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US Immigration from Latin America in Historical Perspective

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The share of US residents who were born in Latin America and the Caribbean plateaued in the last decade or so at about 6 percent of the total US population, after a half century of rapid growth. Given how politically fraught immigration has become in the United States, this fact has received surprisingly little attention. Although smaller immigrant populations from Central and South America continue to expand, the number of US residents born in Mexico—by far the most common origin country among current US immigrants—showed little net change between 2007 and 2019. Now that the great post-1960 Latin American immigration wave has reached a mature state, we take the opportunity to reflect on its evolving characteristics, primary causes, and possible future paths.

In terms of magnitude and duration, the Latin American wave easily earns a place among the major US immigration episodes, including nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century inflows from Ireland, Germany, and Eastern and Southern Europe. As in those cases, Latin American migrants were escaping a dearth of options at home, settling initially in immigrant enclaves, and later slowly dispersing across the country (Abramitsky and Boustan 2017). Because immigration from

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the Latin American region is non-European in origin, involves populations with much less schooling than the US native-born, and includes many members who first entered the United States without authorization, there has been concern over whether large-scale inflows from the region harm US workers and deepen US cultural and political divisions (for example, Huntington and Dunn 2004). Such controversies arose with prior immigrant waves as well; the Irish were singled out for not being Protestant, the Germans for not speaking English, and Eastern and Southern Europeans for not being literate and for not being from traditional origin countries in Western and Northern Europe (Higham 2002). Calls for more immigration restrictions at that time, which culminated in the imposition of tight quotas in the 1920s,[1] have their echo in modern calls for stricter controls, which have led to more border enforcement to prevent undocumented entry (Orrenius and Zavodny 2010; Bazzi et al. 2021). Each successive influx has brought an immigrant group to the United States that at the time seemed more culturally or socially distant than the last, only for the integration of each group into American society to proceed over the ensuing decades. To date, immigration from Latin America is broadly consistent with this pattern.

Turning to migration causes, we consider how demographic shifts, economic crises, and natural disasters contributed to cross-border labor flows. We argue that, up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the long-run forces behind Latin American migrant inflows appear to have weakened, albeit unevenly, across sending countries. The acceleration of inflows in the 1980s, primarily from Mexico, was due to rapidly increasing numbers of young people entering the labor force, repeated financial crises, and a US economy that was enjoying steady growth (Hanson, Liu, and McIntosh 2017). Since then, demographic pressures for migration have slackened across Latin America (Hanson and McIntosh 2016), and, at least prior to the pandemic, economic volatility has dampened. At the same time, the US government dramatically expanded policing of US borders (Roberts, Alden, and Whitley 2013), and US economic growth slowed. Although Central America's Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—has experienced considerable instability and emigration (Clemens 2021), this region accounts for just 6 percent of Latin America's population and seems unlikely to generate flows commensurate with earlier surges from Mexico, which has four times the population of the Northern Triangle and shares a land border with the United States. Much of the region appears less subject to the volatile combustibility of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, when the Latin American migration wave built its momentum. Meanwhile, the challenges the United States faces regarding immigration from the region have shifted from border control to dealing with growing numbers of asylum seekers.

[1] These immigration restrictions were built on a literacy test for immigrants mandated by the Immigration Act of 1917. They included strict entry limits in the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, the permanent codification of visa allocations across origin countries based on pre-1890 immigration patterns in the Immigration Act of 1924, and legislation allowing for the deportation of immigrants without record of lawful entry in 1929 (Goldin 1994). The Western hemisphere was exempt from those quotas, reflecting the low level of public concern regarding immigration from the region early in the twentieth century.

Throughout the paper, we review some of the consequences for the United States of immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean. Looking ahead, we suspect that a long-run slowing of immigration from Latin America would create the need for adjustments in parts of the US economy, especially in labor-intensive industries in the Sunbelt and Western states. During the five-decade increase in immigration from Latin America, the United States saw a steadily expanding number of less-educated workers. From today's vantage point, it seems unlikely that coming decades will bring the same.

US Immigration from Latin America in Historical Perspective

Early US immigration flows from Latin America and the Caribbean, like their modern counterparts, were motivated by trouble at home and opportunity abroad.[2] Chileans headed to California during the Gold Rush of the 1850s; Cubans found work in Florida during the Prohibition era of the 1920s; and over one million Mexicans sought refuge in the United States during their country's revolution (1910–1920) and the ensuing decade of instability (Allende 1999; Durand, Massey, and Zenteno 2001). Seasonal migration flows from the region also have a long history. In the early twentieth century, farmers and ranchers in Texas sent contractors into Mexico to recruit agricultural workers. This practice, and the onset of World War II, brought about the US government-administered Bracero Program (1942–1964), which at its peak in the late 1950s brought 450,000 temporary farm laborers to the United States annually (Calavita 2010). Yet, permanent large-scale Latin American immigration to the United States did not begin until after 1960.

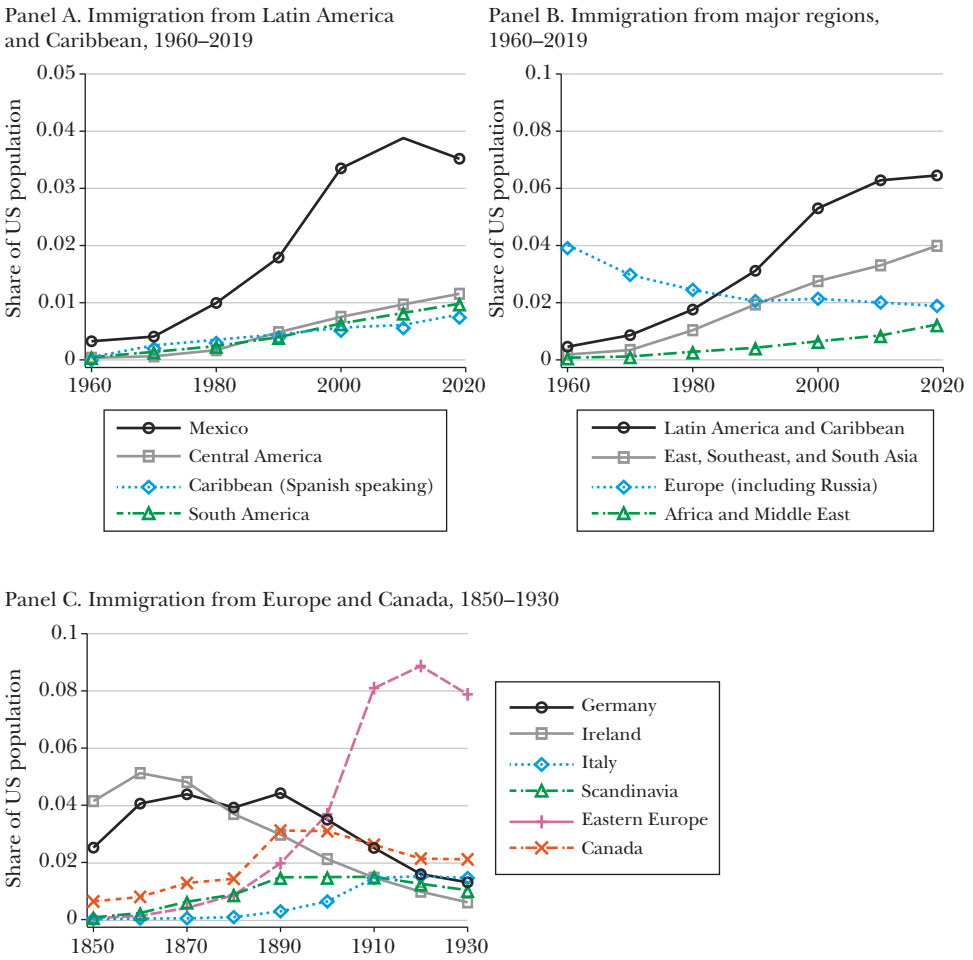
Commonalities among Major Immigration Waves

