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“ILLEGAL” IMMIGRATION ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER: IS IT REALLY A CRISIS?

BY

WILLIAM C. GRUBEN, PH.D.
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
GLOBALIZATION AND MONETARY POLICY INSTITUTE
FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF DALLAS

AND

TONY PAYAN, PH.D.
FRANÇOISE AND EDWARD DJEREJIAN FELLOW FOR MEXICO STUDIES
DIRECTOR, MEXICO CENTER

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Introduction

In recent months, print and television journalists have presented the American public with a “crisis” of illegal¹ immigration on the U.S.–Mexico border. Much of this recent discussion has centered on Central American children traveling alone and on allegations that they are responding to motivations created by the Obama administration’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival policy.² The word “crisis,” however, can have alternative meanings. If a “crisis” of undocumented immigration means a historically large or very rapidly growing flow of undocumented immigrations, the overall national evidence shows today that there is no such crisis. Border Patrol apprehensions of undocumented immigrants attempting to cross the U.S.–Mexico border have in fact plummeted and remain far below levels a decade earlier.

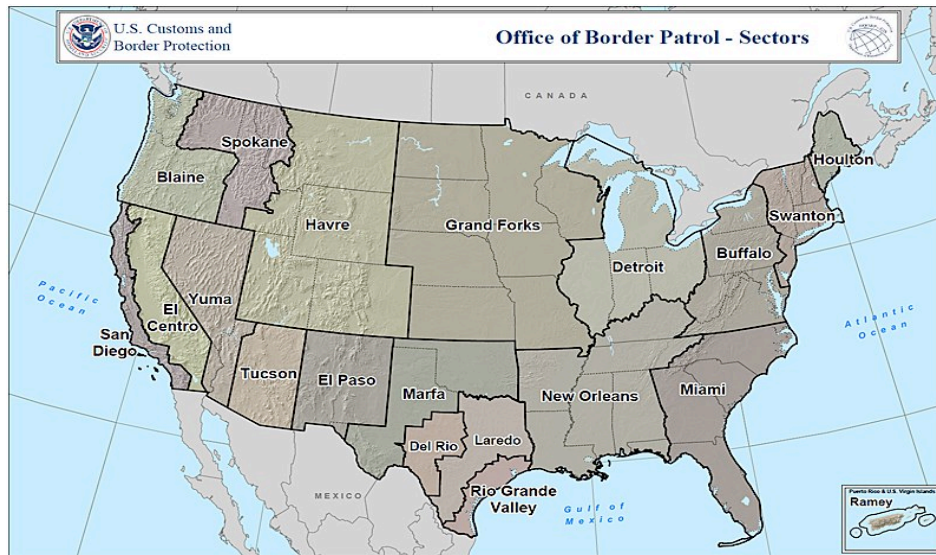
Nevertheless, apprehensions of children traveling alone have indeed surged. Many of these child immigrants are traveling alone from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. This flow of children from Central America requires careful examination, especially if compared to Mexico’s numbers. Although Mexico’s population is eight times Guatemala’s, 15 times Honduras and 19 times El Salvador’s, for example, the most recent partial-year apprehensions of unaccompanied children from each one of these countries have exceeded such apprehensions of children from Mexico. All this points to a surge of unaccompanied Central American children. But even this has to be qualified as a true crisis or not. While references to a record of apprehensions of unaccompanied child immigrants are correct, publicly available data for this category only go back to 2010. Thus, it may be preliminary to draw definitive conclusions about record numbers of unaccompanied children based on four full-fiscal-year observations plus monthly observations into a fifth year. Other data, including total apprehensions for any undocumented child immigrants, accompanied or otherwise, extend more than a decade. Preliminary estimates for fiscal year 2014 suggest that these apprehensions have remained below levels a decade earlier.

¹ For the remainder of the paper, we refer to the colloquial concept of “illegal immigration” as undocumented immigration or, occasionally, unauthorized immigration. While cited data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection still refers to “illegal aliens,” our language from here on will reflect a shift away from the term “illegal” in the academic and journalistic literature on migration in the United States.

² “On June 15, 2012, the Secretary of Homeland Security announced that certain people who came to the U.S. as children and meet several guidelines may request consideration of deferred action for a period of two years, subject to renewal.” From USCIS: <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca>

One basis for misunderstanding what has been taking place on the border involves the large changes in overall apprehensions and child apprehensions from one region of the border to another. In this paper, we chart large shifts in apprehensions from the western portion of the

Figure 1. U.S. Border Patrol Sectors



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection

U.S.–Mexico border (Yuma and Tucson sectors) to its extreme southeastern section (particularly the Rio Grande Valley sector). The map above presents the U.S. Border Patrol’s nine geographic U.S.–Mexico border sectors, to which we give sector-by-sector attention in later sections of this paper. Moving from west to east, these sectors include San Diego, El Centro, Yuma, Tucson, El Paso, Marfa, Del Rio, Laredo, and the Rio Grande Valley. Overall, apprehensions of undocumented immigrants crossing the border from Mexico to the United States increased 26.5 percent (12.5 per year at a compound rate) between 2011 and 2013. This overall change constitutes an increase of almost 87,000 apprehensions. However, a major shift in apprehensions has occurred across the sectors on the map. Apprehensions in the Rio Grande Valley sector, seen on the map along the southernmost portion of the Texas–Mexico border, rose by a little more

