

The Demographic Fit Between the United States and Latin America

by Gregory B. Weeks and John R. Weeks*

As young people approach adulthood, every society must deal with the question of whether enough resources are available to provide an economic livelihood for this new generation. If the answer is no, then we have the most obvious reason for the migration of young people. But a society may also turn that question around and ask whether enough young people are available to keep the economy going. If the answer to that question is no, then we have the most obvious reason for the recruitment of labor from elsewhere. Population dynamics in Latin America and the United States during the second half of the twentieth century found Mexico and Central America, in particular, answering the first question in the negative, and the United States answering the second question in the negative—producing the demographic fit that has encouraged massive migration to the United States.

By demographic fit we mean that the dents in crucial age groups in one society are matched by bumps in those age groups in another society. By crucial age groups we refer especially to the young adult ages—people who are in their economically active prime years. It is virtually unheard of, on the other hand, for a society to believe that it has too few older people or too few people who might otherwise be dependent upon others. Deficiencies of people are almost always thought of in terms of workers, since they are what help to drive the economy, even in a “post-modern,” “information age,” “globalized” world.

For some time now, there has been a clear demographic fit between the age structures of the United States and those in much of Latin America—especially Mexico and Central America. The United States economy has needed more young workers than Americans were producing, whereas in Latin America in 2010, for example, 10 countries had more than 50 percent of their population under the age of 25, led by Guatemala (62), Honduras (58), Haiti (57), and Nicaragua (56). The entire list is shown in Table 1, where it can be seen that nearly all Latin American countries with at least 40 percent of their population under age 25 are prime candidates to be sending reinforcements to the younger ages in the United States. Moreover, many of those young Latin Americans can be found in countries that are quite close to the United States—Mexico, obviously, but also countries in Central America and the Caribbean. All of these countries,

Table 1. Percent of the Population That Is Less Than 25 Years Old, 2010, Latin America and the Caribbean, Compared with the United States

Latin American and Caribbean Countries	% under 25 in 2010	Country Population 2010 (millions)
Guatemala	62	14,389
Honduras	58	7,601
Haiti	57	9,993
Nicaragua	56	5,788
Belize	56	312
Bolivia	56	9,930
El Salvador	54	6,193
Paraguay	54	6,455
Guyana	52	754
Dominican Republic	50	9,927
Ecuador	49	14,465
Peru	49	29,077
Venezuela	48	28,980
Mexico	47	113,423
Jamaica	47	2,741
Colombia	47	46,295
Panama	46	3,517
Costa Rica	44	4,659
Brazil	43	194,946
Argentina	42	40,412
Chile	39	17,114
Trinidad & Tobago	38	1,341
Uruguay	38	3,369
Cuba	32	11,258
Barbados	32	273
<i>United States</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>308,745</i>
<i>U.S. Non-Hispanic Whites</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>196,817</i>
<i>U.S. Hispanics</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>50,477</i>
<i>Canada</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>34,017</i>

Source: United Nations Population Division, 2011, "World Population Prospects, The 2010 Revision" (http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/panel_population.htm); U.S. data are from the U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov).

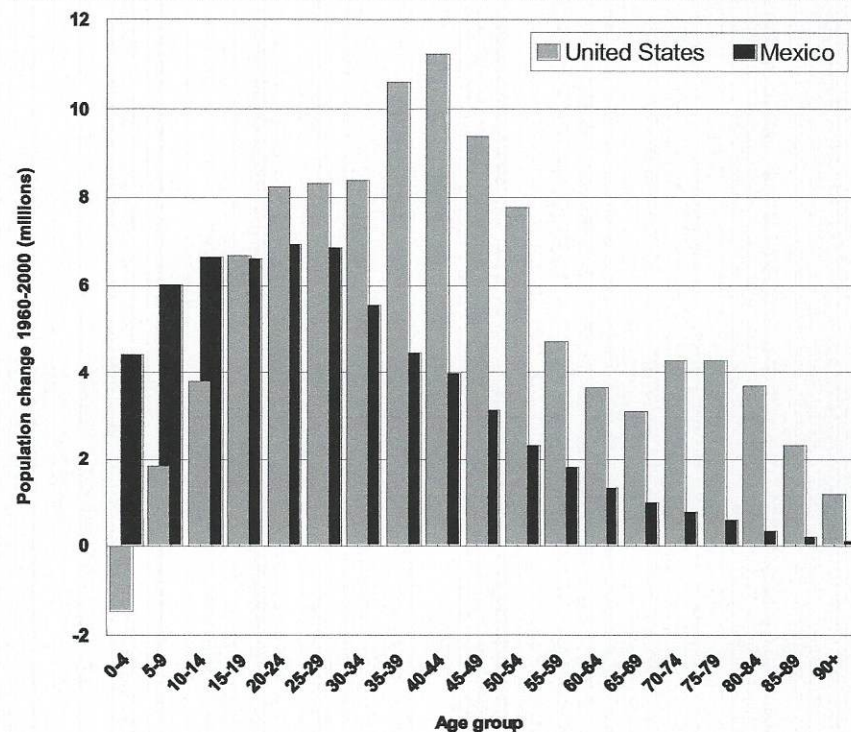
but especially Mexico, would have even a higher percentage under 25 were it not for the earlier outmigration of young people into the United States.

