



INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

REGIONAL FACT SHEET

The Americas

Northern America hosts the largest concentration of migrants in the world, most of whom are long-term immigrants. Between 1990 and 2005, the number of migrants living in Canada and the United States increased by 17 million between 1990 and 2005—the largest influx to any region in that period—to reach a total of 44.5 million. *See table 1 next page.* The most notable flow has been northward from Central America and Mexico to the United States. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that 10.7 million people born in Mexico are residing in the US; 6.7 million of them are workers.

Remittances sent home by these migrants provide a major benefit to families in Latin America and the Caribbean. Remittances to Mexico totaled about \$18 billion in 2005, the remainder of the countries in the region are likely to have received an overall amount that is similar or larger. Countries in which remittances constitute a large percentage of gross domestic product include Haiti (22.1 per cent), El Salvador (16.5 per cent), Jamaica (16.4 per cent), Nicaragua (11.8 per cent) and the Dominican Republic (10.4 per cent).

According to the US-based Urban Institute, currently there are about 11 million undocumented migrants in the US, of whom about 6.2 million are Mexican. Concern in the US about the impact of migrants on jobs, wages and ability of local governments to provide services, and difficulties in stemming the flow of undocumented workers across borders has made immigration an emotional national issue. A 2006 study by the Pew Hispanic Center nevertheless found little or no correlation between levels of immigration and unemployment rates in US localities, and other studies generally show that undocumented workers contribute more to government coffers than they take out.

The ongoing policy debate in the United States so far has resulted in draft bills in Congress that either place increased emphasis on security and control, or lean toward regularization of undocumented migrants and establishment of a temporary worker programme. In a major policy speech in early 2006, the President of the United States acknowledged the contributions made by migrants. As Congress debated the proposed bills, immigrants and groups sympathetic to immigration staged large-scale rallies in major US cities.

Despite recent growth, migration to the Americas is not at an historic high. Immigration swelled the population of Argentina by 60 per cent between 1870 and 1910, and its labour force by 86 per cent. Canada's population rose by 32 per cent due to immigration and its labour force by 44 per cent in the same period. For the United States, with a larger base population, the proportional increase was a smaller but still-substantial 17 per cent of population and 24 per cent of the labour force.

Migration has remained fairly static within Latin America and the Caribbean. The number of international migrants in this region was 7 million in 2005, representing a decrease of 0.3 million since 1990. But this reduction does not signify that migrant inflows stopped. They were just not large enough to counterbalance the repatriation of 1.2 million refugees in Central American after 1990.

Table 1: Estimated average annual numbers of migrants to the United States and Canada

Receiving country	Average annual number of migrants (thousands)			Average annual number of migrants from developing countries (thousands)			Percentage from developing countries		
	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004
Immigrants									
Canada	237	204	233	186	160	194	78	79	83
United States ^a	330	743	926	182	615	761	55	83	82
United States ^b	770	746	926	615	617	761	80	83	82

Source: Calculated from the Population Division of the United Nations Secretariat, *International Migration Flows to and from Selected Countries: 2005 Revision (POP/DB/MIG/FL/Rev.2005)*, database in digital form.

^a Data excluding the migrants legalized under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA).

^b Data including the migrants legalized under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA).

In addition to migration north to the US, an increasing number of Latin Americans are moving to Western Europe, particularly to Spain and Portugal.

Admission policies

Family reunification continues to be the cornerstone of migrant admissions in the US and Canada, although a declining one in the latter nation. During 1990–2002, 65 per cent of permanent immigrants to the United States were admitted under family preferences. In Canada, the equivalent proportion was 34 per cent.

In Canada, applicants for permanent residence are selected on the basis of a point system, with higher scores assigned to individuals with upper-secondary or university education. Since 1965, the United States has had an employment-based preference to accommodate the admission of immigrants with needed skills; the ceiling for visas in that category was raised to 140,000 annually by the Immigration Act of 1990.

A number of developed countries maintain special programmes for the admission of low-skilled workers. Canada and the United States are among the countries that have seasonal worker programmes, mainly to satisfy labour demands in agriculture. In addition, Canada allows young citizens of selected countries to travel and work within the host country for periods that can last for one or two years. (They are called “working holiday makers”.) These young migrants are most likely to find temporary jobs in low-skilled occupations.

The United States stands out as the main destination for people seeking higher education abroad, with the majority of such students coming from Asia and Europe. In 2002, 583,000 foreign students were enrolled in accredited US educational institutions at college level or higher. It is estimated that in 2001, 67 per cent of foreign students in the United States had covered their educational expenses from personal or family sources. □