Figure 1 compares immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States from 1960 to 2019 among countries in the region (panel A), relative to other regions of origin in the same period (panel B), and relative to earlier major immigration waves (panel C). In 1960, immigrants born in Latin America were just 0.5 percent of the US population. At the time, Europe was still the largest origin region for US immigrants. Migrants from Latin America increased over time, reaching 1.8 percent of the US population in 1980, 5.3 percent in 2000, and 6.5 percent in 2019. Latin America became the top origin region of the US foreign-born population in 1990, a position it retains even though the population of immigrants from Asia grew at a faster rate during the 2010s. In 2019, immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean were 44 percent of foreign-born residents in the United States.[3]

[2] Our discussion of immigration focuses on countries of Hispanic and Latino heritage. This includes Mexico, all of Central America (except Belize), all of South America (except French Guiana, Guyana, and Suriname), and Cuba and the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean.

[3] Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, immigration from Asia has dropped sharply, whereas immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean has grown.

Figure 1
Foreign-Born Shares of the US Population



Source: Based on IPUMS data on the 1850, 1870, 1890, 1910, 1930, 1960, 1980, and 2000 US Census of Population and the 2019 1 percent sample of the American Community Survey.
Notes: In each panel and for each year, the numerator is the population of US residents from a given birth country or region and the denominator is the total US population.

Mexico is the largest source country of Latin American migrants. Its share of the US population peaked at 3.9 percent in 2010, before falling to 3.5 percent in 2019. Immigrant shares from Central America (at 1.2 percent of the US population in 2019), South America (at 1.0 percent), and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (at 0.8 percent) are roughly similar in magnitude, despite vast differences in the respective sizes of these regions. In 2019, Cuba and the Dominican Republic together had 22 million residents, compared to 49 million in the six Central American countries,

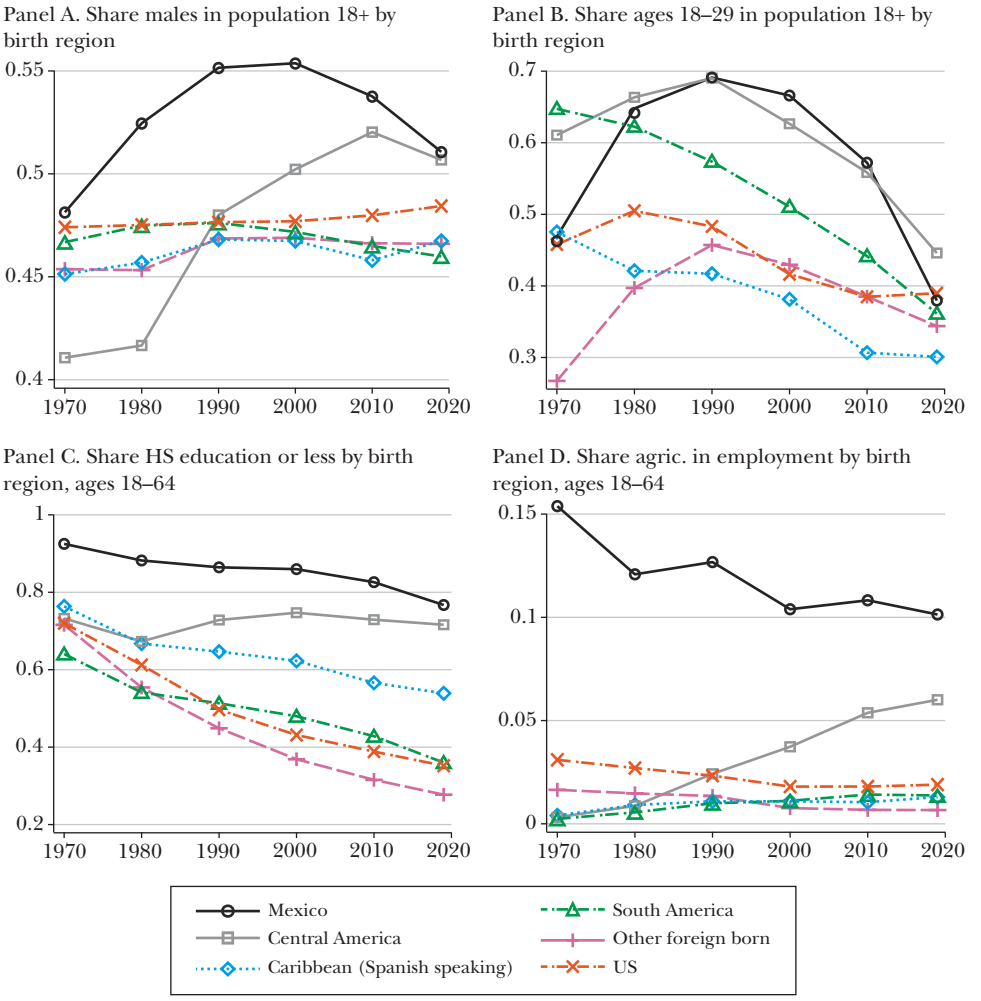
and 429 million in the nine South American countries. The implied differences in emigration rates to the United States are enormous. In 2019, origin-country immigrant populations in the United States were equivalent to 12.2 percent of Cuba's domestic population, 9.0 percent of Mexico's population, and 7.0 percent of Honduras's population, compared to just 1.7 percent of Colombia's population—which is the largest origin country for US immigrants from South America.

Looking back in US history, modern Latin American immigration is comparable in magnitude to the larger waves of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as seen in Figure 1C. Because the US Census did not enumerate the birth country of respondents until 1850, the data do not fully reflect immigration from Ireland, which began in the 1820s and accelerated after the onset of the Irish Potato Famine in 1845, and from Germany, which, while most expansive after 1850, had begun earlier. Immigration from Mexico is similar in scale to inflows from these two countries, while being smaller than that from Eastern Europe in the early 1900s and larger than the respective Canadian, Scandinavian, and Italian inflows of the late 1800s. In the Irish, German, and Mexican cases, the immigrant population peaked at 4 to 5 percent of the US population and required four decades to reach this apex. Like immigrants from Mexico, who first concentrated close to the US-Mexico border, the Irish settled in Boston—the closest US port to their embarkation point of Liverpool, England—and in New York, the largest port on the US East Coast at the time (Glaeser 2005). Irish inflows were also met with political opposition, like the modern inflows from Mexico. The Know Nothing Party (1854–1856), whose platform was anti-Catholic and anti-Irish, had its greatest electoral success in Massachusetts (Alsan, Eriksson, and Niemesh 2020). In the modern era, opposition to immigration reemerged in the 1980s, contributing to the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and intensified further in the 1990s, finding notable expression in the presidential campaign of Pat Buchanan in 1992 and California's failed Proposition 187 in 1994, which sought to block undocumented immigrants from the use of all non-emergency state-level programs (Hanson 2005).