The demographic pattern in the United States is characterized by an aging baby boomer population that has not replaced itself through reproduction. The

average baby boom woman wound up having fewer than two children, and the birth rate in the United States dropped precipitously from about 1960 to 1980 and has remained low since then. No country in Latin America (outside of the Caribbean) has as low a percentage of the population under 25 as does the United States. Canada has the lowest percentage, although its 30 percent under 25 is nearly matched by the non-Hispanic white population of the United States. At the same time, you can see in that table that the Hispanic population in the United States has a very young age structure—almost as young as in Mexico—and this will eventually contribute to an end to the demographic fit.

Figure 1 shows the changes in the population for each age group in Mexico and the United States between 1960, just prior to the change in immigration laws in the United States and about the time that the Bracero program was ending, and the year 2000—the period in which migration from Mexico to the United States accelerated. You can see that in 2000 there were about 11 million

Figure 1. Changes in the Population by Age in Mexico and the United States, 1960–2000

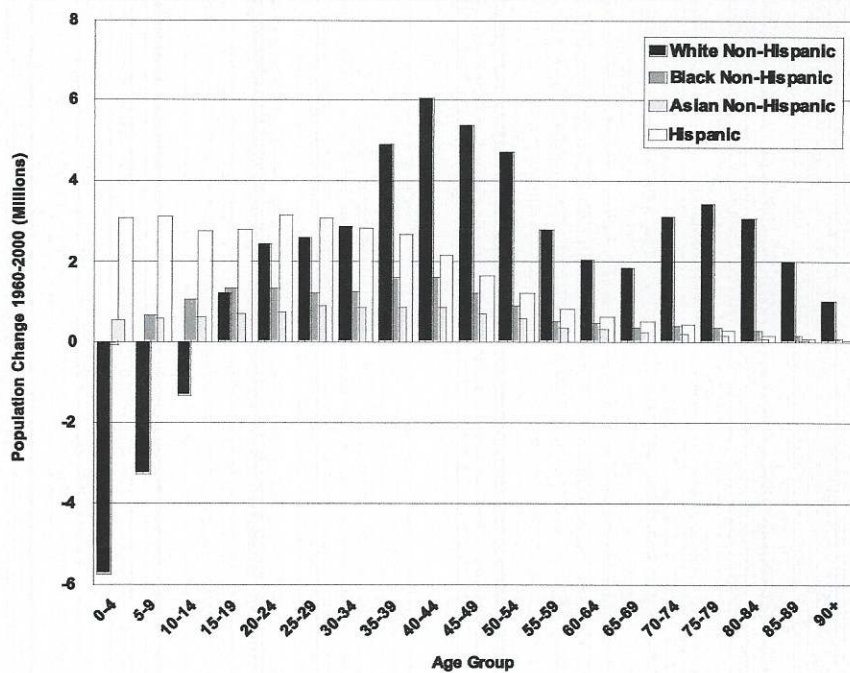


more people at ages 45–49 in the United States than there had been in 1960, but at every younger age the increase was increasingly smaller. At ages 10–14, for example, there were only four million more in the U.S. in 2000 than in 1960. These “holes” or “dents” in the age structure are important because American society had changed to accommodate the greater numbers of people (the baby boomers) and, when each successive age group after that was smaller than the previous one, a demand was created to fill in the gaps. The potential supply of young people to fill these gaps is pretty obvious from Figure 1. Mexico had nearly seven million more people aged 10–14 in 2000 than in 1960; all of these individuals have since been competing for places in Mexican society that were not being vacated by older people because there were only four million more people aged 45–49, as an example, than in 1960. Mexican society has not changed enough to accommodate the increase in the younger population (although NAFTA was designed to help that problem), so many of those young people have very naturally looked next door for opportunity.

