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## Report Shows 'Statistical Standstill' in Migration from Mexico as Immigration Levels Drop and Many Mexicans Return Home

by Carlos Navarro

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A recent report from the Pew Hispanic Center confirmed a recent trend: that the influx of undocumented immigrants into the US has fallen steadily in recent years. The report, released in late April, also showed that a significant number of undocumented Mexicans have returned home, resulting in what the Los Angeles Times described as a "statistical standstill" in net migration from Mexico to the US.

The release of the Pew Hispanic Center's findings came at about the same time that the US Supreme Court was considering Arizona's controversial Senate Bill 1070 (SB1070), which would allow local law-enforcement officials to detain undocumented immigrants ([SourceMex, April 28, 2010](#)). Several reports said the US high court was leaning toward upholding some elements of the Arizona law, partially reversing a decision by a US District Court to block portions of SB1070 ([SourceMex, July 21, 2010](#)). Following the district court's decision, Arizona filed an appeal with the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, but also lost.

The Pew Hispanic Center report said 1.4 million Mexicans immigrated to the US between 2005 and 2010, less than half the number that migrated between 1995 and 2000. At the same time, the number of Mexicans and their children that moved from the US to Mexico in the same five-year period rose to 1.4 million, about double the number that did so between 1995 and 2000.

The Pew Hispanic Center, which based its report on census data from the US and Mexican governments, cited various factors for the drop in migration, one of which was the economic slowdown in the US, which has reduced the number of jobs in services and construction ([SourceMex, June 3, 2009](#), and [Feb. 22, 2012](#)). Increased security at the US-Mexico border ([SourceMex, Oct. 10, 2007](#), and [Jan. 2, 2008](#)) and state initiatives such as SB1070 have also reduced migration.

The report also mentioned a decline in birth rates in Mexico and increased deportations as reasons for the trend. But one important factor that the report did not mention as a deterrent was the extreme violence along the US-Mexico border, particularly in Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Nuevo León states, where the Zetas drug cartel has been terrorizing would-be migrants ([SourceMex, April 13, 2011](#)).

### *Mexico touts improvements in domestic economy*

Mexican President Felipe Calderón suggested that his administration's economic policies have also contributed to both the slowdown in emigration and the return of Mexicans back home.

"We are creating opportunities, job opportunities in Mexico, education opportunities for young people, health services and healthcare for the entire nation," Calderón said in an address to the US Chamber of Commerce in Washington.

Mexico reported fairly strong GDP growth rates in the last couple of years (Sept. 8, 2010, and Feb. 16, 2011), and Mexico's GDP growth was reported at about 4% in 2011. The Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SHCP) said the growth rate in the first quarter of 2012 was also 4%.

Some observers backed the assertion that strong growth contributed to keeping some Mexicans from emigrating to the US. "From the time the real-estate crisis erupted in the US at the end of 2008, the Mexican economy has generally performed better than the economy of our neighbor north of the border, which has resulted in a lower unemployment rate here in our country," Ricardo Ávila Pinto wrote in Portfolio.com.

"Even if our economic growth has not been strong enough in the past couple of decades, there have been some improvements in our quality of life," political analyst Cecilia Soto wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. She pointed to a recent UN report showing improvements in health care coverage, school attendance, access to higher education, expanded electrification, and the creation of effective social-welfare programs like Oportunidades.

But critics said unemployment levels remained fairly high in Mexico despite the recent growth, a factor that would normally encourage emigration. On May 1, observed around the world as International Workers Day, the International Labor Organization (ILO) issued a report indicating that the number of Mexicans who moved to the informal economy increased significantly since the US economic crisis in 2008. Many people who were once employed in the formal economy were laid off because of the crisis and were forced to seek jobs in the informal economy, said the ILO.

The ILO said the situation was similar in other countries, including Canada, Italy, Portugal, Britain, Sweden, Romania, France, Venezuela, and Finland. "The crisis resulted in an increase in poverty and inequality in one-half of advanced economies and one-third of the developing economies," said the ILO.

### *Increased surveillance, weak US economy greater factors*

Nevertheless, some observers believe many people in developing countries would still choose to move to industrialized nations if economic conditions were better. "The current situation does not erase the reality that rich nations remain an attraction for many people who desire a better future," said Ávila Pinto. "Because of the economic contraction in the industrialized nations, the numbers are smaller at present."