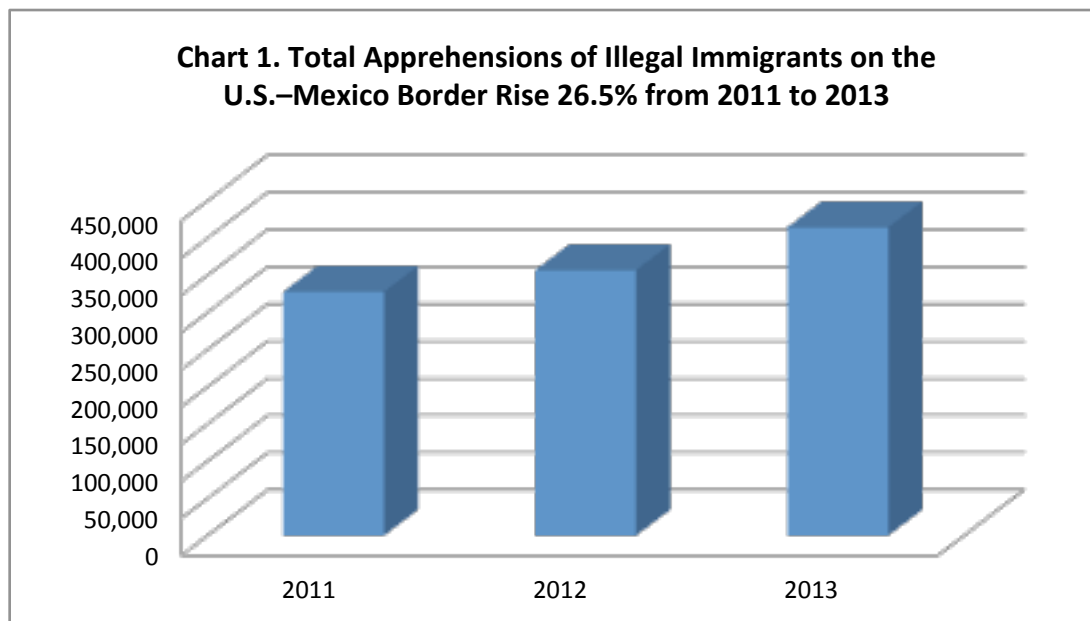
than 95,000. This signifies that the remaining eight sectors, on net, saw a decline of about 8,000 apprehensions. As we discuss, the real reductions came in the westernmost sectors.³

Before commencing our analysis, a caveat is in order. We want to emphasize that apprehensions of undocumented migrants do not tell us how many persons actually crossed the border without authorization. Undocumented migrants who were not caught crossing the border were also often able to avoid capture later in their routes, so we do not know how many successful crossers there have been. Generally, the research community that studies such topics concludes that when apprehensions go up or down, so do overall crossings. We will assume this much in our analysis.

U.S. National Factors that Influence Unauthorized Migration

Chart 1, below, details what has recently been occurring nationally with respect to apprehensions of unauthorized crossers along the U.S.–Mexico border. The chart depicts the 26.5 percent increase in U.S.–Mexico border apprehensions of unauthorized immigrants by the U.S. Border Patrol over the period 2011–2013. The number of apprehensions rose from 323,577 in 2011 to 414,397 in 2013. Both numbers look large and so does their increase. We do not intend to trivialize them, but we do intend to put them in perspective in order to address the existence of a “crisis,” as has been presented by the media and numerous politicians and bureaucrats.

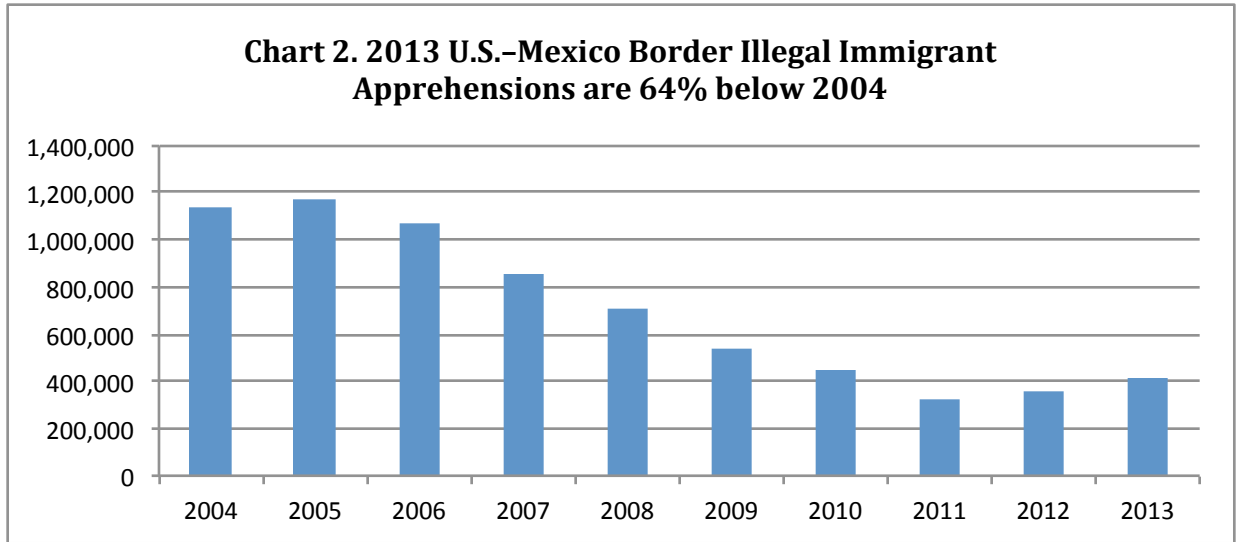
³ To maintain the ratio of agents relative to unauthorized immigrants across the entire U.S.–Mexico border, the Border Patrol responded to these shifts by moving large numbers of agents from the sectors in the western United States to the Rio Grande Valley sector in southern Texas.



Source: U.S. Border Patrol, “Nationwide Illegal Alien Apprehensions,” fiscal years 1925–2013

Our explanations will include evidence to suggest that this recent increase is in part a response to growing U.S. economic “pull” factors—including rising labor demand due to the U.S. economic recovery and to changes in the distribution of labor demand toward occupations and jobs often held by undocumented immigrants. Moreover, as we will show, there is evidence of an intensification of origin-country “push” factors that motivate Mexicans and Central Americans to leave their countries even if there were no changes in U.S. “pull” factors. These include weak economic conditions, declining real wages and—particularly in the small Central American countries, south of Mexico—gang- and cartel-related violence.

Chart 2, below, expands the reporting period for apprehensions of undocumented immigrants to 10 years, from 2004 to 2013. Chart 1’s depiction of the 26.5 percent increase in apprehensions for 2011–2013 is dwarfed by the overall decline in apprehensions from 1,139,282 in 2004 to 414,397 in 2013. Indeed, fiscal year 2013’s count is just 36.5 percent of that of 2004.

