

New Research Takes a Detailed Look at 30 Years of Mexican Migration

As her sabbatical year comes to a close, Harvard Assistant Professor of Sociology Dr. Filiz Garip is finalizing a research paper on Mexican immigration, based on her recent study which may alter existing stereotypes on the demography of the “average” Mexican immigrant.



For Garip, a native of Turkey who also serves as a member at the Harvard Pop Center, her latest research focuses on trying to understand patterns of first-time migrants from Mexico to the United States from 1970 to 2000.

“I come from an engineering background and I switched to sociology in graduate school, so I am always keen on using statistical methods in my research. In social science research, certain methods sometimes blind us as they can limit how we approach questions,” says Garip. “One of the things that interested me in the Mexico-United States cases is that when you read existing studies, there is an average migrant who is young and uneducated, who comes to the United States to increase earnings. That is the story we typically hear, but these studies are based on regression methods. I questioned if there are different kinds of migrants, and if there are different types of migrants at different times, so I took a very different approach.... I basically asked the question, ‘Are there different types of migrants under different political or economic context or time periods?’”

As Garip explains, the answer to her

question was affirmative, and she found four categories of Mexican migrants within the studied 30-year time frame.

“When you look at 1970s, you see household heads, mostly men, and they have very little or no education and no assets in Mexico, so basically farmers who came to the U.S. to increase their earnings ... at a point when U.S. wages were at their highest level,” says Garip. “Starting in the early 1980s, you see a shift in the character of migrants. These people are, again, mostly men, not household heads, but the sons of the household heads who come from very wealthy households in the rural communities with significant land or successful businesses” with a goal to “diversify family earnings.”

In 1986, yet another shift was noted after the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), signed by then President Ronald Reagan, which made it unlawful to knowingly hire illegal immigrants yet also granted amnesty to 2 million migrant workers who had worked and resided in the United States prior to 1982.

“IRCA was a big break,” says Garip, “and by the 1990s we see a big proportion of migrants coming to join their family members in the U.S., so greater numbers of women and children. In the 1970s and 1980s, the people who came were mostly temporary migrants, so they would come, make money and then leave. In the later 1980s and 1990s, people were coming and staying. Then, in the later 1990s, we also see a very different type of migrant, and they come from mostly cities. In addition, they are well educated, with a background in manufacturing or service jobs from large metropolitan areas.”

What has also changed significantly is the difficulty and danger in making border crossings today, says Garip, with an average of three to five attempts as well as more reported deaths on failed crossings. “It has not stopped migration,” she says, “it has just made it harder ... but what it has also done is made it harder to leave, so people are staying longer and longer in the U.S.”

As Garip works on final edits to complete her report for publication, she acknowledges

some surprise at the discovery of the four different types of migrants and the fact that the patterns observed stand in sharp contrast to existing beliefs on Mexican immigrants.

“This study defies the stereotype, so

What has also changed significantly is the difficulty and danger in making border crossings today, says Garip, with an average of three to five attempts as well as more reported deaths on failed crossings. “It has not stopped migration,” she says, “it has just made it harder ... but what it has also done is made it harder to leave, so people are staying longer and longer in the U.S.”

that’s the first piece of information that could affect public thinking,” says Garip. “Second of all, it shows us if we want to change migration flow, we need to pay attention to this diversity. We should not assume there is one type of migrant who should be stopped, and we need to devise more customized policies to affect migration.”