Even Calderón acknowledged that many Mexicans still think about leaving for the US. "But the fact is there is a swing in terms of opportunity [here in Mexico]," the president said during his visit to Washington.

US officials attributed the recent migration trends to tighter surveillance at the border. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, in a document presented to Congress, said the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Border Patrol have implemented several measures that have deterred unauthorized immigration. She said the application of intelligent and effective immigration laws in recent years, as well as the unprecedented use of personnel, technology, and other resources to protect the border, all contributed to the decline in the number of people attempting to cross into the US without documents.

Napolitano said apprehensions have decreased by 53% in the past three years, in part because the increase in the number of Border Patrol agents has served as a deterrent for undocumented

immigrants. "We have increased the number of Border Patrol agents to more than 21,000, which is more than double the size of the Border Patrol in 2004," Napolitano said in a prepared report.

The homeland security secretary said President Barack Obama's administration has also discouraged illegal immigration by sanctioning employers who hire undocumented workers. Since 2009, the federal government has levied fines totaling US\$80 million on about 600 businesses for violations. Several new federal restrictions were initiated in recent years, including the requirement that would-be employers check the migratory status of applicants through the E-verify system.

### *US Supreme Court might uphold controversial provision in Arizona law*

The Pew Hispanic Center report was released just days after the US Supreme Court began hearing oral arguments on an appeal by Arizona of a US District Court's decision to prevent four provisions of the SB1070 from going into effect.

Any decision on SB1070 will come from only eight of the nine members of the court, as Justice Elena Kagan recused herself to avoid a conflict of interest. Kagan was solicitor general when the Obama administration filed the original challenge to SB1070 on the grounds that Arizona assumed a role reserved for the federal government when it approved SB1070.

Arizona's argument is that its law complements, not replaces, federal law. In the oral arguments, attorney Paul Clement noted that SB1070 "borrowed the federal standard as its own" in combating Arizona's "disproportionate share of the costs of illegal immigration."

If the justices split evenly on the decision, the 4-4 tie would automatically uphold the decision by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals without creating a nationwide precedent against similar laws passed in five other states: Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah ([SourceMex, March 8, 2006](#), and [Aug. 17, 2011](#)). But judging from the justices' comments during the oral hearings, a tie appeared unlikely. A majority of the justices appeared to support the most controversial measure of SB1070, a requirement that state and local officials check the immigration status of detainees.

Sources said such a ruling could codify the type of enforcement that some local authorities in Arizona have carried out during the last six years and open the door to such enforcement in the five states with similar laws. Similar legislation is under serious consideration in eight other states.

"I think you'll see more involvement by local police in immigration enforcement, an involvement that hadn't previously been seen," Kevin Johnson, an immigration expert at the University of California-Davis School of Law, told the Associated Press.

The justices, however, stopped short of endorsing criminal sanctions contained in SB1070, which would criminalize the mere presence of undocumented immigrants in Arizona as well as any effort on their part to seek employment in the state. The US District Court and the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals blocked the two provisions, which Arizona is seeking to overturn.

Experts said the justices are leaning toward blocking the criminal sanctions while allowing authorities to check documents of detainees. Arrests without warrant would be allowed to go into effect as long as detainees are not held longer than they would be in the absence of SB1070.

"We are told that there are some important categories of aliens," such as those with pending asylum applications, who "cannot obtain federal registration, and yet they are people that nobody would

think should be removed," said Justice Samuel Alito, one of two conservative judges on the court who oppose criminalizing the presence of undocumented immigrants in Arizona.

It is not certain when the high court will issue a final verdict, but some observers point out that its ruling might not end the controversy. "While that outcome would be a partial victory for Arizona and the states that have followed its lead, such a ruling would also leave those laws vulnerable to potential and currently pending challenges by civil rights groups on behalf of individuals who allege violations of equal protection and due process protections, among other constitutional injuries," said the online publication The Huffington Post.

There were also concerns about the long-term impact of the law on Arizona, including the possibility of renewed boycotts and a flight of Latinos—whether they are undocumented, permanent residents, or US citizens—to other states. Latinos play an important role in Arizona's economy.

"As the economy improves, it will be harder and harder to get the labor we need," Arizona farmer Tim Dunn told Bloomberg news service. "1070 has stopped the debate as far as what we really need: a way for people to come here to work legally."

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