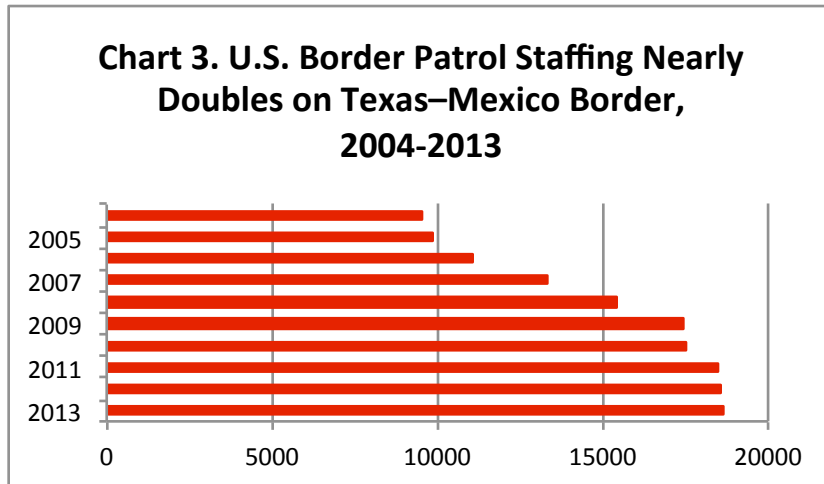


Source: U.S. Border Patrol, “Nationwide Illegal Alien Apprehensions,” fiscal years 1925–2013

Chart 2 invites questions about the causes of the decline from 2005 to 2011, and what they suggest for the future. The consensus among immigration analysts is that tougher border enforcement coupled with the job-killing financial crisis of 2007–2009 were significantly responsible. This conclusion, with which we concur, reinforces the idea that pull factors weigh heavily in migrant calculations to move. Complicating these patterns is the simultaneous intensification of the home-country push factors, as the deteriorating economic and security conditions of this period should have motivated more unauthorized immigration to the United States, not less.

The Role of the Border Patrol’s Effectiveness

Chart 3, below, depicts the level of U.S. Border Patrol staffing on the U.S.–Mexico border for each year from 2004 to 2013, a 10-year period. The number of U.S. Border Patrol staff on the U.S.–Mexico border almost doubled, rising from 9,506 to 18,611. The scholarly and technical literature in the field of immigration offers strong evidence that increases in the number of border enforcement personnel reduces undocumented immigration.



Source: U.S. Border Patrol, “Border Patrol Agent Staffing by Fiscal Year”

The association between law enforcement’s effectiveness and the presence of undocumented immigrants in the United States does not seem to be appreciated in all of its detail. Other things equal, more U.S. Border Patrol personnel on the U.S.–Mexico border mean fewer apprehensions—not more—of unauthorized crossers, even though this also signifies a reduction in the number of apprehensions per agent.

This association reflects the Border Patrol’s role as a deterrent to undocumented immigration—although it may not be the only variable at work here. Nevertheless, Border Patrol personnel increase the cost of undocumented crossings because they lower the likelihood that these immigrants will succeed in crossing or, if they manage to cross, will reach their ultimate destination. And unauthorized immigrants can be assumed to behave as if they understand the effects of probabilities on costs and on future streams of income—and re-evaluate their estimates as conditions change. Much of the evidence suggests that these calculations do enter the equation of both undocumented migrants and the equations of undocumented migrant smugglers—known as coyotes or *polleros*—that undocumented immigrants hire to help them. As enforcement increases, with its attendant upturn in apprehensions, for example, prices charged by coyotes rise accordingly, creating a cost to attempted unauthorized immigration that is measurably separate from the simple increase in likelihood of capture on one’s own (Gathmann 2008; Ortmeier and Quinn 2012).

However, tighter border enforcement also induces more families of undocumented immigrants to settle permanently in the United States, instead of relying on male family members to migrate back and forth between the United States and, for example, Mexico (Orrenius and Zavodny 2012). Among analysts and scholars in the field of unauthorized immigration, this phenomenon is known as the “caging effect,” although others have called it “entrapment.” Associated with this caging effect there is evidence to suggest that recent increases in the crossings and apprehensions of unaccompanied children along the U.S.–Mexico border are simply part of a pattern of longer-term permanent immigration—with a lag occurring between when a father establishes a beachhead in the United States and when the spouse and then the children follow progressively (Nowrasteh 2014).⁴ This phenomenon is argued to be particularly applicable to Central American immigrants because they pay higher coyote fees than Mexican immigrants, and are typically poorer. These peculiarities of the Central American immigrant pool create a longer lag between the time when the initial migrant arrives and the time when he can afford to bring one part or another of his family.

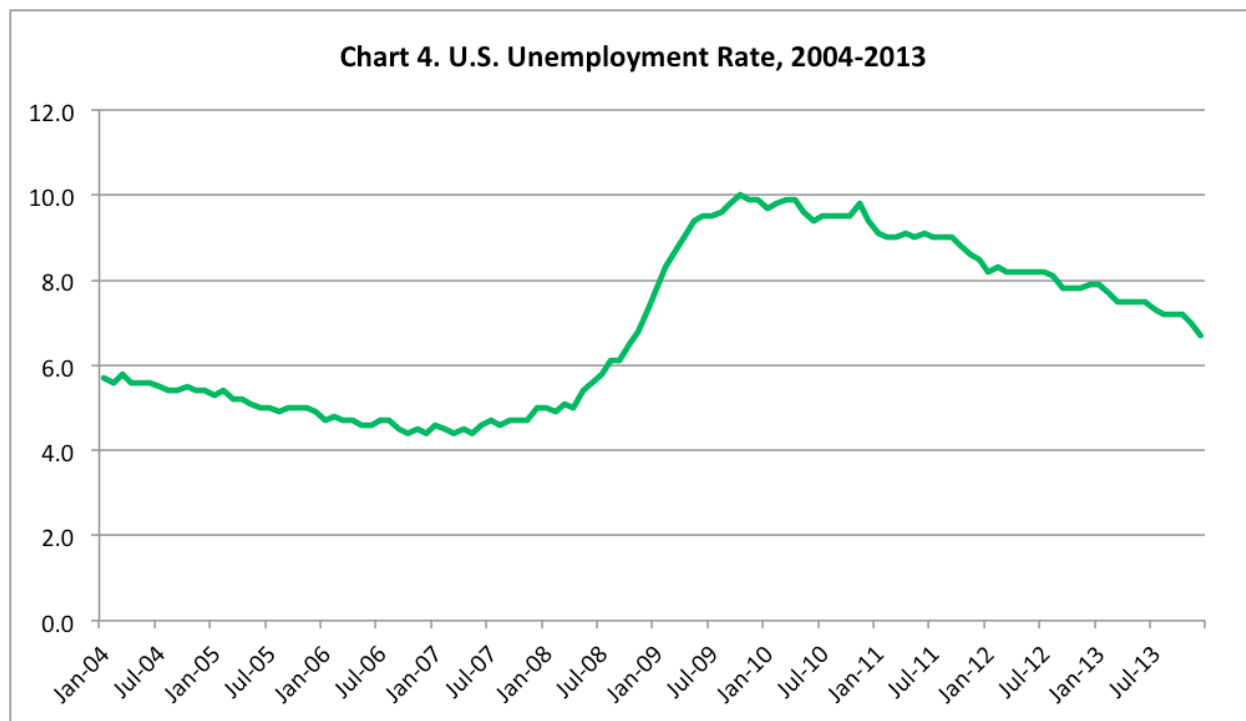
The Effect of Job Availability on Immigration