Of Sojourners and Settlers

Cuba and Mexico dominated post-1960 immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean. By 1980, the two countries accounted for nearly three-quarters of Latin American immigrants in the United States. The nature of their migrations, however, differed substantially. After Cuba's 1959 revolution, the number of Cuban immigrants in the United States increased from 78,000 in 1960 to 455,000 in 1970. Those with higher incomes, who were more at risk of being jailed or having property confiscated, were more likely to flee. As seen in Figure 2, in 1970, the US immigrant population from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, which was overwhelmingly Cuban in origin, was modestly more female than male (panel A) and had an age distribution (panel B) and education levels (panel C) similar to the US native-born. In later years, the Cuban government occasionally permitted large-scale emigration, such as the Mariel Boatlift of 1980 (Card 1990). These later waves were representative of the broad swath of Cuban society, which has much less schooling than the US native-born, and contributed to the slower decline in the less educated among

Figure 2
Composition of Immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean



Source: Based on IPUMS data on the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 US Census of Population and the 2010 and 2019 1 percent samples of the American Community Survey.
Notes: In panels (A) and (B), the population is adults (those ages 18 and up) by country or region of birth; in panels (C) and (D), the population is individuals of working age (ages 18 to 64) by country or region of birth.

immigrants from the Caribbean relative to other Latin American origin groups (panel C). In the Caribbean-origin group, Cuban migrants were later joined by migrants from the Dominican Republic, who also settled in Florida but in much larger numbers in New York City.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the characteristics of immigrants from Mexico differed from the US native-born much more than did those of immigrants from Cuba. Because of the long history of Mexican laborers travelling north to work on

US farms, much initial immigration from the country was tied to agriculture. In Figure 2, early Mexican immigrants were more likely to be male (panel A), young (panel B), and lacking a secondary education (panel C) when compared either to other Latin American immigrants or later immigrants from Mexico. In 1970, 15.4 percent of Mexican immigrants worked in agriculture (panel D), compared to 3.1 percent of US native-born workers and less than 0.5 percent of workers from elsewhere in Latin America. At that time, many Mexican workers moved back and forth across the border, following the seasonal cycle of farm jobs, while their families remained at home. This practice was viable in part because, until the 1990s, the US-Mexico border was lightly enforced (Durand, Massey, and Zenteno 2001). Migrants without visas could cross the border with little consequence and with success likely within several attempts. Over time, these sojourners became settlers (Marcelli and Cornelius 2001). Mexican immigrants spread beyond agriculture and included more women. The expansion of US border enforcement—first in the early 1990s after the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and then in the 2000s after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—made circular migration riskier and costlier (Gathmann 2008). In response, more Mexican immigrants chose to reside in the United States on a permanent basis (Angelucci 2012).

Immigration from Central and South America expanded after 1980 during periods of economic and political volatility in the region. The Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras dominated flows from Central America and accounted for 85 percent of the US population from that subregion in 2019. Other countries in Central America include relatively prosperous Costa Rica and Panama, which send few migrants to the United States, and relatively poor Nicaragua, most of whose sizable emigrant population resides in neighboring Costa Rica. Whereas from the 1970s to the 2000s migrants from Mexico accounted for the vast majority of those apprehended trying to cross the US-Mexico border without authorization, by the mid-2010s apprehensions of migrants from Northern Triangle countries had become roughly equal to those from Mexico (US Department of Homeland Security 2022).

Turning to South America, the largest origin countries for US immigrants are (in descending order of their 2019 immigrant populations) Colombia, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador, which together accounted for 71 percent of immigrants from the subregion in 2019. Much emigration from South America has not been northward to the United States so much as within the continent or to former colonial powers, such as Spain, which at times has allowed the entry of Latin Americans without a visa. For example, most Ecuadorians who left during an economic crisis in the late 1990s went to Spain, while Venezuelans who exited as their economy collapsed in the mid-2010s primarily went to Colombia (Bertoli 2010; Wolfe 2021).

The Pandemic Interregnum

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the immigration trends of the preceding decade partially reversed. Notably, attempted unauthorized immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean soared. US Border Patrol encounters with unauthorized migrants at the US-Mexico border rose from 1 million in Fiscal

Year 2019 to 2.4 million in Fiscal Year 2022, with the large majority of these migrants coming from Latin America and the Caribbean.[4] The migration surge came on the heels of widespread COVID-19 restrictions and severe economic downturns in Latin America. Rising attempts at undocumented immigration after origin-country crises are a familiar pattern (Hanson and Spilimbergo 1999).

In about half of migrant encounters—primarily involving adults from Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries—the US Border Patrol summarily expelled those apprehended under Title 42 of the US Code, which allows the government to prohibit migrant entry during a public health emergency in order to avoid the spread of disease. From April 2020 to March 2022, migrants from Mexico accounted for 60 percent of Title 42 expulsions, while migrants from the Northern Triangle accounted for another 34 percent of expulsions (as reported by Gramlich 2022). Many expelled migrants reattempted entry and were caught again, inflating the number of encounters (Bazzi et al. 2021). Although counts of migrant encounters along the border are available, we do not yet know how the US stock or flow of undocumented immigrants changed during the pandemic.

Most of the remaining pandemic-era migrant encounters at the US-Mexico border have involved people seeking asylum. The US immigration system has historically allowed people to present themselves to authorities at a US border, request US admission as an asylum seeker, and remain in the United States until their asylum claim is adjudicated.[5] Unauthorized immigrants who are apprehended in the United States can also seek asylum as a defense against deportation. Given the rise in asylum-seekers even before the pandemic, the United States had stopped allowing most of these individuals to enter and instead required them to wait in Mexico. The backlog of asylum claims has grown rapidly, and it typically takes years for an applicant to go through the asylum claim process. It is unclear how the US government will resolve the backlog or whether it will continue to allow applicants to remain in the United States while they await adjudication of their cases.

Causes of Immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean

Immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean started gradually in the 1960s, grew at an increasing rate from 1970 to 2000, and then rose at a decreasing rate from 2006 to 2019, as shown earlier in Figure 1. This pattern reflects the timing of the shocks that contributed to labor outflows from the region, the internal forces that sustained migration once it had initiated, and the increasing restrictiveness of US immigration policy.

[4]The figures are reported at the US Customs and Border Protection website at https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters.

[5] The rules are discussed at the US Citizenship and Immigration Services website at https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-and-asylum/asylum.

The Decision to Migrate

In modelling migration, economists posit that individuals weigh the benefits and costs of moving. Benefits of migration include the possibility of earning higher wages abroad, escaping violence or political repression at home, and achieving a better future for one's children. Clemens, Montenegro, and Pritchett (2019) compare the average earnings of young foreign-born men with a secondary education who moved to the United States to those who stayed in their birth country. Among those born in Latin America, the ratio of US to origin-country earnings in 2000 (adjusted for purchasing power parity) ranged from lows of 2.1 for the Dominican Republic and 2.6 for Mexico to highs of 3.8 for Brazil and 4.2 for Peru. (Values for Cuba and the Northern Triangle countries of Central America were not available.) Purely in terms of real earnings, the gains from migration appear substantial.

