

# Exercising the 'right to stay home'

Persistent rurality in Mexico

The globalisation of Mexico's economy, accelerated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), brought with it predictions of rural depopulation, yet Mexico's rural population continues to increase. This has led Associate Professor Xóchitl Bada from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Professor Jonathan Fox from the School of International Service at American University, to explore the cross-border migration patterns from rural Mexico to the US. After analysing census data from 2000 and 2010, they discovered two long-term trends together with a countryside population who exercise their 'right to stay home' by refusing to migrate.

While the media have persistently highlighted an upsurge in the number of unauthorised crossings of the southern US border since the pandemic, the arrival of refugees from other countries obscures longer-term trends of migration from Mexico. The globalisation of Mexico's economy and society, accelerated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) an agreement eliminating most of the trade barriers between the US, Canada, and Mexico) was widely predicted to result in rapid rural depopulation, yet contrary to most expectations, Mexico's rural population continues to increase.

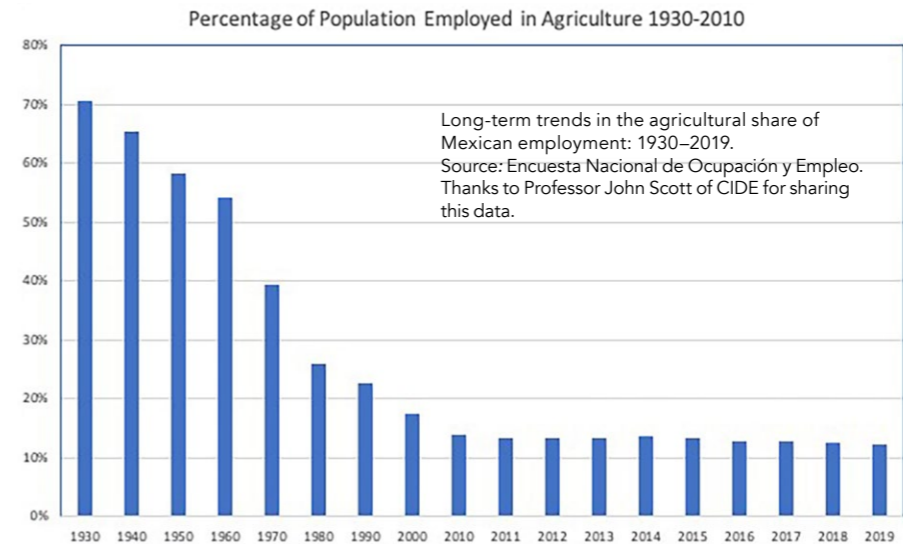
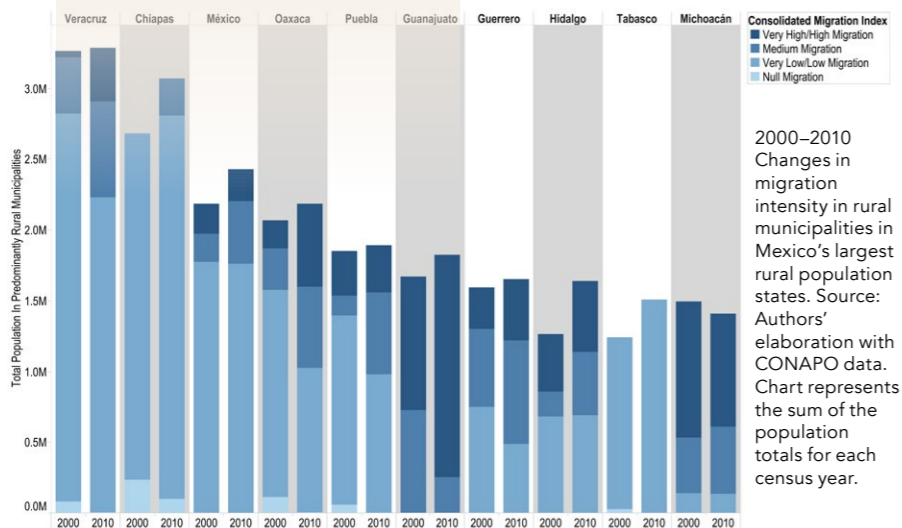
These conflicting trends have led Dr Xóchitl Bada, Associate Professor in Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Professor Jonathan Fox from the School of International Service at American University, to explore cross-border migration of the rural population from Mexico to the US. Comparing census data from 2000 and 2010, they discover

two long-term trends as well as a persistent countryside population who exercise their 'right to stay home' and choose not to migrate to the US.

