

## **Occupational Mobility of Mexican Migrant Heads of Household in the United States**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the pre-to-post migration occupational mobility experience of Mexican heads of households and their spouses who immigrated to the United States after 1965 (the end of the Bracero program). Building on recent work about occupational trajectories in Europe, we first provide an overview of the occupational distribution of migrants regarding their last occupation in Mexico and first occupation in the United States, and we review characteristics of migrants that were found to have influenced mobility in different contexts (e.g., age, education, documentation status, marital status). Given changes in Mexican states of origin and U.S. states of destination, we include information about key out- and in-migration states in our analysis. We further distinguish between the period 1965-1985 (end of the Bracero program and prior to the 1886 immigration legislation) and 1986-2012. Our data come from the Mexican Migration Project (MMP). We report our descriptive and analytical results separately for males and females and discuss differences between them. Overall, female migrants were far more likely to experience upward mobility than were men, and less likely to be downwardly mobile. Our models also show substantial differences in the determinants of mobility for males and females. Age affected occupational mobility of males but not females, with the reverse being the case for marital status. And for males, migrating to a traditional U.S. destination state decreased their likelihood of upward mobility whereas it increased that likelihood for women. The paper concludes with a discussion of context in which occupational mobility of migrants occurs.

## **Introduction**

This paper analyzes the occupational mobility experience of Mexican heads of household and their spouses who immigrated to the United States after 1965 (the end of the Bracero program). We build on recent work about occupational trajectories in the United States and Europe. For example, Helgertz (2013) found that immigrants to Sweden tended to have a lower return on their skills both in terms of occupational status and income. A study of occupational trajectory of Senegalese immigrants in Europe (Obucina 2013) showed that Senegalese men and women experienced occupational downward mobility upon arrival, and that their first job in Europe was a better predictor of their subsequent occupational trajectory than their past occupation in Senegal. Toussaint-Comeau's (2006) study of the occupational assimilation of Hispanic immigrants indicated that initially the wage costs of immigrants is greatest in the highest-status occupations, but that for all occupations that cost decreases with time in the United States. And in their study of immigrant women in Spain, Vidal-Coso and Miret-Gamundi (2014) found that females were more likely than men to experience downward occupational mobility at the time of migration, with only a small proportion able to later leave such traditional jobs for female immigrants as house cleaning and domestic service.

## **Analytical Strategy, Data, and Methods**

We used these and other studies to guide our analytical strategy to analyze (1) the pre-to-post migration occupational mobility experience of migrants and (2) their occupational trajectory in the United States after migration.

We use life history data from the Mexican Migration Project (MMP) to analyze the determinants of occupational mobility for the first migration trip to the United States. More specifically, we use information on the employment and migration history of the heads of household and their spouses to determine the type of occupation they had before migration, and we then compare it to their occupation after their first U.S. migration trip. Our sample selects respondents who migrated to the U.S. for the first time after 1965. We chose this date because it represents the end of the Bracero program under which immigrants were neither free to select a job nor to choose the state where they wanted to work. Rather, the Bracero program assigned them to a specific job prior to coming to the U.S. To compare their occupations pre- and post-migration, we classified them into eight ordinal categories; we then created a categorical variable to indicate whether the occupation in the first trip to the U.S. is lower, the same, or higher (downward, lateral and upward mobility) in the eight-category ranking. We use a multinomial logistic regression model to estimate the relative risk of being in a U.S. occupation that is lower or higher than the occupation they had in Mexico (relative to staying in the same type of occupation). This first set of models controls for sex, age, education, marital status at first migration, use of migrant networks, region of origin Mexico and state of destination in the US. The second part of the paper uses a comparable strategy for analyzing the occupational trajectory of migrants from their first occupation in the United States to their most recent one, controlling for the time spent in the U.S. and number of migration trips since the first one. At this stage of our paper, we present preliminary findings for the first part: the pre-to-post migration occupational mobility of Mexican migrants to the United States.

### **Preliminary Findings**

Table 1 shows the occupational distributions for males and females in Mexico prior to migration and in the United States after their arrival. Overall, males tended to more higher-status occupations in Mexico and more lower-status occupations in the U.S., with the exception of agricultural workers. A similar pattern exists for females. When the moves are tabulated in terms of upward, lateral, and downward occupational mobility (based on the detailed information given in Table 3), the summary shows that more male migrants were upwardly than downwardly mobile (see Table 2). For females, the ratio of upward to downward mobility was almost twice as high.

Table 2 also presents sample characteristics for both male and female migrants. Little difference between males and female migrants to the U.S. exists in terms of age (about 25 years of age) and marital status (about 22 percent), but females have about three more years of education than do men. For both males and females, about 80 percent came undocumented on their first trip to the U.S. The historic regions in Mexico were the place of origin for about three quarters of male migrants and nine out of ten female migrants. For males, California was the most prominent place of destination for males, accounting for almost 60 percent of all migrants. In contrast, about 60 percent of all female migrants went to a U.S. location outside the three traditional states of destination: California, Texas, Illinois. Almost all male migrants were heads of household, compared to only 18 percent of female migrants.

