

Mexico-U.S. Migration in Time: From Economic to Social Mechanisms¹

Filiz Garip
Asad L. Asad
Harvard University

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Question

Mexican-born population in the U.S. has increased continuously over the past decades despite stronger efforts to control flows.

Research attributes this pattern to a process of 'cumulative causation' – that is, to network effects on migration.

But studies are ambivalent about the social mechanisms that produce these effects.

Methods

First – establish the presence of network effects

Analyze survey data from 90,000 individuals

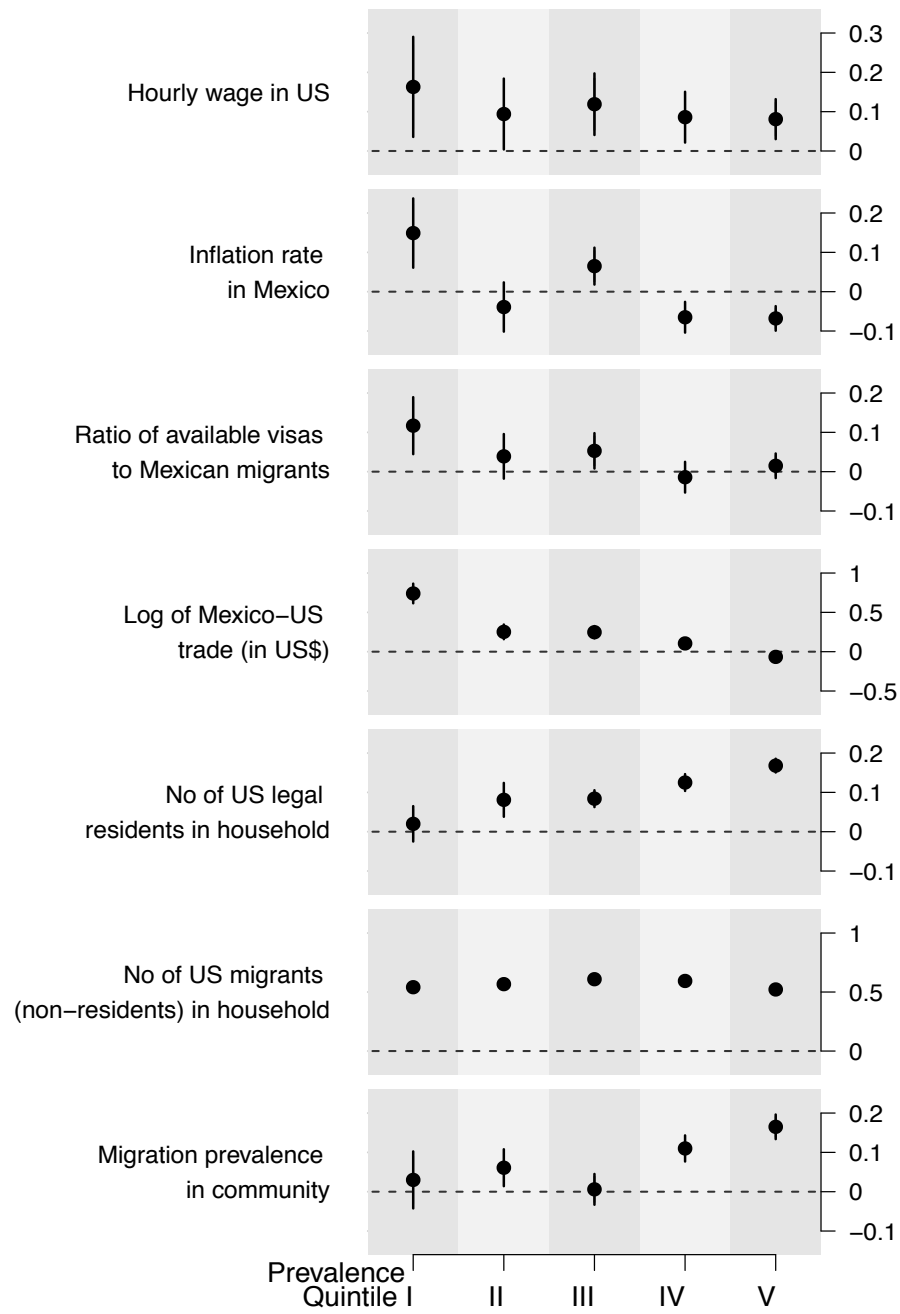
Then – identify the mechanisms underlying network effects

Analyze qualitative data from 120 in-depth interviews

Mechanisms for Network Effects

An exhaustive typology by DiMaggio and Garip (2012, ARS)

1. *Social facilitation*: Network peers provide information or help that reduces the costs or increases the benefits of migration.
2. *Normative influence*: Network peers offer social rewards or impose sanctions to encourage or discourage migration.
3. *Network externalities*: Network peers generate a common pool of resources that increase the net value of migration.