Especially striking is the fact that, in the 40 years between 1960 and 2000, the population of Mexico grew from less than 40 million to more than 100 million, a massive increase of 63 million. To be sure, the United States added 102 million during this same period, but in 1960 the population of the United States was already 179 million—nearly five times the size of Mexico’s. By 2000, the U.S. population was less than three times the size of Mexico’s. The population of Mexico was growing most quickly in the young adult age groups, as can be seen in Figure 1, whereas in the United States these ages were growing much more slowly than were the middle ages. This is the essence of the demographic fit—the United States age structure was contracting at the younger ages, while at the same time, right next door, the Mexican age structure was expanding at those younger ages.

The changes in the U.S. age structure were almost entirely a consequence of demographic shifts within the politically and economically dominant ethnic group—non-Hispanic whites. As can be seen in Figure 2, Asians and blacks experienced a little more growth at the middle ages than at the younger ages, but the dramatic shifts occurred within the white non-Hispanic population. Although there were millions fewer non-Hispanic whites at the younger ages, there were millions more at the older ages in 2000 than in 1960. This has presented a problem for older Americans: Who is going to keep the economy going and pay the taxes that are needed to maintain the health and lifestyle of an increasingly larger number of older people? This question keeps being asked in debates about the funding of Social Security, but it rarely surfaces in the immigration debate, perhaps because older people tend to be more opposed to immigration

Figure 2. Changes in the Population by Age in the United States by Major Racial/Ethnic Groups, 1960–2000



than younger people, so politicians may be unwilling to tie Social Security to immigration. The same issues exist in Europe and Japan, where aging populations have created holes in the age structure that threaten the funding of their old age pensions, yet few people in Europe and East Asia seem to want the holes in the labor force to be filled by immigrants.

In essence, the decline in the number of non-Hispanic whites in the United States at the younger ages has created a vacuum into which immigrants have flowed. The call has been eagerly responded to by Latin Americans, especially, but not exclusively, Mexicans. Although fertility has recently been declining substantially in Mexico and, to a lesser degree, in Central America, these declines are much more recent than in the United States. Between 1960 and 2000, the Mexican population added nearly as many younger people as the U.S. non-Hispanic white population was losing. Obviously, not all of those people migrated, but many did, and they, and especially their children who were born in the United States after they migrated, are helping to fill in the younger ages in the United States. The size and scope of the demographic fit shown in Figure 1 is, in truth,

partly obscured by the fact that the population of the United States in 2000 included migrants from Mexico and their children, while, at the same time, of course, the population of Mexico was less than it might otherwise have been had the migration not taken away millions of young people.

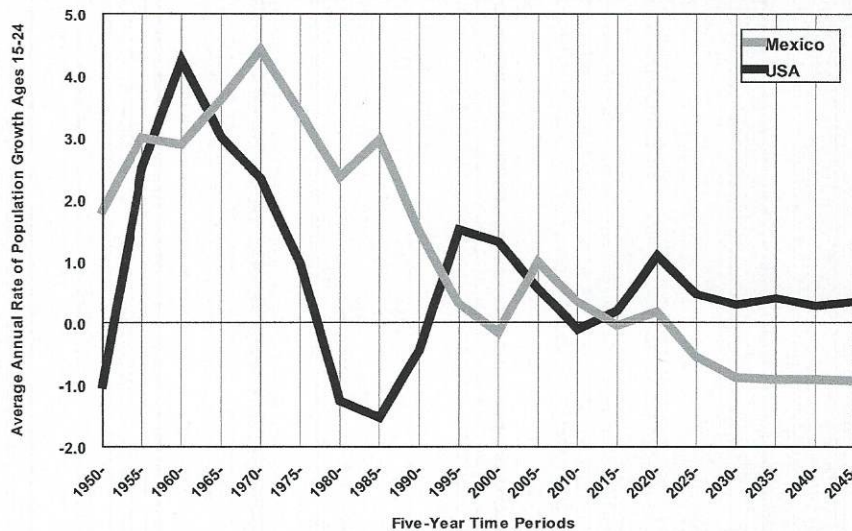
The demographic “replacement” of non-Hispanic whites by Hispanics in the United States can be seen in Figure 2, which compares the change in the number of Hispanics in the United States at each age with the number of non-Hispanic whites at each age. At each of the younger ages, the decline in the number of non-Hispanic whites is nearly matched by the increase in the number of Hispanics. The decline in the number of young white non-Hispanics has not been compensated for by a rise in the number of blacks or Asians. Rather, it is been compensated for by the increase in the number of Hispanics. In 1960, 45 percent of the non-Hispanic white population in the United States was under the age of 25; by 2010, that percentage had dropped to 31 (see Table 1). The void was there to be filled by immigrants from countries like Mexico with high percentages of young people looking for jobs.