On occasion, the benefits from migrating rise suddenly due to a deterioration in origin-country conditions brought on by economic crises, natural disasters, or political upheaval. Beyond the Cuban Revolution of 1959, currency collapses in Mexico in 1982 and 1994 and several devastating hurricanes elsewhere in Latin America triggered substantial outflows (Mahajan and Yang 2020; Monras 2020). In the Mexican case, apprehensions of those crossing the US-Mexico border illegally—a proxy for undocumented immigration—showed large and rapid responses to exchange-rate-induced changes in US-Mexico relative wages during the 1980s and 1990s (Hanson and Spilimbergo 1999).[6] Geographic proximity to the United States meant that adverse shocks translated quickly into cross-border labor flows. Meanwhile, US GDP grew steadily (at least relative to Mexico's GDP) during the Great Moderation of 1982 to 2007, creating a continuing lure to prospective migrants experiencing volatility in Latin America. Net migration from Mexico came to an abrupt halt with the onset of the Great Recession in the United States in 2007. Economic contractions in much of Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic combined with sharply higher wages in the US likely increased pressures to emigrate. In Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, greater political repression may have compounded these pressures.

Other important causes of migration are slower moving. Over time, demographic shifts may alter relative labor supplies, and therefore relative wages, across countries. In the 1970s and 1980s, Latin America and the Caribbean began to see relatively large cohorts of young adults entering the labor market, which in theory should have put downward pressure on domestic wages (Hanson and McIntosh 2012). In Mexico, the total fertility rate reached a stunning seven births per woman in the mid-1960s, which meant record growth in labor supply two decades later (Hanson and McIntosh 2009). When repeated economic crises hit Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s, these demographic-induced downward pressures on wages helped push migrants abroad. Drug-related violence is an additional slow-moving cause of migrant outflows (Orozco-Aleman and Gonzalez-Lozano 2018; Clemens 2021).

[6]The US wage expressed in terms of the Mexican peso also affected border apprehensions, suggesting that migrants planned to keep links with origin communities, whether through remittances to family members or return migration.

Barriers to Migration

The costs to migration include the financial expense of moving to the United States and the psychic burden of leaving home. Migrant networks in the destination country can help lower perceived migration costs and boost future outflows. As the stock of prior migrants from an origin country grows, new migrants may have an easier time of landing a job, finding housing, and locating places to socialize. Empirically, networks elevate the probability of migration by improving labor market outcomes for new arrivals (Munshi 2003; Orrenius and Zavodny 2005). These networks—which may be based on kinship, friendship, or simply sharing a common origin community (Caballero, Cadena, and Kovak 2018)—can make migration self-reinforcing. Because current migration lowers future migration costs, migration may continue to rise even after initial push factors have waned (Carrington, Detragiache, and Vishwanath 1996).

The costs of migrating to the United States depend on the mode of entry. Most immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean appear to have entered the United States either without authorization or with visas sponsored by family members already in the country (Jasso et al. 2008). Unauthorized inflows grew following the end of the Bracero Program and passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which imposed a cap on legal immigration from the Western hemisphere for the first time and allocated most permanent resident visas (green cards) to family members of US citizens and legal permanent residents (Massey and Pren 2012).

Most Latin American immigrants residing in the United States without authorization entered the country by crossing the US-Mexico border illegally or by obtaining a temporary visa and staying beyond its expiration (Warren 2019). Of the estimated 8.1 million undocumented immigrants from Latin America and Caribbean in the United States in 2017, 84 percent were from Mexico and Central America, while 16 percent were from South America and the Caribbean (Passel and Cohn 2019). In 2019, the respective shares of these two subregions in the overall Latin American immigrant population were 73 percent and 27 percent, indicating that Mexico and Central America are overrepresented among the region's undocumented immigrants.

By the 1990s, networks of Mexican immigrants in the United States were firmly in place. In the previous decade, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 had started a process that ultimately granted legal permanent residence to over two million undocumented immigrants from Mexico, allowing those migrants to sponsor relatives abroad for green cards—yet undocumented immigration continued (Orrenius and Zavodny 2003). Because of backlogs for visas, which are subject to annual quotas for all family members who are not immediate relatives of US citizens, many Mexican immigrants who had applied for a green card still entered the United States without authorization while they awaited adjudication of their application (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2003).

The intensification of US border enforcement starting in the 1990s has made illegal entry much more difficult. From the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, the United States quintupled the number of Border Patrol agents stationed at the US-Mexico

border, built 700 miles of physical barriers along the border, expanded legal sanctions for those caught crossing illegally, and increased the deportation of undocumented immigrants residing in the US interior (Roberts, Alden, and Whitley 2013). These changes, plus the Great Recession of 2007–2009 and the sluggish US recovery that followed, combined to reduce inflows of undocumented immigrants (Gathmann 2008; Allen, de Castro Dobbin, and Morten 2018; Lessem 2018; Bazzi et al. 2021). Between 2007 and 2019, Mexico's net migration rate to the United States turned negative, reflecting both reduced in-migration and increased voluntary and involuntary return migration (Gonzalez-Barrera 2017).

The intensification of immigration enforcement has made the pandemic-era increase in apprehensions at the US-Mexico border difficult to interpret. On the one hand, rising border apprehensions imply more people are attempting to enter illegally; on the other hand, more apprehensions may mean that, relative to the past, repeat apprehensions of migrants have increased.[7] A further source of uncertainty about recent immigration inflows is the unresolved disposition of the many Latin Americans who have applied for asylum and who remain in the United States while awaiting an immigration hearing. It will thus be some time before we know whether and by how much immigration from Latin America increased during the special period of immigration procedures instituted under the pandemic.

Selection into Immigration

From 1970 to 2019, the difference in the share of the working-age population with a high-school education or less between Mexican immigrants and the US native-born doubled from 21 percentage points (93 versus 72 percent) to 42 percentage points (77 versus 35 percent). This overall pattern of large and rising gaps in average schooling between the US native-born and immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean is apparent in Figure 2.

One reason for this pattern is that post-secondary educational attainment is much higher in the United States than in most of Latin America.[8] It also bears noting that Mexican immigrants in the United States are drawn disproportionately from the middle of Mexico's educational distribution—they are not strongly negatively or positively selected in terms of schooling (Chiquiar and Hanson 2005).

Although Mexico has higher educational attainment than Central America or much of the Caribbean and South America, Mexico sends immigrants to the United

[7] When the US Border Patrol began expelling unauthorized migrants under Title 42 of the US Code in 2020, it stopped pursuing legal penalties against those migrants, removing an important deterrent. The share of apprehensions involving repeat crossers rose from 7 percent in the fiscal year before the pandemic to 24 percent during the pandemic (Gramlich 2022). This is suggests when the United States began imposing such penalties in 2007, it resulted in decreased recidivism in apprehensions (Bazzi et al. 2021).