We present the first and preliminary model results in Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 shows the effects of individual migration characteristics for male and female migrant heads of households and their spouses, expressed as risk ratios. The models show substantial sex differentials. Age affected occupational mobility of males but not females, with the reverse being the case for marital status. Being undocumented increased downward migration for males but increased upward migration for females. (We are currently exploring if the weighted numbers in the survey influenced these unexpected results for females.) Region of origin in Mexico had no effect on occupational mobility for female migrants, but originating from the Central and especially the Southeast region greatly increased the likelihood of upward mobility for males. In contrast to these sex differentials, period of migration, education and state of destination in the U.S. had similar effects on occupational mobility for both male and female migrants.

The 5 represents our first take on identifying possible effects of social networks on occupational mobility, restricted to heads of households only (because information about social networks was only gathered for heads of households and not their spouses). The key variable of interest—migrant network characteristics—shows that those migrants who received help with lodging after their arrival in the United States were more likely to experience upward occupational mobility than those not receiving such help.

In the full version of the paper, we will further explore the influence of social network characteristics to show which ones are important for occupational mobility and which are not. The full paper will also include the analysis of occupational trajectories after arrival in the U.S. At present, we are specifying those models.

## References

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## Tables

**Table 1. Occupation Distribution for Last Job in Mexico and First Job in the U.S.,  
migrant heads of household and spouses, MMP**

	Males		Females	
	Last occupation in Mexico (%)	First occupation in the U.S. (%)	Last occupation in Mexico (%)	First occupation in the U.S. (%)
<b>Type of occupation</b>				
Management, professional	3.39	0.93	8.96	0.56
Skilled occupation	18.68	15.09	22.86	8.01
Administrative	3.36	1.88	11.95	2.07
Services occupation	11.42	22.48	24.85	73.53
Unskilled occupation	19.99	23.62	8.16	3.41
Construction worker	2.96	5.76	0.24	0.04
Agricultural worker	37.99	28.01	11.13	4.39
Domestic worker	2.21	2.22	11.85	7.99

N= 6,225 male (71%); female (28%)

Source: Mexican Migration Project,( MMP143, LIFE and SPOUSE files)

Weighted data

**Table 2. Sample Characteristics Migrant Heads of Household and Spouses at the Time of First U.S. Trip, MMP**

	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
<b>Labor mobility status</b>		
Upward mobility	42.27%	72.19
Lateral mobility	27.38%	15.77
Downward mobility	30.35%	12.04
<b>Age at first migration, mean (SD)</b>	25.05(9.04)	25.06(9.04)
<b>Education in years, mean (SD)</b>	6.69(3.99)	9.65(3.72)
<b>In cohabiting or marital union</b>	22.02%	21.99%
<b>Documentation status for first trip</b>		
Undocumented	80.62%	82.22%
<b>Period of migration</b>		
1965-1985	59.78%	20.13%
1986-2012	40.22%	79.87%
<b>Region of origin in Mexico</b>		
Historic	75.41%	89.14%
Central	9.65%	4.14%
Border	9.65%	4.04%
Southeast	5.19%	2.69%
<b>State of destination in U.S.</b>		
California	59.37%	22.89%
Texas	12.87%	4.12%
Illinois	11.00%	12.04%
Other state	16.76%	60.95%
<b>Household head</b>	99.35%	17.72%

N= 6,225 male (71%); female (28%)  
Source: Mexican Migration Project,( MMP143, LIFE and SPOUSE files)  
Weighted data

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**Table 3a. Percentage Distribution of Type of Last Occupation in Mexico and First Occupation in the United States, Males**


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Last occupation in Mexico	First occupation in the U.S.								
	Management, professional	Skilled occupation	Administrative	Services occupation	Unskilled occupation	Construction worker	Agricultural worker	Domestic worker	Total
Management, professional	9.7	13.9	2.8	<b>29.9</b>	18.1	4.2	17.4	4.2	100
Skilled occupation	0.4	<b>25.8</b>	0.8	21.2	21.4	6.1	22.5	1.9	100
Administrative	0.8	18.1	6.3	<b>24.4</b>	<b>24.4</b>	4.7	18.1	3.2	100
Services occupation	0.2	13.6	1.6	<b>28.1</b>	25.9	4.3	24.2	2.1	100
Unskilled occupation	0.4	13.6	1.4	23.0	<b>28.9</b>	5.7	24.5	2.5	100
Construction worker	0.9	11.0	0.0	<b>27.1</b>	13.6	18.6	25.4	3.4	100
Agricultural worker	0.1	13.0	0.6	17.9	20.0	4.3	<b>42.2</b>	1.9	100
Domestic worker	0.0	16.0	0.0	19.8	17.9	6.6	<b>34.9</b>	4.7	100
<b>Total</b>	0.5	15.4	1.1	21.2	22.3	5.3	32.0	2.3	100

Most prevalent categories in bold.