A LONGER VIEW OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC FIT WITH MEXICO

Migration is largely the province of the young—an important reason for the demographic fit between the United States and Mexico. The age group 15–24 is particularly prone to migration; Figure 3 shows the average annual rate of growth, in percent, of the population aged 15–24 for Mexico and the United States for a century of five-year time periods, starting with the 1950–55 period and projecting the population forward to the middle of this century. Labor shortages in the United States during World War II had been the major impetus for the implementation of the Bracero program (1942–1964). These labor shortages were a consequence both of men being deployed for war and the low birth rate in the United States that had been a result of the Depression years. In the early post-war period, the low birth rate in the United States in the period just before and during the war resulted in continuing declines in the number of people aged 15–24 between 1950 and 1955. In Mexico, however, the drop in the death rate starting in the late 1930s, without an accompanying decline in the birth rate, resulted in the population aged 15–24 growing at a rate of more than 2.5 percent per year. This demographic fit encouraged the maintenance of the Bracero program during this time. With too few young men in the United States, labor had to be imported, albeit temporarily, from Mexico.

By 1955–60, the early baby boomers were starting to move into the 15–24 age range; by 1960–65, this age group was actually growing at a more rapid rate in

Figure 3. Measuring the Demographic Fit: The Average Annual Rate of Growth of the Population Aged 15–24, Mexico and the United States, 1950–2050



Source: Calculated from the United Nations Population Division, 2011, "World Population Prospects, the 2010 Revision" (<http://esa.un.org/unpp/>).

the United States than in Mexico. It cannot be a coincidence that the end of the Bracero program came about at exactly the same time as this dramatic shift in demographic fit—from fit to no-fit. But that period of no-fit was short-lived, even though no one anticipated the end of the baby boom and the steep drop in U.S. birthrates that followed. After the fact, it was decided that the baby boom "officially" ended in 1964, but that wasn't obvious until several years later.

The baby boom in the United States was followed unexpectedly by the baby bust and so the rate of growth of the 15–24 age group declined steadily from 1965–70 through 1985–90. During most of this time, the rate of growth of the young adult age group remained high in Mexico, and not until 1985–90 did the decline in fertility, which began in the 1970s in Mexico, start to show its effects in a drop in the rate of growth of the 15–24 age group. It is also no coincidence that the period in the chart in which a consistent gap appears between the United States and Mexico in the growth rates of the 15–24 age group is the period of the most rapid migration of Mexicans to the United States. Despite the changes in the U.S. immigration laws in 1965 (which, for the first time, put a numerical limit on the number of legal migrants from the Western hemisphere), the influx of migrants in the 1990s was enormous, aided by changes in the immigration law in 1996.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the demographic fit was much less in evidence for two complementary reasons: (1) declining fertility in Mexico has slowed down the rate of growth of the young adult population and (2) the previous high rates of immigration of young adults from Mexico to the United States produced a large number of children of immigrants, who have helped to increase the rate of growth of the 15–24 age group in the United States. These trends suggest that the era of demographic fit between the United States and Mexico may now be coming to a close, with future migration most apt to be a consequence of the longer-term “economic fit” between the two countries— young people in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America seeking higher-paying jobs in the United States. Indeed, it is probable that the diminishing fit, in the presence of continued underemployment in Mexico and Central America, contributes importantly to the contentiousness of the current policy environment in the United States about immigration. A considerable supply of surplus labor still exists among young people in Mexico and Central America, in particular, but the demand for this labor in the United States—although still present—is going down, not up.

However, the end of the demographic fit should also result in the Mexican labor pool, in particular, being smaller, thereby increasing the chances that a given individual in Mexico will find employment, assuming—and this is no sure assumption—that the Mexican economy does not contract. This decline in the birthrate was the Mexican government’s goal when it created family planning policies and launched a public relations campaign that aired commercials claiming “the small family lives better” (Kronholz and Lyons 2006). That logic has been the driving force of fertility decline in many countries, including the United States.

Mexico is a large country, of course, and the decline in the birth rate and the subsequent change in the age structure have not occurred evenly in all areas. They have happened most quickly in the central and northern parts of Mexico, but change has been slower in the southern, more heavily indigenous areas. Data from the U.S. Border Patrol reveal a shift in the pattern of origin of detainees from Mexico, with increasing proportions of them coming from the southern states of Mexico where birth rates are the highest and the economy is the weakest (Weeks, Jankowski, and Stoler 2011). Mexico’s southern neighbor, Guatemala, is the most populous country of Central America (except for Mexico, of course—which is either in North America or Central America depending on whom you are talking to), and, as shown earlier in Table 1, it has the youngest population in all of Latin America. Guatemalans are moving to Mexico to find work, with then many of them then moving farther north in to the United States to look for jobs.