[8] Between 1970 and 2010, the fraction of the population ages 15 to 64 with some post-secondary education increased from 2.2 percent to 17.8 percent in Mexico and from 22.2 percent to 55.6 percent in the United States (based on the Barro-Lee Educational Attainment Dataset available at http://www.barrolee.com/).

States who are less educated than arrivals from the other subregions.[9] This pattern arises because immigrants from everywhere else in Latin America are positively selected in terms of schooling—that is, those with more education are more likely to migrate abroad (Grogger and Hanson 2011). For these countries, migration costs to the United States are also relatively high. For example, Central Americans migrating to the United States without authorization must traverse Mexico, which involves physical risks and large smuggling fees; those from the Caribbean must cross by sea or obtain an entry visa of some kind; and those from more distant South America face greater logistical challenges still. Empirically, the higher the migration costs, the lower is the fraction of less-educated and lower-income individuals among those who emigrate (Orrenius and Zavodny 2005; McKenzie and Rapoport 2007). We thus tend to see greater positive selection of Latin American immigrants in terms of education the farther a country is from the US border.

Determinants of Migration Rates

To study the factors behind recent immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States more formally, we use data on the decadal change in the number of foreign-born from each country in the region living in the United States relative to the origin country's population at the start of each decade. We include the 18 countries from the region that had reasonably large samples in the decennial Census (1960 to 2000) and the American Community Survey (2010 and 2019); we include all ages, because a growing share of migrants from the region are children or are middle aged and beyond.

Motivated by our discussion above, we focus our regression analysis on variables that capture migrant networks and key demographic, economic, and other push factors in the region. We measure migrant networks with an indicator variable equal to one if, at the start of the decade, the number of migrants living in the United States as a share of the origin country's population is in the top half of the Latin American sample. We capture demographic pressures using the share of the origin country's population that is between ages 5 and 14 at the start of the decade, which indicates the relative size of the population that will come of working age by the end of the decade. We characterize economic push factors using the growth rate of real GDP per capita and the number of balance-of-payments crises during the decade. We distinguish between decades when GDP grew and those when it contracted, as the effects on migration may be asymmetric. We measure balance-of-payments crises using "sudden stops" in inflows of international capital or large declines in a country's current account, as documented by Cavallo (2006). We include the total number of major natural disasters, based on data from the International Emergency Event Database on the number of hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, and droughts during the decade, and defining a natural disaster as "major" if it affected

[9] In 2010, and among the population ages 15 to 64, the 17.8 percent of Mexicans with some post-secondary education compared to 9.8 percent in Brazil, 12.2 percent in the Dominican Republic and 5.3 percent in El Salvador (again, based on the Barro-Lee Educational Attainment Dataset at http://www.barrolee.com/).

at least 10 percent of the population or killed at least 0.01 percent of the population. We also include the number of major armed conflicts during the decade using data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, where an armed conflict is defined as "major" if it resulted in more than 1,000 deaths since it began (and where we include both conflicts that involve the state and that involve non-state actors only).

Each of the first four columns in Table 1 presents the results of a separate regression. The dependent variable in each regression is the change in the number of foreign-born living in the United States over a decade as a share of the population in an origin country at that start of that decade. Each of the regressions also includes origin country and decade fixed effects to control, first, for time-invariant migration push factors that are specific to an origin country and, second, for pull factors that are common across all countries during a given decade. The former encompasses factors such as distance from, linguistic similarity to, and shared colonial history with the United States, while the latter absorbs the stage of the US business cycle and the intensity of US immigration restrictions.

The specifications in Table 1, columns 2 through 4, each include an interaction of the variable noted at the top of the column with a variable measuring distance (population-weighted) between the origin country and the United States. The intuition here is that distance is a proxy for bilateral migration costs, and the interaction term seeks to capture the relationship between an individual regressor and these costs.

Overall, the evidence in Table 1 is consistent with economic crises leading to migrant outflows. Countries have larger outflows to the United States during decades of economic weakness, especially as captured by the number of balance-of-payments crises. Having a balance-of-payments crisis during the decade is associated with a 0.8 to 1 percentage point increase in the decadal migration rate, roughly equivalent to the weighted sample mean of 0.8 and thus suggesting that a balance-of-payments crisis doubles outflows. The rate of GDP growth does not have a significant effect on migration from the region, whereas a higher rate of GDP contraction spurs additional migration. Although the results suggest that crises, not economic growth, lead to more migration from the region, it is important to consider that many residents are very poor and simply do not have the resources to migrate. Economic growth that leads to higher income and savings could enable more people from Latin America to undertake the costly move to the United States (Clemens 2022).

Migrant networks and origin demographics matter, and seem to matter considerably more when distance from the United States is taken into account. Being farther away dampens the positive impact of migrant networks or a youth bulge on migration, as indicated by the negative estimated coefficient on the interaction term in columns 2 and 3. Meanwhile, the results suggest that a country with its population centered 2500 kilometers from the United States—the distance between the population-weighted centers of Mexico and the United States—would see an additional 1.7 percent of its population migrate to the United States over a decade if its migrant network is in the top half of the sample (column 2).[10] A one-standard

[10] The estimate is based on evaluating the estimated coefficient on the interaction term in column 2 at 2.5 and adding the estimated coefficient on the migrant network variable.

Table 1
Determinants of US immigration rates, Latin American countries, 1960s to 2010s

		Log distance from US ×			
	(1)	*Network* (2)	*Pop. age 5–14* (3)	*Conflict* (4)	*Sample mean* (5)
Number of balance-of-payments crises during decade	1.013	1.038	0.902	0.823	0.403
	(0.496)	(0.496)	(0.451)	(0.390)	(0.638)
Rate of real GDP per capita growth over decade	–0.002	–0.002	–0.001	–0.001	31.433
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(29.053)
Rate of real GDP per capita contraction over decade (absolute value)	0.017	0.017	0.018	0.017	2.619
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(12.767)
Migrant network in top half of LACs at start of decade	0.652	3.033	0.846	0.815	0.389
	(0.452)	(1.507)	(0.441)	(0.405)	(0.490)
Share of population ages 5–14 at start of decade	0.007	–0.011	0.207	0.014	22.647
	(0.081)	(0.077)	(0.082)	(0.056)	(3.850)
Number of major natural disasters during decade	0.406	0.395	0.382	0.220	0.369
	(0.234)	(0.228)	(0.221)	(0.208)	(0.555)
Number of years with major armed conflicts during decade	–0.054	–0.070	–0.034	–0.485	1.533
	(0.076)	(0.074)	(0.061)	(0.217)	(2.826)
Interacted variable	—	–0.515	–0.034	0.092	5.807
		(0.277)	(0.008)	(0.036)	(2.492)
R^2	0.734	0.741	0.761	0.770	
Number of observations	107	107	107	107	107

Source: See the online Appendix for data sources.
Notes: Columns 1–4 report separate regressions; column 5 reports the weighted sample mean (and standard deviation) of the indicated regressor. The dependent variable is the change in the number of foreign-born living in the United States over the decade as a share of the population in the origin at that start of decade (weighted sample mean is 0.838). The sample covers 18 Latin American countries from 1960 to 2010. All specifications include country and decade fixed effects. Observations are weighted by the origin population at the start of the decade. Standard errors in parentheses in columns 1–4 are clustered on the origin country.

