrenberg and Smith, 349), is often seen as exploitation of Mexican labor. What these researchers and the public fail to see is that this amount is still far greater than what the person would make in Mexico. As one man from Puerto Vallarta expressed in 1996, AWe can earn in one day in California what we earn in two weeks in Jalisco. What would you do?@ (Hess, Kelly, and Juraschek, 5).

Some proponents of restricted immigration believe that Mexicans come to the United States without a job and live off of public assistance monies until they do eventually find jobs. This assumption is incorrect for two reasons. First of all, illegal immigrants cannot collect public assistance or welfare, unless, perhaps they have fake documentation. These programs are reserved for U.S. citizens who meet certain qualifications. Also, there are not many people who leave Mexico without some idea of how to find a job once they reach the United States (Rothstein, 3). There would not be much motivation for someone to leave his home country, family, and friends if he knew there would not be any work for him when he arrived here (Rothstein, 1). The truth is that most immigrants have family who have come to the U.S. before and may still be here (Gomez-Quinones, 91). These people create networks of information among themselves regarding where there is the greatest possibility of finding a job and also things like where they may be able to find housing. While the majority of people who immigrate here from Mexico plan on returning home to live at some point in time, they may stay in the United States indefinitely until the economic or violent situations improve at home. This means that some people may feel as if they are in a state of limbo. They don=t want to get too accustomed to life in the U.S. For this reason, some migrants may avoid learning English. They see it as a waste of their time, but if they learned the language, they may be able to find higher paying jobs. It is difficult to always wait for the time when you will return home.

In order to gather data for my research, I visited several different places where I knew that I would be able to speak to Mexicans. The first contact that I made was with Pablo, who is a supervisor at Penn Quality Eggs. Next, I went into York Springs and spoke with a young woman named Carmen and her brother Jose. All three of these people are year-round residents of Adams County. I also went to El Vista Orchards where I spoke with Cesar, who is a resident of Gettysburg, and also with three men who work in the orchards there picking and pruning. These three

men are seasonal workers. Finally, I went to one of the GED classes in York Springs where I was able to speak with three more members of the community: Juan, who works at PQE, Miguel, who works in a factory, and Maria, whose family owns the Mexican store in York Springs. I asked these ten people the same questions and have made note of all of their responses. I also spoke with one prominent grower in the area who employs migrant Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. I was interested in learning about some economic issues from his point of view, especially how he determines how much to pay his laborers.

When I spoke to the grower, I first asked him about his profit margin. While this grower is a member of the Knouse Foods co-op, he also has his own packing and storage facilities on the premises. He told me that, other than his profits from the co-op, which are actually the profits from several years earlier, it is almost impossible to maintain any consistency of profits. The costs of fertilizer and pesticide may change from year to year, and there is no way to predict how damage to the trees from drought or frost will affect his crop. While he is in business to make money, he is not guaranteed a crop from season to season. One of the few input costs over which he has control is what he pays his employees.

The grower with whom I spoke told me that he pays his growers on a piece rate basis. What this means is that for every bushel of apples picked or every tree pruned, the worker is paid a set amount. When asked how he determined what the piece rate would be for a given season, he told me that it is a trial and error type of thing. He knows from past experience what he cannot afford to pay the workers, yet he has to be careful not to set the rate too low, or no one will want to work for him. There must be an employer/employee relationship that exists in order to determine a fair piece rate. It is also important to realize that workers earning a piece rate wage are guaranteed to make at least the minimum wage. At the end of a pay period, an employee's earnings are divided by the number of hours worked in order to come up with an hourly wage. If that hourly wage is less than the minimum wage, his pay is adjusted accordingly. The employee is paid whichever rate is higher, the piece rate or minimum wage.

When asked why they initially came to the United States, all but one of my respondents told me that that it was due to economic reasons. Cesar came to the United States to visit his brother in California and then came to Pennsylvania to visit some friends here. He ended up moving here when he realized that there were

better employment opportunities in the northern states and has lived here for seventeen years. He did not come here with the intention of making a lot of money and then returning to Mexico, although his father has come to the U.S. a few times to make money and then returned to Mexico. Cesar has ten brothers and sisters and he said that one or more of his brothers usually comes to El Vista, works for the apple season, and then returns to Mexico. Cesar thinks that about fifty percent of the young people who come to the United States do so for the adventure and to travel, although that is not what I found when I talked to other people.

Pablo told me that he came here for economic reasons and initially planned on returning to Mexico, but he met his wife here and she is American, so he has been here ever since. He expressed to me that it is more difficult to make a living here than he had thought it would be. He makes between two hundred fifty and three hundred dollars a week, which ends up being approximately thirteen thousand dollars a year. He also is provided with housing and a truck to use. Even though people make less than they initially thought they would here, it is still two or three times what they would make in Mexico. Many of Pablo=s employees come here to work for a year, make as much money as possible, and then return to Mexico. His brother came to the U.S. to work for a while and then returned to Mexico.