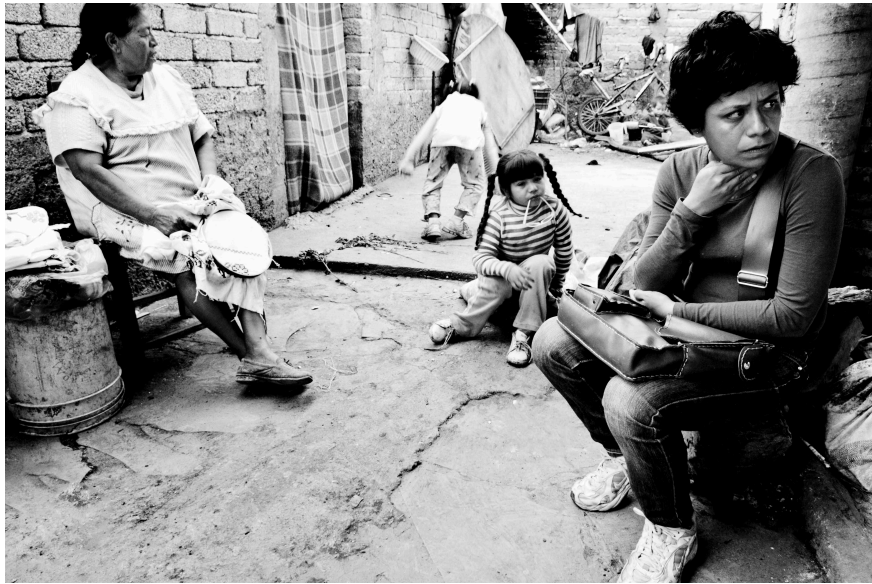


Migration as a chain process

“People go where their family is, where their friends are, where their relatives are, and where any acquaintance is. People get stuck at that, like, from this town in Jalisco, everybody goes to Oregon. People from [another town] go to Chicago because three or four people [from that town] went there, so, well, those people helped another five, and those five bring ten.” (Former migrant, male, 50)



Social facilitation



“An opportunity came up so that my siblings could help him – because nobody from his family was there – only my family. His cousins said they’d go with him, but they didn’t, so we called my sisters, and they said yes, he could go with them. That’s why he left.” (A migrant’s wife, 40)

“My mother lived with the same things [as us]... Like, at the beginning, we only had a little room and a tiny kitchen. And as soon as my brother left [for the U.S.], they built her a house. And because of that, I say, it’s because they [migrants like my husband] do observe, more than anything, they say, ‘You can see the results.’” (A migrant’s wife, 35)

Normative influence

“We talked about our situation here [in community] and told him: ‘If you want to go, you decide. You’re still young and so you have to think about it. We support you if you want to go to [the United States].’ And yes, everyone agreed – nobody said no.” (A migrant’s father, 53)



“My children don’t like this place [the tortilla bakery I own]...They don’t want to raise pigs, goats, cows, farm, or sell...They want to go to a better place, to the North. But they are worthless there. It’s only pride, the pride that...They got raised like that, [thinking] that they are going to make it there, that ‘I’m going to make it to the North.’” (Migrants’ father, 55)

Normative influence

Interviewer: Sir, do you have any friends from your village who migrated before you?

Respondent: Oh, yeah, well, many. I repeat to you, I saw a friend that came back two or three years after leaving, and I tell you that appearances always have you mistaken.

I: And how did your friends do?

R: No, well, they all did ok, but normally they came and told stories that weren't real. Really! "No, no, 'Over there I have,' 'Over there I am,' and they were all lies... When I left, I went with friends who had [spent] years over there and noticed that they hardly had anything to eat. They've been there for years, and the ones here thought they were millionaires over there, but it was all a lie. (Former migrant, male, 67)

Network externalities

“They crossed [the border] and the coyote [smuggler] arrives and says: ‘You are going to pay me for all of them [two siblings]’ and we didn’t have money.... What do you do? You can get into a problem; they can even kill you if you don’t pay. Then one of my brothers talked to the coyote and said: ‘I can pay you next week for one and the other week for the other,’ and the coyote said ‘If you don’t do the way you say, you will pay the consequences’... They [coyotes] are people that you get on the border, you don’t know who they are. (Return migrant, female, 47)”



Summary

There are network effects in Mexico-U.S. migration.

These effects become stronger as migration becomes more widespread in a community.

The effects work through three mechanisms: social facilitation, normative influence, and network externalities.

The mechanisms often work in combination.

Significance

By focusing on the social mechanisms underlying the network effects on migration, we can...

...anticipate whether and how these effects may decline in size or be reversed;

...design more effective policy interventions.

Migration from Mexico to the United States

Major milestones