A second determinant of undocumented immigration is the existence of jobs in the United States that are typically available to unauthorized immigrants. Charts 4 and 5, below, present evidence that U.S. job demand is now markedly lower than during the first half of our 10-year period of examination, from 2004 to 2013. The low levels of undocumented immigrant apprehensions are not only consistent with the enforcement data, but also with these indicators of a soft job market. Nonetheless, there is reason to suspect that employment opportunities for undocumented workers have lately been growing faster than employment as a whole in the United States and that these changes may help to explain the recent increases in apprehensions of undocumented immigrants.

⁴ The number of Border Patrol agents is not the only indicator of intensity in apprehension efforts. The Border Patrol tracks its arrestees by means of a database that incorporates fingerprints and digital photographs that identify repeat apprehendees instantaneously. Using this data and a series of managerial changes, the Border Patrol has reorganized its enforcement procedures to reduce the incidence of repeat unauthorized immigrants from 27 percent of apprehendees in 2007 to 16 percent in 2013. Using these methods, the Border Patrol has identified a significant number of unauthorized child detainees who have previously attempted to cross.

“Illegal” Immigration on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Is It Really a Crisis?

As a first indicator of how easy or difficult it may be to find a job overall, Chart 4 below depicts the U.S. unemployment rate from January 2004 through December 2013. A higher unemployment rate means more difficulty finding work.



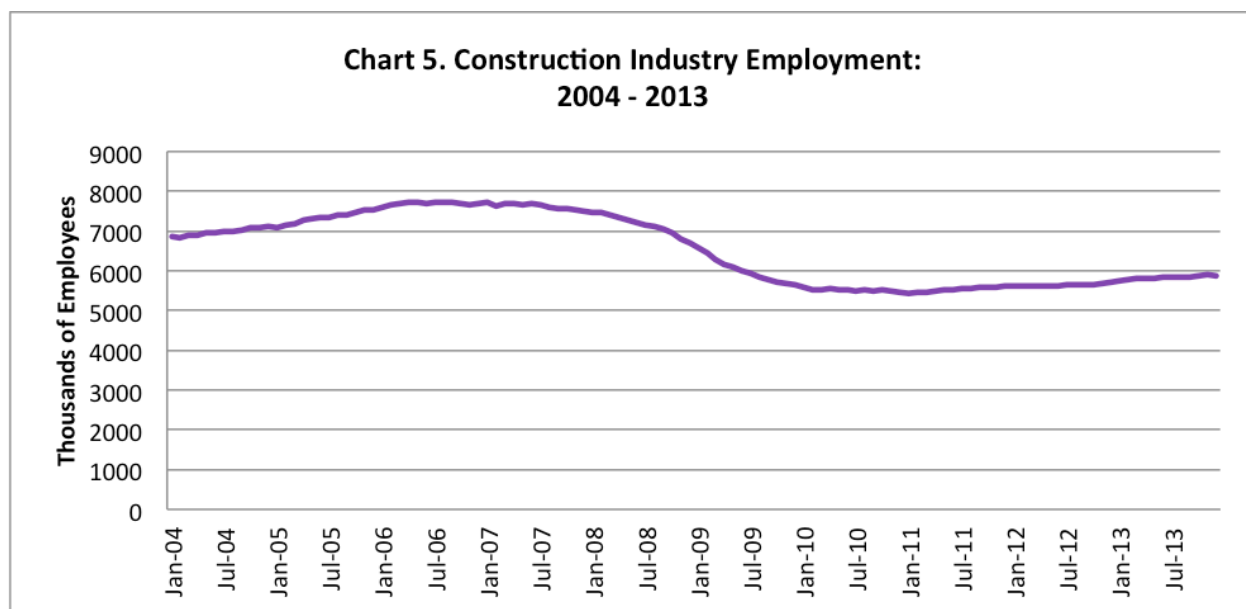
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey”

As Chart 4 shows, the Great Recession of 2007-2009 resulted in an increase in the U.S. unemployment rate from which the United States still had not fully recovered. The year-end 2013 unemployment rate of 6.7 percent was still substantially higher than the 5.1 percent average of the entire first half of the 10-year 2004-2013 sample that is the focus of our discussion in this paper. However, overall employment bottomed out in December 2009 and had increased by 4.7 percent by the end of 2013.

The post-recession decline in employment and the rate of increase in employment are widely regarded as slow. Some recent research on this topic suggests changes in the distribution of demand for labor in categories into which unauthorized immigrants may fit. Specifically, recent decades have seen a “hollowing out” in labor demand, as automation has reduced the demand for routinized middle-skill jobs and increased the demand for high-skill and—to some degree—low-

skill employees (Autor 2010). Jaimovich and Siu (2012) find that the Great Recession of 2007-2009 accelerated this “hollowing out.” This finding suggests a faster recovery in the demand for low-skill jobs often held by undocumented workers, relative to the somewhat slower overall labor market recovery, than what would have occurred in the past.