deviation increase in the origin population share ages 5–14 is associated with a 0.04 percentage point increase in the decadal migration rate, about one-twentieth of the mean rate, when evaluated at the average distance for the sample (column 3).[11]

Major natural disasters are an additional push factor. Having such an event is associated with a roughly 50 percent increase in the decadal migration rate (column 1). Civil conflict also appears to affect migration. Evaluated at mean distance to the United States, experiencing one year of major armed conflict is associated with a 0.05 percentage point increase in the decadal migration rate, less than one-tenth of the sample mean (column 4).[12] Being farther away from the United States implies a larger impact of armed conflict on migration flows (that is, the interaction term is positive). This surprising result may reflect heterogenous effects of violence on migration flows across origin countries. The literature reaches mixed

[11] The estimate is based on adding the estimated coefficients on the interaction term in column 3 (evaluated at mean distance and the standard deviation for the youth population share) and on the youth population share (evaluated at the standard deviation for the youth population share).
[12] The estimate is based on evaluating the estimated coefficient on the interaction term in column 4 at 5.807 (mean distance) and adding the coefficient on the armed conflicts variable, which results in a positive estimate despite the negative estimated coefficient on the main effect for the conflict variable.

findings about whether higher levels of violence cause migration (for example, Orozco-Aleman and Gonzalez-Lozano 2018). Most Latin American migration in response to natural disasters and conflict is internal, which is less costly.

Patterns of Integration

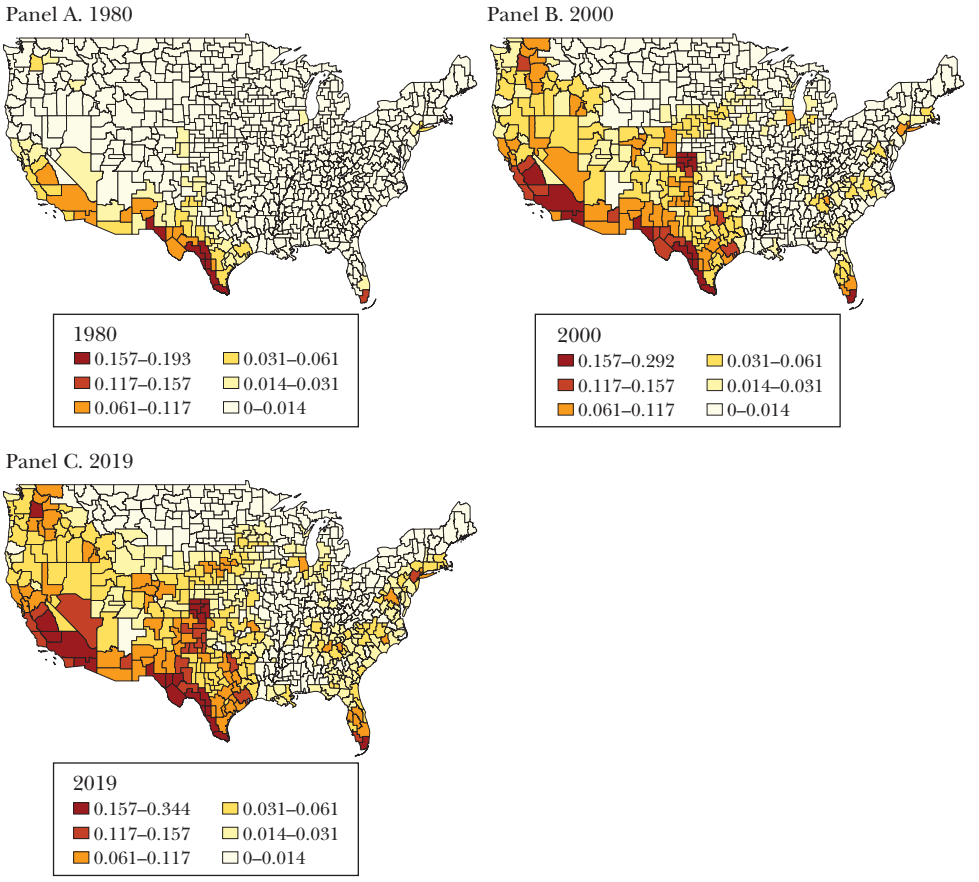
Latin American immigrants, like earlier immigrant groups, face many challenges in adapting to life in a new country, including learning a new language and customs. Large numbers of Latin American migrants have an additional challenge: lack of legal status. Many of the immigrants from the region who entered the United States without authorization have not succeeded in obtaining a green card, which creates uncertainty about their future opportunities to remain in the country. During the Age of Mass Migration from Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which occurred without the legal complications of today, the assimilation of many immigrant groups was considered slow, often stretching well into the second generation (Abramitsky et al. 2014). In this section, we examine markers of integration among Latin American immigrants related to settlement patterns, language, and citizenship.

Geographic Dispersion

In the presence of migrant networks, new immigrant arrivals in a country are likely to settle in enclaves comprised of individuals from their birth region. The concentrations of Cubans in Miami, Mexicans in Los Angeles, and Dominicans in New York City are a few of many such examples. Figure 3 describes the geographic dispersion of US immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. We map the share of immigrants from the region in the total population of each commuting zone for the continental United States. In 1980, when large-scale immigration from the region was barely a decade old, migrant populations were concentrated in communities close to the US-Mexico border, where Mexican immigrants tended to settle; South Florida, where Cuban immigrants tended to settle; nascent enclaves around New York City, consisting mostly of immigrants from the Caribbean and South America; and select agricultural regions in the West, here too consisting mostly of immigrants from Mexico. By 2000, in contrast, immigrant populations had spread, creating new clusters in growing urban areas, including Atlanta, Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, Dallas–Fort Worth, Denver, Houston, Raleigh-Durham, and Washington, DC. New clusters were also present in Missouri and Nebraska, where immigrants from Latin America helped fill openings in beef and pork packing plants (Champlin and Hake 2006). Between 2000 to 2019, Latin American immigrant populations grew intensively in and around the clusters that had formed by 2000 and spread only modestly beyond them.

Two factors likely contributed to the geographic dispersion of Latin American immigrants after 1980. The first is the legalization of undocumented migrants that was part of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (Orrenius and Zavodny 2003; Card and Lewis 2007). Legalization may have lowered the perceived costs of

Figure 3
Share of Commuting Zone Population Born in Latin America and Caribbean



Source: Based on IPUMS data on the 1980 and 2000 US Census of Population and the 2019 1 percent sample of the American Community Survey.
Notes: Figures show the share of the US population in a given commuting zone and year that was born in Latin America and the Caribbean. The legends divide population shares into six categories by value for the bottom four quantiles and the top two deciles.

internal migration for those who had previously lacked a green card. A second factor relates to the potential for immigrant workers to "grease the wheels" of the labor market (Borjas 2001). Because immigrants may have weaker long-run attachments to specific US cities than do the native-born, they may be more mobile in response to labor market shocks. During the Great Recession, recent Mexican immigrants with a high-school education or less were highly responsive to changes in local labor demand, whereas less-educated native-born workers were not (Cadena and Kovak 2016). This responsiveness, more generally, may have made Latin American immigrants relatively likely to move into growing US cities in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.

