Introduction

This study examines the phenomenon of undocumented Mexican migration to the United States. The United States faces an apparent imbalance between jobs and native workers in the lower strata of the labor market. Historically, certain jobs have usually been taken by new immigrants and refused by second generation migrants. This imbalance is similar to that faced by many Western European nations such as Germany and Switzerland, and appears to be characteristic of most developed countries. The development process entails upward mobility for the native labor force and, apparently, after a certain stage of this process, there is insufficient native labor to take the jobs located at the bottom of the labor market. Historically, these jobs have not disappeared and have been filled by immigrant labor.

European countries have dealt with the phenomenon by hiring migrant
workers contracted specifically, and temporarily, for the purpose of closing the gaps between labor supplies and demands in certain areas. The United States has refused to implement similar policies except briefly and on a limited scale, as in the case of the Bracero program for Mexican workers and on even more restricted programs affecting Jamaican nationals. The existing gaps did not originate or disappear with the legislation, however, and have been continually filled by international migrants who are in most cases undocumented. The migrants are illegal in a technical sense, but in many cases their illegal presence is overlooked because it helps satisfy existing economic needs.

The idea of establishing a category of temporary international migratory workers without citizenship rights, as in Germany or Switzerland, seems to be inadmissible in the United States. At the same time the right to acquire citizenship has been severely curtailed through reductions in the immigration quotas, while the need for migrant labor has not abated. The jobs are there and are being filled up with international migrants. The laborers are illegal, but the jobs are not. If apprehended, the illegal migrant laborers have virtually no rights, except to choose voluntary deportation, and consequently, they exist in a limbo located somewhere inside the secondary sector of the labor market. The apparent major supplier of these migrants, Mexico, faces the problems of a dual economy. It has a fast-growing modern sector coexisting with evident economic backwardness. This is complicated by rapid population growth in the rural areas and the “traditional” sector of the urban centers.

Heavy migration from the rural areas to the cities in Mexico and the inability of the modern economic sector in Mexico to absorb the tremendous growth in labor supply has resulted in a peculiar urban labor structure. The resulting structure of the economy reflects the contradictions of an improving modern sector and worsening conditions elsewhere. The rural sector is overcrowded, characterized by relatively low wages and a falling rate of labor productivity.

The other major outlet for the overcrowded rural sector is the United States. There seems to be a labor market complementarity between the United States and Mexico; a symbiotic relationship between workers searching for jobs in one country and jobs lacking workers in the other, operating fluidly but in a clandestine way.

In understanding this process one should see the issue of international labor migration as a transfer of resources. The international transfer of resources has been studied mostly in the context of financial transfer of capital from rich to poor countries. Foreign capital supplements low domestic savings and also helps finance imports. The objective is to supplement