Accordingly, while the overall unemployment rate is a useful indicator, labor market information on particular occupations or industries in which undocumented immigrants tend to work is increasingly important. The Great Recession was largely precipitated by a financial crisis that found its way into the nonfinancial (or “real”) sector through a construction crash. A large share of undocumented low-skilled workers may be affected by changes in the availability of construction jobs. Construction employment typically fluctuates more than overall private-sector employment.



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey”

Chart 5, above, depicts monthly U.S. construction employment over our standard 10-year period of examination, 2004-2013. December 2013 construction employment was still down by one-fifth below the average level of construction employment for the first half of our 10-year examination period. Even so, U.S. construction employment had increased by 8.2 percent since

its trough in January 2011, considerably faster than the rate of expansion of overall employment or virtually any of its components.

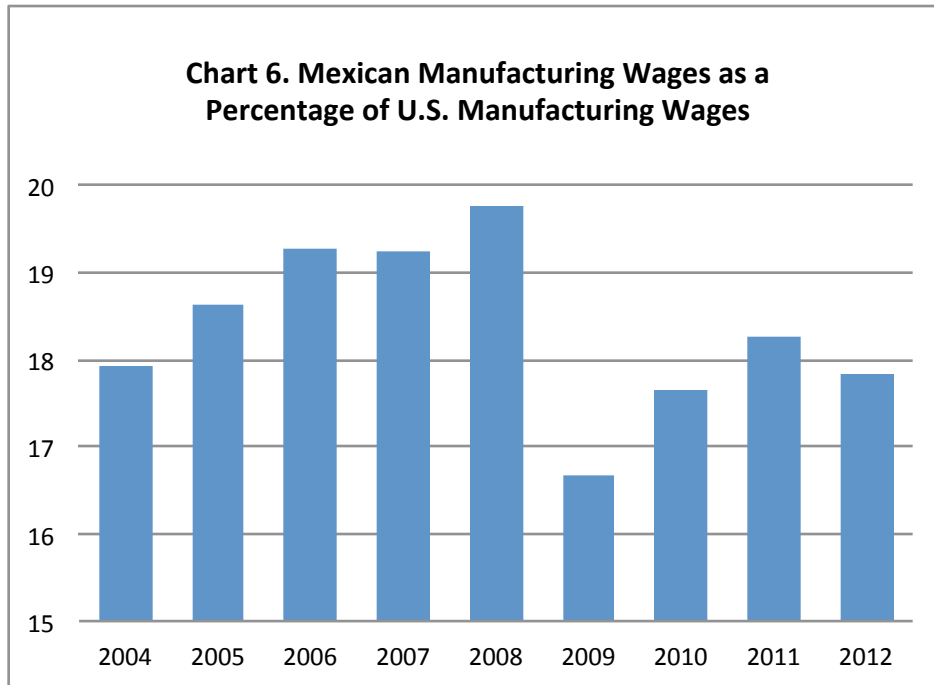
However, any accurate assessment of employment and employment demand for undocumented workers crossing the U.S.–Mexico border will require much more detailed analysis, not only of occupational demand in the United States, but of the abilities and readiness of potential workers from south of the border to fill them.

We next address “push” factors, that is, the conditions in the sending countries. We focus on two major factors, the economic and security conditions that prevail in Mexico and in Central America. Push and pull factors interact in ways that are not fully understood but are clearly complex. Neither appears to be a sufficient condition for a migrant’s decision, but they seem jointly to have a clear effect on the decision-making process involved in making the move.

Sending-Country Factors: Push and Structural Effects

One migration determinant involving push factors is the fluctuation in relative wages in the origin country versus the destination country. While wage data for Central American countries would be useful in this context, only Mexican wage data are currently available for fully accurate comparisons. Chart 6, below, presents manufacturing wages in Mexico—expressed in dollars—as a percentage of manufacturing wages in the United States for the period 2004-2012.

Despite public attention to undocumented immigrants in construction, domestic work, and food preparation, many undocumented immigrants work in manufacturing in the United States.



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “International Wage Comparisons”

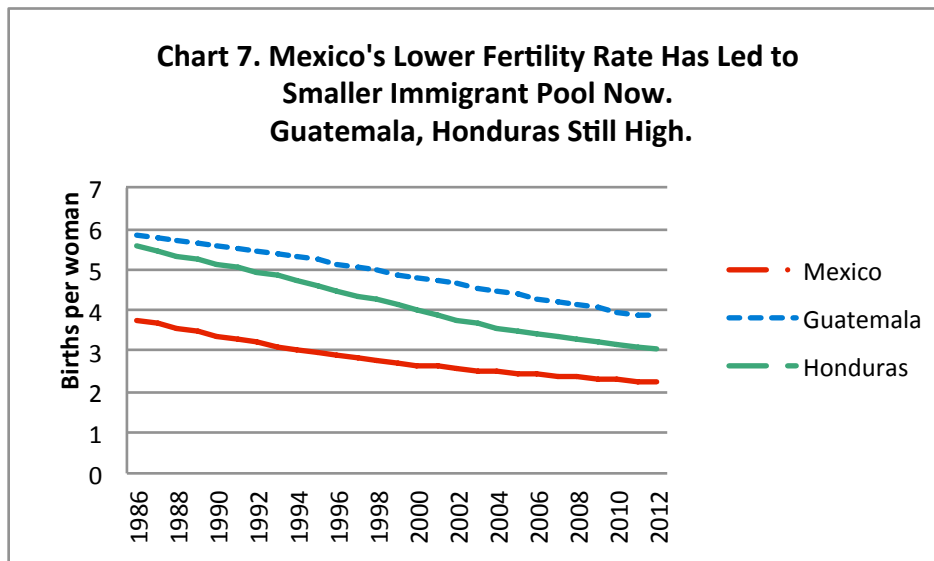
Mexican manufacturing wages on average are always lower than U.S. manufacturing wages. However, when the ratio is relatively high, so will be the motivation to remain in Mexico. When the ratio falls, more Mexicans leave. On Chart 6, the recession year 2008 was the high point. The high value signifies that wage factors would have been less likely to induce manufacturing workers to leave Mexico. Chart 6 shows that the ratio fell in 2009, grew in 2010 and 2011, and slipped back in 2012, but it was lower in all four years than it was in 2008.