Language, Citizenship, and Permanence

In Figure 4, we consider additional markers of immigrant integration. Perhaps the simplest is language. In panel A, we show the fraction of the adult population that speaks English "well," "very well," or "only" by birth region. Although immigrants from Latin America are less likely to speak English than immigrants from other regions, English-speaking rates are high and stable over time at around 92 percent for South Americans and around 82 percent for those from the Caribbean, while for Mexican immigrants they have risen over time from 76 percent in 1980 to 85 percent in 2019. For Central Americans, English-speaking rates have fallen, which may reflect the recency of these flows as well as falling educational attainment among recent immigrants relative to earlier arrivals from Central America.

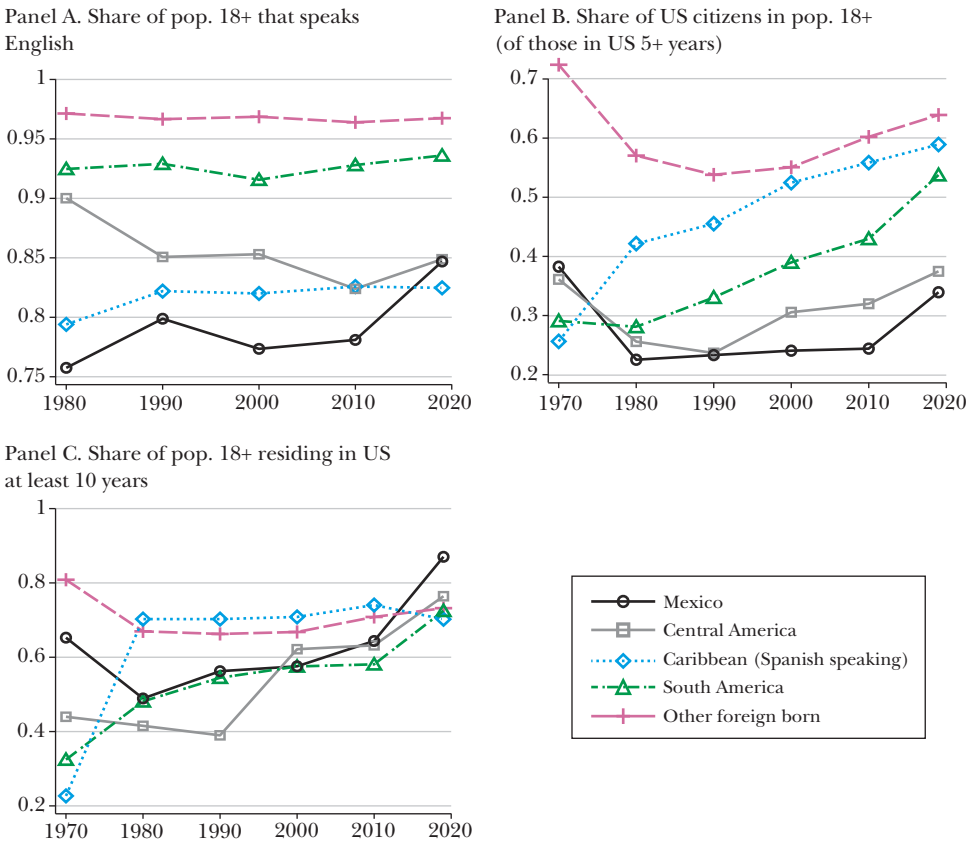
In panel B, we turn to the fraction of the immigrant population that has US citizenship, which is one indicator of being permanently attached to a country. Because immigrants with a legal permanent residence visa typically have to wait five years before they can apply for citizenship, we show citizenship rates for the population that meets this residence criterion. Not surprisingly, given the relatively high fraction of Latin American immigrants who never obtain a green card, citizenship rates for this population are lower than for immigrants from outside the region. Citizenship rates are highest for those from the Caribbean (58 percent in 2019), next highest for South Americans (54 percent), and lowest for Central Americans (38 percent) and Mexicans (34 percent). These rates reflect variation in the incidence of undocumented status among these groups. However, even among Mexicans eligible for citizenship, naturalization rates are lower than for other groups (Gonzalez-Barrera 2017). In interviews, migrants cite inadequate English skills (which make it hard to pass the citizenship test) and the cost of applying for citizenship as deterrents to naturalizing.

In panel C, we consider a third indicator of the attachment of Latin American immigrants to the United States: the fraction of adult immigrants who have resided in the country for at least ten years. In the absence of return migration (and in the presence of stable emigration rates), this fraction would rise mechanically over time. As immigration continues, new arrivals would tend to account for a smaller share of the origin group population. Among all Latin American immigrant groups, the fraction of the population with at least ten years of residence in the United States has increased over time. In 2019, it ranged from 70 percent for immigrants from the Caribbean to 87 percent for immigrants from Mexico. Based on Figure 4, there is little reason to believe that most noncitizens from Latin America might ultimately choose to return permanently to their birth country, despite their legal status being unresolved.

Immigrant Employment Patterns

Given the concentration of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean in specific US regions, seen in Figure 3, and their overrepresentation among those with a high school education or less, seen in Figure 2, we would expect immigrants from the region to account for a large share of employment in labor-intensive sectors. In Figure 5, we show, by US commuting zone, the 2019 employment share

Figure 4
Assimilation of the Population 18+ by Birth Region



Source: Based on IPUMS data on the 1980, 1990, and 2000 US Census of Population and the 2010 and 2019 1 percent samples of the American Community Survey.
Notes: Figures show for immigrants 18 and older from each origin country or region the share of the population that speaks English, the share of the population that is a US citizen, and the share of the population that has been residing in the United States for at least 10 years.

of Latin American immigrants in four large sectors in which less-educated workers predominate: agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and personal services.

Nationally, Latin American immigrants are a major presence in these sectors. In 2019, they accounted for 28 percent of employment in agriculture (up from 2 percent in 1970), 21 percent of employment in construction (up from 1 percent in 1970), 15 percent of employment in personal services (up from 2 percent in 1970), and 9 percent of employment in manufacturing (up from 2 percent in 1970).[13] In

[13] These shares are higher when considering less-educated workers. In 2019, the shares of Latin American immigrants in the employment of workers with a high school education or less were 42 percent in agriculture, 30 percent in construction, 24 percent in personal services, and 16 percent in manufacturing.

the regions where Latin American immigrants have concentrated, their presence is especially pronounced. At the 90th percentile of commuting zones in terms of the employment of workers born in Latin America, their employment shares are nearly 60 percent in agriculture, over 40 percent in construction, nearly 30 percent in personal services, and over 20 percent in manufacturing.

What will happen to the US labor market in the future if immigration from Latin America continues to moderate? For tradable goods production, such as in agriculture and manufacturing, firms may need to reduce labor intensity by altering product mixes or production techniques. Alternatively, firms may shift production offshore where possible. In the past, manufacturing plants that were located near US metropolitan areas experiencing larger inflows of less-educated immigrants were slower to increase machinery per unit of output (Lewis 2011), which is consistent with pressures for automation being responsive to immigration. For nontradable sectors, such as construction and personal services, relative prices may rise, and some US workers may be able to command better wages and working conditions. In the past, US local labor markets with larger inflows of less-educated immigrants had smaller increases in the relative prices of non-traded services—such as childcare, gardening, and housekeeping—than did other regions (Cortes 2008). These regions in turn saw greater displacement of native-born workers employed in occupations tied to these industries, but no such adjustment for jobs in tradable industries (Burstein et al. 2020).