The net migration rate of Mexicans to the US peaked two decades ago. The rural proportion of Mexico's population remained broadly stable, in spite of the loss of agricultural employment. This research centres on the size and distribution of the rural population in Mexico during the period from 2000 and 2010, since the first unabated decrease in immigration from Mexico to the US took place during this decade. The relationship between migration and development may seem clear-cut, in that continued underdevelopment promotes migration, but the researchers explain how research into migration and rural development 'have evolved on parallel tracks that rarely intersect'. This multifaceted and nuanced association between migration and development therefore underpins the fundamental empirical question of the study, as the researchers consider the persistent rural population who are exercising their right to not migrate to cities or across national borders.

## EMPIRICAL QUESTIONS

First, the researchers apply innovative methodology to analyse census data to find out if the proportion of Mexico's population living in rural areas has altered in the ten years from 2000 to 2010. The Mexican government defines 'rural' as localities with less than 2,500 residents, but this is deemed unrealistically low, so the study develops a new indicator of rurality. This metric focuses on predominantly rural municipalities and detects that 25% of the national



population remained rural in 2010 – a small drop from 27% in 2000. Furthermore, 55% of the national rural population reside in rural municipalities that still have no significant dependence on cross-border migration. At the same time, the actual number of residents living in small rural towns, villages and hamlets increased to 28.3 million, despite the lack of governmental policies promoting sustainable employment. Although they chose to remain in rural areas, most of these rural inhabitants did not receive their main income from farming, with many employed in the neighbouring regional or urban labour markets.

The researchers address a second set of questions to identify trends in cross-border migration from these predominantly rural areas, employing the government's migration intensity index. This index is established using a government survey sampling 10% of the population on international migration characteristics. They reveal the areas and the degree of overlap between these two trends using a new technique that involves crossing the evolving migration intensity data with the persistent rurality data.

## MEXICO'S PERSISTENT RURAL POPULATION

The population exerting their right to stay home is concentrated geographically. Ten states, mostly in central and southern Mexico, contain 74% of the rural population, with more than half (51.9%) of the national rural population

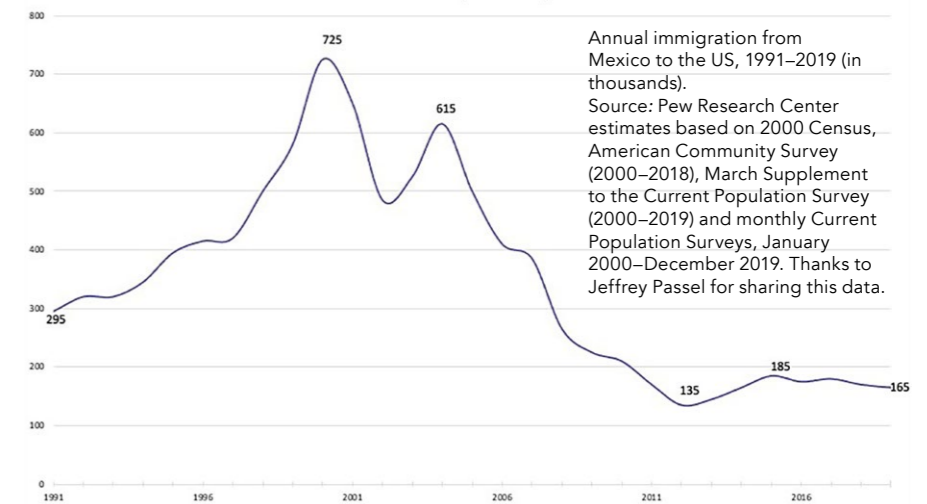
concentrated in only six states: Chiapas, Estado de México, Oaxaca, Puebla, Veracruz, and Guanajuato. This concentration has an ethnic dimension; in 2010, 6.6 million (23.3%) of the 28.3 million people living in rural areas resided in indigenous households.

## CONTRADICTIONARY TRENDS

Analysis of the data at municipal level revealed that two contradictory outmigration trends were taking place

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in Mexico in the decade from 2000 to 2010. Firstly, in one-third of the mainly rural municipalities, migration intensity increased. Secondly, more than half of the rural population still lived in



municipalities that had little dependency on migration to the US. In 2010, only a quarter of the rural population lived in municipalities with high migration indexes and the number of people living in rural municipalities with high levels of international migration rose by only 4% in the decade running up to 2010.

When the researchers examined these trends in relation to their spatial distribution, of the ten states with the largest rural populations, only Michoacán and Guanajuato depended highly on international migration. Both are situated in the centre of Mexico's historic sending region.

## EXERCISING THE RIGHT TO STAY HOME

Analysing the census data confirmed that after the introduction of NAFTA, most of the residents living in rural areas chose to remain in Mexico rather than risk their lives attempting to cross to the US. By choosing to search for work within Mexico, these communities were exercising their right to stay at home and not migrate during the period from 2000 to 2010. In contrast with

previous migration studies that demonstrate how and why rural Mexicans left the countryside for the US, this research indicates that a surprisingly large proportion of rural Mexicans choose to stay at home.