Source: Mexican Migration Project (MMP143, LIFE and SPOUSE files).

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Table 3b. Percentage Distribution of Type of Last Occupation in Mexico and First Occupation in the United States, Females

Last occupation in Mexico	First occupation in the U.S.								Total
	Management, professional	Skilled occupation	Administrative	Services occupation	Unskilled occupation	Construction worker	Agricultural worker	Domestic worker	
Management, professional	9.1	<b>18.2</b>	9.1	<b>18.2</b>	<b>18.2</b>	0.0	9.1	<b>18.2</b>	100
Skilled occupation	2.3	41.9	2.3	<b>30.2</b>	4.7	0.0	7.0	11.6	100
Administrative	0.0	20.0	20.0	13.3	20.0	0.0	0.0	<b>26.7</b>	100
Services occupation	1.6	14.3	0.0	<b>47.6</b>	9.5	0.0	4.8	22.2	100
Unskilled occupation	0.0	10.0	0.0	<b>30.0</b>	20.0	0.0	10.0	<b>30.0</b>	100
Construction worker	0.0	<b>100.0</b>	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100
Agricultural worker	0.0	14.8	0.0	14.8	7.4	0.0	<b>51.9</b>	11.1	100
Domestic worker	0.0	20.6	2.9	26.5	2.9	2.9	5.9	<b>38.2</b>	100
<b>Total</b>	1.8	21.3	3.1	30.2	9.8	0.4	11.6	21.8	100

Most prevalent categories in bold.

Source: Mexican Migration Project (MMP143, LIFE and SPOUSE files).



**Table 4. Multinomial Logistic Regression to Estimate Labor Mobility among First Time Migrants to the U.S., Household Heads and Spouses**

	Males		Females	
	Upward	Downward	Upward	Downward
	vs. lateral mobility		vs. lateral mobility	
	RR	RR	RR	RR
<b>Individual migration characteristics</b>				
Age <sup>a</sup>	0.967 ***	1.012 **	1.003	0.985
Education in years <sup>a</sup>	1.031 **	1.071 ***	1.155 ***	1.104 *
In cohabiting or marital union <sup>a</sup>	1.017	0.996	0.304 ***	0.766
Documentation status				
<i>Undocumented</i>	1.111	1.281 *	3.300 ***	1.096
Period of migration				
1965-1985 ( <i>reference</i> )				
1986-2012	1.322 ***	1.186 *	0.359 **	1.120
Region of origin in Mexico				
<i>Historic (reference)</i>				
<i>Central</i>	1.740 ***	0.928	0.777	1.213
<i>Border</i>	0.873	0.941	1.112	0.475
<i>Southeast</i>	2.912 ***	0.542 **	1.244	0.311
State of destination in U.S.				
<i>California</i>	1.575 ***	0.887	0.083 ***	1.306
<i>Texas</i>	1.905 ***	1.522 **	0.108 ***	1.274
<i>Illinois</i>	2.342 ***	0.750	0.111 ***	1.457
<i>Other state (reference)</i>				
Household head	0.843	1.613	0.427 *	2.328 *
<b>Log pseudo-likelihood</b>		-5730		-377
<b>N</b>		5,496		729

<sup>a</sup> In the year of first migration

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Source: Mexican Migration Project (MMP143, LIFE and SPOUSE files )

Weighted data

**Table 5. Multinomial Logistic Regression to Estimate Labor Mobility among First Time Migrants to the U.S., Household Heads Only**

	Upward		Downward	
	vs. lateral mobility			
	RR		RR	
<b>Individual migration characteristics</b>				
Age <sup>a</sup>	0.973	***	1.008	
Female	0.933		1.501	
Education in years <sup>a</sup>	1.009		1.022	
In cohabiting or marital union <sup>a</sup>	0.899		1.033	
Documentation status				
<i>Undocumented</i>	1.078		1.348	*
Period of migration				
1965-1985 ( <i>reference</i> )				
1986-2012	1.274	*	1.226	
Region of origin in Mexico				
<i>Historic (reference)</i>				
<i>Central</i>	1.290		0.765	
<i>Border</i>	0.740		0.985	
<i>Southeast</i>	2.259	***	0.453	***
State of destination in U.S.				
<i>California</i>	1.259		0.780	
<i>Texas</i>	1.800	**	1.281	
<i>Illinois</i>	2.064	***	0.740	
<i>Other state (reference)</i>				
<b>Migrant network characteristics</b>				
Contacted relatives or friends upon arrival	0.788		1.073	
Obtained lodging from friend or relative	2.174	***	1.116	
Obtained financial help from friend or relative	1.086		0.786	
Has relatives and friends with U.S. migration experience	1.002		0.999	
<b>Log pseudo-likelihood</b>				-2609
<b>N</b>				2591

<sup>a</sup> In the year of first migration

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Source: Mexican Migration Project (MMP143 LIFE and MIG files)

Weighted data