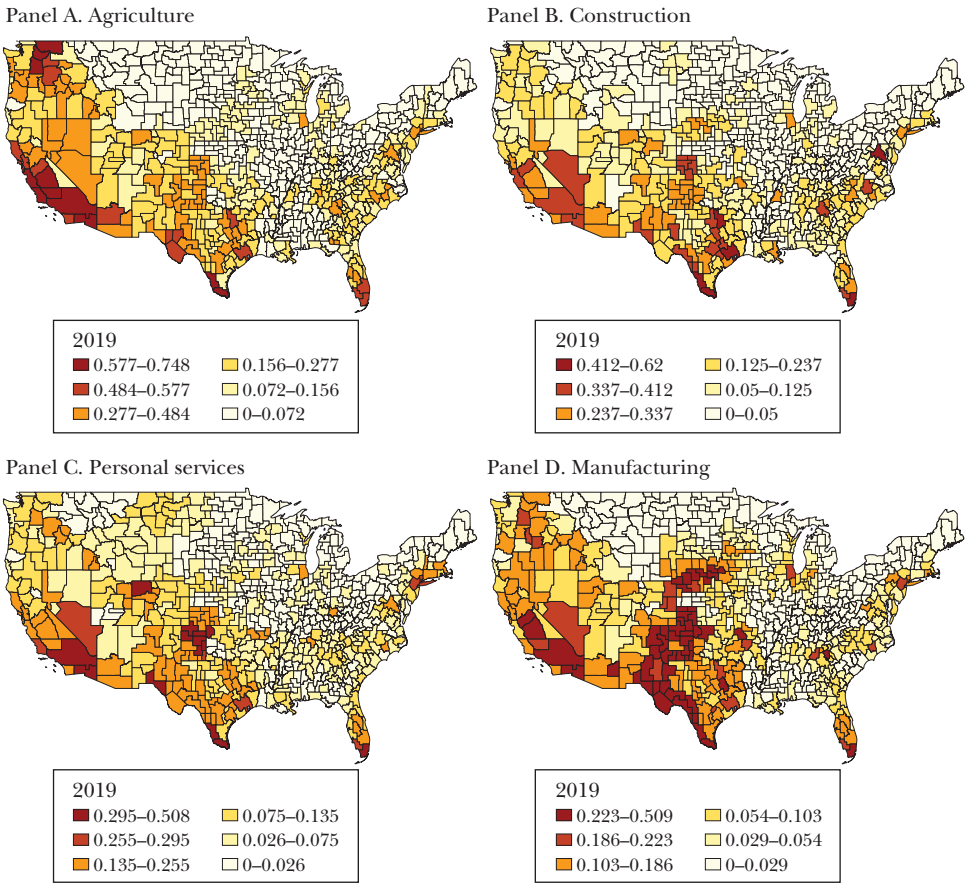
When immigration was expanding substantially, local and national labor markets adjusted along multiple margins. Now—the still unresolved COVID-19 pandemic changes in immigration notwithstanding—the United States may have begun a national experiment in how labor markets respond to substantial declines in the immigration of less-educated workers.

What Might the Future Hold for Latin American Immigration?

Although Hispanics remain the largest origin group of US immigrants, they may not be so within a few decades. If pre-COVID-19 immigration patterns were to persist, Latin America and the Caribbean would lose their current dominance in US labor inflows, just as the Irish, Germans, and Eastern Europeans did in previous eras. Under pre-pandemic trends, the Asian foreign-born share of the US population would surpass the Hispanic share by 2065 (Cohn 2015). In addition, Africa could become a more significant origin region for migration to the United States, given high population growth, low average incomes, and English fluency on much of the continent. Outside of Africa and the Middle East, population growth is on the decline, which may reduce origin-country demographic pressure for migration. Climate change, by disrupting production in many parts of the world and increasing the frequency of extreme weather, may become a more important migration push factor globally, although its specific impacts on US immigration are unclear.

Up to 2020, it seemed likely that most future US immigration inflows would be legal. The unauthorized labor inflows that so distinguished the Latin American

Figure 5
Share of Workers Born in Latin American and the Caribbean in Select Major Industries, 2019



Source: Based on IPUMS data on the 2019 1 percent sample of the American Community Survey.
Notes: Figures show the share of workers for a given industry and in a given commuting zone that was born in Latin America and the Caribbean. The legends divide shares into six categories by value for the bottom four quantiles and the top two deciles.

immigration surge had fallen dramatically. Visa over-stayers, who enter legally but become undocumented when their visas expire, had become more numerous than immigrants who entered illicitly (Meissner, Hipsman, and Aleinikoff 2018; Warren 2019). The drop-off in unauthorized border crossings was due in part to the fact that the US-Mexico border had become more heavily enforced than at any point in US history.

The pandemic-era increase in unauthorized border-crossing attempts has tested the new enforcement regime, with the outcome in terms of net US immigrant

flows still unknown. Title 42—the pandemic-induced US policy of no-consequence rapid expulsions of most migrants caught trying to cross the border—may have emboldened more migrants to attempt crossings and to keep attempting even if apprehended one or more times. With renewed high levels of attempted border crossings from an expanded set of origin countries, smuggling organizations have flourished, both along the US-Mexico border and along smuggling routes that extend deep into Latin America.

Perhaps the most notable pandemic-era change in US immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean is the exponential increase in the number of migrants asking for asylum. Asylum seekers can live and work legally in the United States while waiting for their claims to be adjudicated. If current backlogs persist, most migrants will not see their cases resolved for several years or more, possibly reducing their willingness to return to their home countries in the likely event, based on past precedent, that the large majority of claims are denied.

Given that the US economy is faced with an aging workforce and falling birth rates, pressures to liberalize US immigration policy may build, at least with respect to employment-based migration. Existing programs—such as those that allocate H-1B and H-2B temporary work visas—are already heavily oversubscribed and quickly run out of visas each year (Orrenius and Zavodny 2020). The pandemic has added urgency to immigration reform by creating labor shortages, albeit possibly temporary ones. Pandemic-based measures that closed US borders and consulates abroad in 2020 and 2021 prevented hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers from entering the country (Peri and Zaiour 2022), which may have further tightened US labor markets.

In response to these developments, labor markets in the United States and abroad will evolve. Difficulties in hiring native-born workers and obtaining visas for foreign-born workers may cause US labor costs to rise, which could induce firms to accelerate automation and the offshoring of production. Widespread experimentation with remote work during the pandemic may have taught firms that having all workers on-site is unnecessary. Such innovations may lead to more extensive changes in how foreign-born workers supply their services to US employers. At the same time, it is worthy of note that each new change in US immigration policy has inspired efforts to engineer around these changes in order to bring foreign-born labor into the country through other means. Economic and political crises abroad, fueled by continuing large international differences in living standards, are likely to sustain pressures for US immigrant inflows, whether from Latin America and the Caribbean or elsewhere.

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