From the perspective of rurality, ethnicity and migration, this synthesis of 2010 data revealed that most of the indigenous population remains rural. Moreover, almost a quarter of the persistent rural





migration, due to a lack of comparable data for 2020.

Data-gathering for the 2020 census was impacted by COVID-19, and the repercussions for trends in the rural population and migration are yet to be examined. From the long-term standpoint of structural change, there has been a significant deceleration in the reduction of the proportion of the population living in rural areas. Likewise, the decline in the percentage of the economically active population employed in agriculture and the rate of migration from rural Mexico to the US have also slowed. Rural inhabitants continue to exercise their right to stay home even though sustainable rural development has not been at the heart of the Mexican government's agenda. Governmental social programmes have focused on transfer payments to individuals rather than investing in job creation by social enterprises, suggesting that it is doubtful that social spending will create sustainable rural employment.

Despite the new president's remarking that 'migration should be a choice rather than an obligation', persistent violence has led to ongoing forced displacement from some regions. In addition, the new economic policy emphasising strict budgets that prioritise industrial mega-projects will have a direct effect on many rural inhabitants. The overall agricultural budget has been cut, and it is unclear if investment in family farmers has grown. Yet within national agricultural policy, subsidy programmes favouring large growers were cut, which allowed for budget increases for programmes that targeted smallholders.

The researchers sum up that considering the expected radical depopulation post-NAFTA, agricultural employment was indeed hollowed out, but *rural* and *agricultural* are no longer synonymous. Even so, millions of Mexican families choose to stay in their rural communities rather than risk dangerous border-crossings or potential alienation and urban insecurity. Professors Bada and Fox conclude that 'in spite of so many powerful "push" factors, rural agency appears to have thrown sand in the machinery of structural determinism and rural depopulation.'

Ten states with the largest absolute population in municipalities that are predominantly rural 2000–2010						
State/Year	Population living in predominantly rural municipalities (in millions)		Percentage of the national rural population		Percentage of state population living in majority rural municipalities	
	2000	2010	2000	2010	2000	2010
Veracruz	3.3	3.3	12.2%	11.6%	47%	43%
Chiapas	2.7	3.1	10.1%	10.9%	68%	64%
Estado de México	2.2	2.4	8.2%	8.6%	17%	16%
Oaxaca	2.1	2.2	7.8%	7.7%	60%	57%
Puebla	1.9	1.9	6.9%	6.7%	36%	33%
Guanajuato	1.7	1.8	6.3%	6.4%	36%	33%
Guerrero	1.6	1.7	6.0%	5.9%	52%	49%
Hidalgo	1.3	1.6	4.7%	5.8%	57%	61%
Tabasco	1.2	1.5	4.7%	5.3%	66%	67%
Michoacán	1.5	1.4	5.6%	5.0%	38%	32%
<b>National Total</b>	<b>26.7</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>72.4%</b>	<b>73.9%</b>		

Note: These ten states represented 72% of the total national population living in predominantly rural municipalities in 2000 and 74% in 2010. Source: Authors' elaboration using CONAPO data on migration intensity rates at the municipal and state level.

## Considering the expected radical depopulation post-NAFTA, agricultural employment was indeed hollowed out – but rural and agricultural are no longer synonymous.

residents were indigenous to Mexico; one third of the rural population living in low migration areas were indigenous and nearly three quarters of the rural indigenous population remained in regions that were still not dependent on rural international migration. The researchers comment that it is unlikely that this pattern will have changed significantly by the 2020 census.

### FUTURE TRENDS

The researchers describe how economic dislocations due to the pandemic and the unusually low unemployment levels in the US from 2018 to 2020 have resulted in an increase in cross-border outmigration to the US, but it would be premature to say whether this is a blip in the trend or the beginning of a new pattern of

# Behind the Research



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## Research Objectives

Xóchitl Bada and Jonathan Fox research population and migration trends in rural Mexico.

## Detail

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### Bio

**Xóchitl Bada** is an associate professor in Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She studies migrant access to labour rights,

organising strategies, and transnational advocacy mobilisations. She is co-author of *Scaling Migrant Worker Rights. How Advocates Collaborate and Contest State Power*, University of California Press.

**Jonathan Fox** is a professor in the School of International Service at

American University, where he directs the Accountability Research Center. He studies the relationships between accountability, transparency, and citizen participation.

### Funding

American University's School of International Service

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## Personal Response

**What would be your advice for policy-makers wishing to promote the rural Mexican population and their return to employment in the agricultural sector?**

“ About a decade ago, more than half of the rural population still lived in municipalities that had little dependency on migration to the United States. We recommend that new public investment initiatives in sustainable job creation shall be targeted to areas with high poverty indicators and low or intermediate rates of international migration. The insights of community leaders and social organisations from areas that are not yet highly dependent on international migration should be included in any conversations about public investments in the rural countryside. ”