These changes in ratios actually reflect two patterns, a push and a pull. The push factor was a net 2 percent decline over 2008-2012 in Mexican manufacturing wages denominated in dollars. Hanson and Spilimbergo (1999) find that declines in Mexican wages motivate increases in apprehensions even when U.S. wages do not rise. They also find that increases in U.S. wages motivate rises in apprehensions even when Mexican wages do not decrease. On the pull side, U.S. wages increased 8.8 percent at the same time that the 2 percent decline in Mexican wages did its part for the push side.

Wages are not the only push factor. Although Mexico’s increased gang- and cartel-related violence has received much attention in the United States media, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala all have higher murder rates than Mexico. Recently released econometric models show that murder rates, measured on a municipality-by-municipality basis, affect the likelihood that residents of those municipalities will emigrate. Other things equal, higher murder rates in a municipality mean more people will be leaving. This means that murder is a push factor.

The Role of Demographics

In addition to the push factors that motivate potential unauthorized immigrants to cross Mexico’s border into the United States, it is also possible to identify structural factors that may not push directly, but affect the population size of potential unauthorized immigrants who will be pushed. Chart 7, below, depicts an important demographic factor in this calculus, the fertility rate. The fertility rate tells us how many children an average woman has in a given country.



Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank

These rates vary greatly over time and among countries. To appreciate the significance of Chart 7, bear in mind that births determine the pool of potential immigrants. Other things being equal, a decline in the Mexican fertility rate in 1986 lowers the pool of potential unauthorized immigrants 18 years later, in 2004. Similar declines in other feeder countries are also important. But demographic shifts in Mexico’s large population (122 million) will have a greater effect in

“Illegal” Immigration on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Is It Really a Crisis?

supplying potential undocumented crossers to the U.S. than do Guatemala’s (15 million), Honduras’s (8 million) or those of the other, even smaller Central American countries.

Mexico’s changing demographics and its large population’s traditional contribution to unauthorized immigration flows are important reasons why immigration from south of the border has fallen so significantly over the last 10 years, and why long-run pressures for a resurgence will probably also remain low. The red, dashed line in Chart 7 depicts the large declines in Mexico’s fertility rate since 1986. The fertility rate fell from 3.8 children in 1986 to 2.5 in 2004 to 2.2 in 2013—barely above the 2.0 required to maintain a constant population.

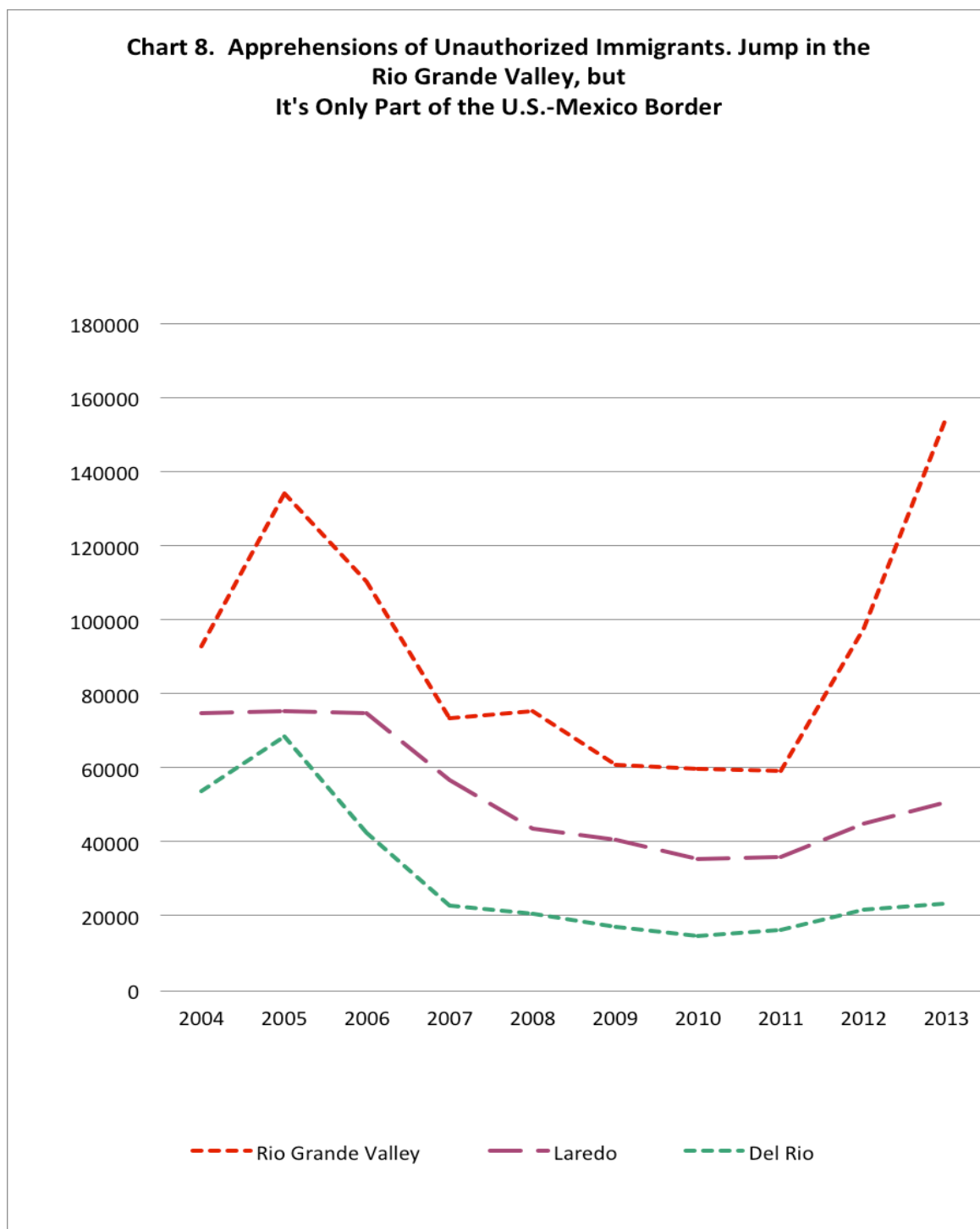
Chart 7 shows that fertility rates in Guatemala and Honduras are also falling. However, Guatemala’s 3.8 fertility rate in 2012 was only just where Mexico’s was in 1986. By 2002, Honduras’s fertility rate had only fallen to where Mexico’s was in 1986, but it was a decline, and the rate was noticeably below Guatemala’s. In 2012, Honduras was where Mexico was in 1994. This means that, despite declines, Honduran and Guatemalan fertility rates are still well above the simple rate of basic replacement, 2.0. These relatively high fertility rates, compared to Mexico’s, help to explain the significant expansion of undocumented immigrant flows from Guatemala and Honduras, despite their small populations. Generally speaking, Central American countries are still producing teenaged potential migrants at a fairly rapid rate. Still, these smaller countries’ own declining fertility rates and small sizes restrict the likelihood of heavy immigration from south of the border in the future.

