Changes in trip duration for Mexican immigrants to the United States

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Abstract. Using the Mexican Migration Project sample, this paper explores the patterns of trip duration for Mexican immigrants to the United States and the reasons for the patterns observed. I found that the most important factors leading to changes in trip duration are US immigration policy, the conditions of the Mexican economy, and the development of social networks. It appears that the legalization of many immigrants after passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act encouraged short-term migration, but the build-up at the US-Mexico border may have changed this pattern leading to longer duration in the United States. Furthermore, changes in the exchange rate, a devaluation of the peso relative to the dollar, for example, leads to more return migration, as immigrants are able to get more value for his dollars in Mexico. On the other hand, an expansion of networks and resources for immigrants in the United States leads to longer duration in the United States.

Introduction

Mexican migration has been characterized by its temporary nature (Bean et al. 1987; Calavita 1994; Cornelius 1976; Hugo 1982; Jenkins 1977; Jones 1982; Kossoudji 1983; Massey et al. 1987; Mines & de Janvry 1982; Ranney & Reyes 2001; Roberts 1995; White et al. 1990). Although not all immigrants move temporarily, most of the Mexican immigrants who enter the United States have been found to return to Mexico after a few months or years (Durand & Massey 1992; Lopez 1986; Massey & Singer 1995, Massey et al. 1987, 1994; Mines 1981; Reicher & Massey 1979). In recent years, however, the overall pattern of trip duration may have changed. Community studies find increases in trip duration and more settlement in the United States (Alarcón 1995a, b; Cornelius 2002), while quantitative studies find a shortening in trip duration after the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) (Durand et al. 2000).

While there is an extensive literature exploring the determinants of trip duration (e.g., Lindstrom 1996; Massey & Espinosa 1997; Reyes
this article explores the patterns of trip duration for Mexican immigrants to United States and the factors that led to the change in the patterns observed. For this analysis, I developed hierarchical discrete-time logit models of the probability of return using data from the Mexican Migration Project (MMP).

Reasons for changes in trip duration

Figure 1 shows the rate of return of people who had made a trip to the United States in the 5-year periods before 1992, 1997, and 2000. These data are generated from the 1992 and 1997 ENADID and the 2000 Mexican Census. In these surveys, informants were asked about every person who lived in the household at some point in the last 5 years who had made an international migration independent of their current residence, capturing international migrants who were connected to some household in Mexico.

A smaller proportion of immigrants returned to Mexico in the later part of the 1990s (the 1995–2000 period) than in prior periods. Fifty-four percent of the immigrants in the sample returned to Mexico by the time of the survey in the 1987–1992 period, whereas only 25% returned to Mexico between 1995 and 2000. Even those who did return to Mexico are staying longer in the United States, as shown in Figure 2. In the 1987–1992 period, those who returned to Mexico lived on average 10 months in the United States, compared to those who returned to

![Figure 1. Return migration rates. Source: 1992 and 1997 ENADID and Mexican 2000 Census. Note: These proportions have been standardized by years since departure (within the past 5 years). Non-standardized patterns are similar, with the proportion of migrants having returned to Mexico at 46% for the 1987–1992 period, 35% for the 1992–1997 period, and 23% for the 1995–2000 period.](image-url)