Of course, the decline and eventual end of the demographic fit does not mean an end to immigration. Other factors—especially economic and political—also play crucial roles in creating incentives for people to make the trek to the United States from Latin America. Those incentives will not disappear, as Latin American economies will remain weaker than the U.S. economy, free market policies will continue to affect rural populations, and political decisions made by Latin American governments as well as the federal and local governments in the United States will influence individuals' calculations about migration.

Further, some types of jobs will remain relatively difficult to fill. Jobs that require intense (and sometimes very unpleasant) physical exertion are, by their nature, only seasonal and/or offer no career opportunity. Nevertheless, they are still critical to the U.S. economy and will very likely still be available. The level of demand, however, may at least diminish.

CONCLUSION

Most of the above discussion has focused on unauthorized immigration because the family preference philosophy of U.S. immigration laws has always favored family members of current citizens rather than workers. It is not easy for a would-be immigrant to legally respond to the need for labor in the United States. The surest way to become a legal immigrant to the United States is to be a close relative of someone who is already here legally and who has become a citizen, although a long backlog even of these applications exists, especially if you are from Mexico or the Philippines (Hayes and Hill 2008). One of the hardest ways to enter legally is to be a relatively low-skilled worker trying to meet the needs created by the demographic fit between the United States and Latin America.

In 2010, there were 1,042,625 people admitted legally to the United States, of whom 66 percent were admitted under the family preference categories. Indeed, just under half of them (46 percent) were immediate relatives of U.S. citizens. More importantly, half of these immigrants (50 percent) were not in the labor force—they were nonworking spouses, children, retirees, or were just otherwise not employed. Of those who were in the labor force, the number whose occupations were in “construction, extraction, maintenance, and repair occupations” was only 6,551 (Department of Homeland Security 2011). The undocumented immigrants, who number about 500,000 per year, are filling in the holes created by the current system of legal immigration. The United States admits more legal immigrants than any other country in the world, but not necessarily those that the economy is demanding. It is for that reason that the issue of undocumented immigration plays such a prominent role in our discussion of the demographic fit.

Demography is by no means the sole factor in explaining Latin American immigration to the United States and the policy responses that result, but it is most often neglected in analyses of the subject and requires greater attention. Changes in the age structures in the United States and Latin American countries have an important impact on the decision to migrate. This demographic fit merits closer attention as it also affects the ways in which the receiving country—in this case the United States—responds to immigration. It also has an independent effect on the outcomes of U.S. immigration policy.

The popular response to immigration does not always hew to conventional wisdom in part because the demographic fit has continued to reflect a relative lack of young workers in the United States. In general, public opinion in the United States does not show strong antagonism toward immigration per se, though it clearly considers undocumented immigration to be a problem. As the fit comes to a close, however, that will likely change because the competition for jobs will become more intense.

REFERENCES

- Department of Homeland Security. 2011. Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2010. Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security.
- Hayes, J. M., and L. E. Hill. 2008. Immigrant Pathways to Legal Permanent Residence: Now and Under a Merit-Based System. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California.
- Kronholz, J., and J. Lyons. 2006. Population Shift: As Families Shrink in Mexico, the U.S. May Feel Impact. *Wall Street Journal*, 28 April.
- Massey, D. S., J. Durand, and N. J. Malone. 2002. *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Pew Hispanic Center. 2006. The Labor Force Status of Short-Term Unauthorized Workers. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center.
- Weeks, J. R., P. Jankowski, and J. Stoler. 2011. Who's Knocking at the Door? New Data on Undocumented Immigrants to the United States. *Population, Space and Place* 17 (1):1–26.

***Gregory B. Weeks** is associate professor of political science and director of Latin American Studies at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. He holds a doctorate in political science from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is editor of the *Latin Americanist*, and is the author of several books on Latin American politics.

John R. Weeks is distinguished professor of geography and director of the International Population Center at San Diego State University. He is also clinical professor of global public health at the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, and a senior fellow of the California Council on Science and Technology. He holds a doctorate in demography from the University of California, Berkeley.

Adapted from Gregory B. Weeks and John R. Weeks, Chapter Four, *Irresistible Forces: Latin American Migration to the United States and Its Effects on the South*. Copyright University of New Mexico Press, 2010.

Used by permission.