What Would Make Reasonable Americans Guess That There is an Immigration Crisis?

Our discussion may raise questions about why undocumented immigration across the U.S.–Mexico border has been perceived as a crisis. In point of fact, a narrow focus on the U.S. Border Patrol’s Rio Grande Valley sector in southern Texas might convince thinking people that there is an immigration crisis, if they had not understood what had happened along the rest of the U.S.–Mexico border. As before, the story is in the statistics.

“Illegal” Immigration on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Is It Really a Crisis?

Chart 8, below, depicts apprehensions of unauthorized immigrants from Texas’s three most apprehension-heavy U.S. Border patrol sectors out of the five that touch the Texas border. These three are the Del Rio sector, the Laredo sector and—farthest to the south—the Rio Grande Valley sector. The remaining two sectors, El Paso and Marfa, had so few apprehensions that even very large percentage changes in their values would not have affected the total by much.



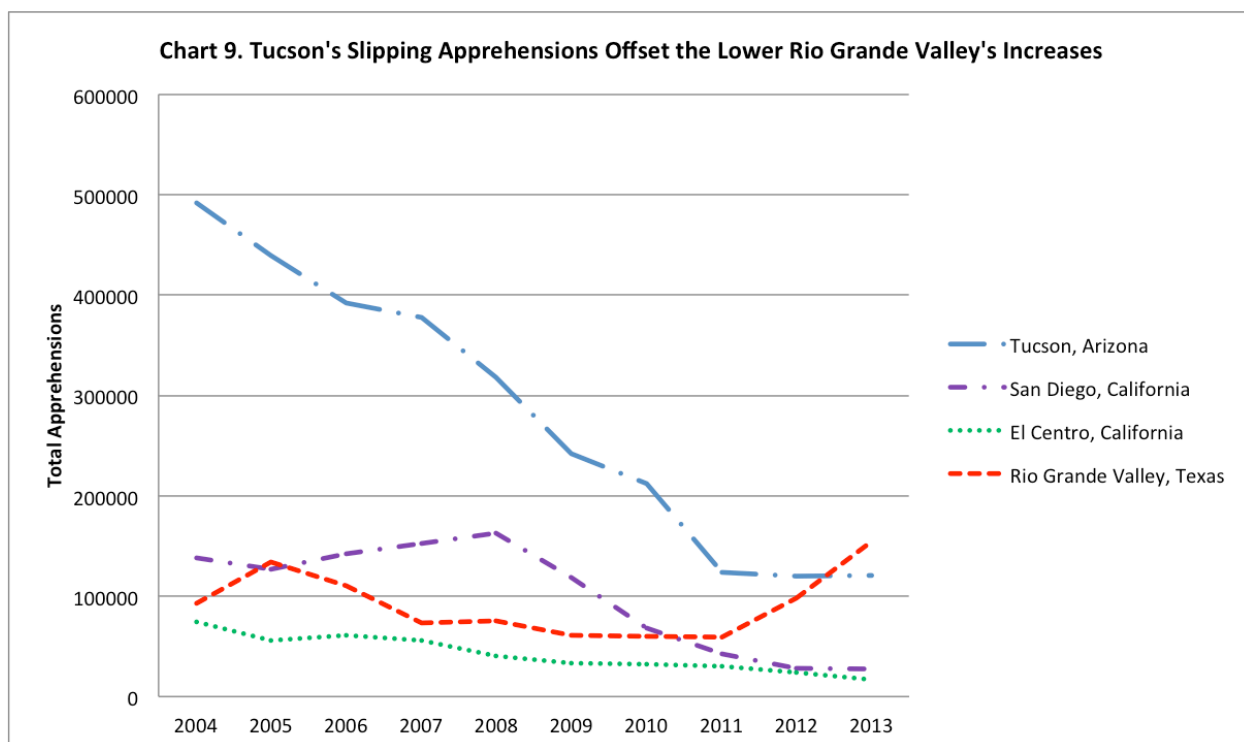
Source: U.S. Border Patrol, “Total Illegal Alien Apprehensions by fiscal year”

To appreciate the Rio Grande Valley sector as an outlier in apprehensions recall that, for the U.S.-Mexico border as a whole (including the Rio Grande Valley Sector), apprehensions of undocumented immigrants fell by 63.6 percent between 2004 and 2013. Over this same period, apprehensions in the Rio Grande Valley sector rose 66.2 percent. In fact, apprehensions

collectively for all U.S.–Mexico Border Patrol sectors except the Rio Grande Valley sector fell 75.2 percent over this period. Moreover, for the U.S.–Mexico border as a whole (including the Rio Grande Valley sector) apprehensions rose over the two-year period 2011-2013 by 26.5 percent while increasing 160.7 percent in the Rio Grande Valley sector.

Nationally, from 2011 to 2013, the total number of apprehensions rose by 86,820. For the Rio Grande Valley sector, apprehensions jumped by 95,210. The difference between the total U.S.–Mexico border’s increase of 86,820 and the Rio Grande Valley’s increase of 95,210 means that, jointly, apprehensions for the other nine U.S.–Mexico border sectors would have to have fallen by 8,390. Even so, apprehensions also rose over this period in both the Del Rio and Laredo sectors. As may be surmised, these results signify that sectors farther west than the Rio Grande Valley, Laredo, and Del Rio sectors sustained significant decreases.