Carmen, who is in her twenties, came to the United States because her father was here and she and her husband wanted to make more money than they could in Mexico. They have a two year old little boy, and neither one of them graduated from high school. They are currently attending the GED class in York Springs. Shortly after she and her husband came to the States, Carmen=s brother Jose came to join them here, and their father returned to Mexico. Carmen and Jose said that if you are able to save anything while you are here, you can return to Mexico with a sizeable amount of money. The problem is that the cost of living here is very high.

Juan told me that money is definitely the number one reason for coming to the United States, although he is only making between six and seven dollars an hour at Penn Quality Eggs. This comes out to be about thirteen thousand dollars a year. Maria and Miguel added that there are more job possibilities and there is an opportunity for upward mobility. The three men who work in the orchards are here on a seasonal basis and their sole purpose for coming each year is to make money to bring back to Mexico.

Juan, Maria, and Miguel all told me that people who have come to America to work return to Mexico with stories of how much money you can make here. Although some of these people do get good paying jobs, others exaggerate the amount that they made here. They said that after a while you are able to pick the truth out from the stories. Even though they don't make as much as they initially thought that they would here, it is more than they would be making in Mexico. Therefore, as long as it is economically beneficial, they choose to remain in the United States. Francisco, who is in his early twenties, told me that he thought he would make a lot of money here, but in reality, he only makes about twelve thousand dollars a year picking apples and pruning trees. Ricardo, who has been coming to Adams County on a seasonal basis for about twelve years, said that his wages really have not increased during that time.

The three men who are here on a seasonal basis save as much of their earnings as possible while they are here so that they can return to Mexico with some savings. This is a little bit easier for them than it is for year-round residents because they live in housing provided by the grower, which means they don't have to worry about paying for rent or utilities. Cesar and Pablo do not send money to their families back in Mexico. These two men have been here the longest out of all the people I talked to and I think that they view Adams County as their home.

Carmen and Jose said that they regularly send money to their father in Mexico, about every month or two. Juan and Maria told me that between fifty and seventy percent of the Hispanic residents of York Springs send money home on a regular basis, although this number is extremely difficult to verify. It largely depends on how rough things are in Mexico. If things are really bad, people are more likely to send money home.

I got the most enthusiastic responses when I asked these people whether or not they planned on returning to Mexico to live. Pablo and Cesar told me that they both plan on staying here in the United States. They have also been here longer than any of the other people with whom I spoke. Pablo has lived here for ten years and Cesar has been here for seventeen years.

With the exception of these two men, everyone else said that they eventually plan on returning to Mexico to live. What varied was the amount of time they thought they would spend in the United States before they returned home. The men who work at El Vista on a seasonal basis stay for anywhere from five to eight months. Carmen and her husband and brother have been here for

more than two years, but they would like to return to Mexico in the next two or three years. They do not go home for the holidays because it is too expensive.

Juan said that of course he plans on returning to Mexico to live because that is his homeland. Miguel and Maria both expressed that they will someday return to Mexico because that is where their families are. Family is a very important part of Hispanic culture, while it is not viewed in the same way here. They said that in Mexico, your whole family usually lives in the same town and is very close. Although these three expressed that they want to return to Mexico to live, none of them had a definite time frame as to when they wanted to return.

While I did not speak with as many people as I would have liked to initially, I think that the research that I conducted allows me to come to several conclusions. Speaking with a grower enabled me to see how wages are determined, which alleviated some of my feelings that Mexicans are being exploited. The major reason for coming to the United States, with one exception, was economic opportunity, which was what I initially thought. However, I was surprised that some of the people were able to save such significant amounts of their pay in anticipation of their return to Mexico. It seems that if individuals were provided with housing by their employer, they were able to save a larger percentage of their earnings since they did not have to worry about those costs.

I was surprised that some of my respondents have been living in the United States for so long, especially Pablo and Cesar. Miguel has also been living here for six years, although he does plan on returning to Mexico at some point in time. I was also surprised that Ricardo has been doing seasonal work here for twelve years. I'm not sure how long I thought Mexicans stayed on the migrant circuit, but I didn't think that someone close to thirty years old would have been doing that type of work for so long. I did not expect that as many people as I found would be able to send money back to Mexico on a regular basis.

The biggest limitation that I ran into was the fact that I do not speak any Spanish at all. I was often frustrated when I could not speak with certain people because of the language barrier. It was also difficult when I had to rely on someone to translate for me. It is very uncomfortable to not know what is being said, nor knowing whether or not your questions are being translated in the context that you had intended.

In the future, I would like to speak to more people in order to get a better overall understanding of what the expectations are of someone coming to the United States for the first time. I think that more time is needed to conduct this type of program, although I realize that we are limited by the semester. Perhaps if the Mosaic is done again, it should be done in the spring and all of the classroom work could be done in a January term before the beginning of the semester.

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(names have been changed to protect privacy)