Chart 9, below, compares Texas’s Rio Grande Valley apprehensions with the Tucson, Arizona, sector’s apprehensions for the same 10-year 2004-2013 period presented in Chart 8. While Rio Grande Valley apprehensions went up by about 65,000, Tucson fell by about 371,000. It has been argued that the reductions in Tucson sector apprehensions over this longer period are linked to an Arizona law—enacted in 2007 and partly upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2011—that punishes employers for hiring undocumented immigrants. Chart 9 shows that the reduction in apprehensions was taking place before 2007 or 2011, but widespread public attention to the behavior by Arizona law enforcement officials prior to 2007 may also have discouraged crossings before this point.

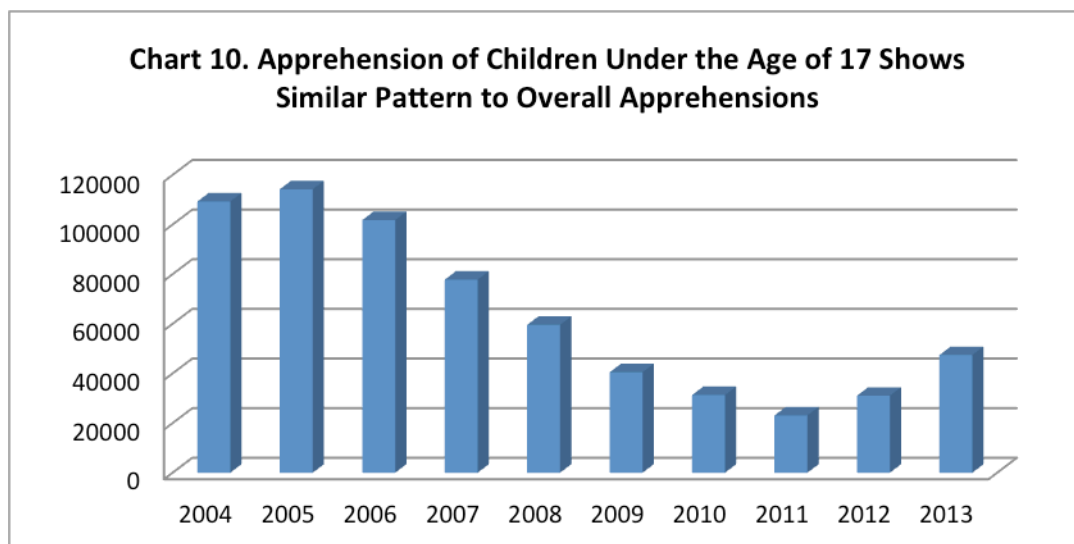


Source: U.S. Border Patrol, “Total Illegal Alien Apprehensions by Fiscal Year”

Did the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival Policy Attract Undocumented Immigrants?

Some observers have argued that recent increases in undocumented apprehensions stem from the current administration’s implementation of the Deferred Action for Child Arrival policy in 2012. It is difficult to attribute very recent undocumented immigration patterns to a program that requires applicants to have lived continuously in the United States since 2007 and to have been physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012. Since critics have argued that this program has induced recent child immigration and apprehensions of unauthorized child immigrants, it may be useful to see the overall pattern of child apprehensions for 2004-2013. Chart 10, below, shows child immigrant apprehensions for this period. These data do not fall and rise in the exact pattern as overall apprehensions, which were depicted in Chart 2, but the pattern is similar.⁵

⁵ Some have argued that unclear public reports about this program—either due to a lack of clarity from Obama administration officials or otherwise unaccountable errors by Central American periodicals—motivated the recent surge in apprehensions of children from Central America. A Huffington Post review of Spanish-language and Latin American newspapers found that they often failed to emphasize the June 15, 2012 cutoff point. However, the review also concluded that these publications otherwise accurately reported DACA. Moreover, the review found that these



Source: Bipartisan Policy Organization, “Child Migration by the Numbers,” Table A-1

Conclusion

Is there an immigration crisis? Considering recent apprehensions of unauthorized immigrants in the context of what has happened over the last 10 years, the data are inconsistent with an immigration crisis—at least a generalized immigration crisis. This statement is applicable not only to overall apprehensions—even if they are down overall—but to apprehensions of undocumented children traveling alone. And we do want to draw attention to both, since our intention is to bring things into a reasonable perspective and move the general discourse away from the moral panic that sometimes pervades the public narrative on immigration. Overall apprehensions in 2013 were about 64 percent below 2004. Overall apprehensions had increased 26.5 percent between 2011 and 2013. Apprehensions were declining consistently before then, with 2011 being the trough year. Principal determinants of this decline likely include the almost doubling of Border Patrol personnel over 2004-2013 and the Great Recession of 2007-2009, together with its lagged effects. Did the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival policy induce recent increases? Not if immigrants knew what the policy included.

newspapers reported the program in enough detail to cast doubt on the eligibility of any new arrivals. See Huffington Post, June 12, 2014.

“Illegal” Immigration on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Is It Really a Crisis?

What might have caused recent increases in unauthorized immigration between 2011 and 2013? We have attributed some of this to pull factors—including overall U.S. employment growth, falling unemployment rates, the “hollowing out” effect (which involves a shift in labor demand away from middle-skill jobs and toward high skill and, to some degree, low skill jobs), a bounce back in immigrant-intense construction employment, and wage increases. Besides these pull factors, we have discussed push factors. These include the immigration effect of violent crime in Central America (and, surely, Mexico), as well as declining manufacturing wages, for example, in Mexico—especially in combination with rising manufacturing wages in the United States.

At the same time we have addressed falling fertility rates in Mexico and Central America, which will constrain immigration to the United States. We also noted, however, that Central American fertility rates continue to substantially exceed population replacement rates.

There are many dynamics, economic and social, that seem to have motivated additional unauthorized travel across the U.S.–Mexico border in the last few years. Finally, there is always the immigrants’ ongoing calculation of the constantly changing probabilities of apprehension, remuneration, and survival. The key with all of these variables, however, is to understand which tug in what direction and weigh them accordingly in order to understand the overall effect on migration wave—this is true for both push and pull factors. But given the statistics story we have presented, we can conclude that there is hardly an immigration crisis—something that would have been a different story around 2005.

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