Who Slips Through? Unauthorized Immigration into the United States

Over the past several decades a variety of policies have been implemented with the intent of reducing the level of unauthorized immigration, particularly from Mexico, into the United States. For instance, through the imposition of sanctions on employers who knowingly hire unauthorized workers, the Immigration Reform and Control Act intended to diminish the demand for these workers and, thereby, stem undocumented immigration. Operation Gatekeeper in California, Operation Hold-the-Line in Texas, and Operation Safeguard in Arizona are examples of intensified border patrol policies to deter Mexicans from illegally crossing the border. An alternative policy approach has been to negotiate trade treaties as in the case of NAFTA. In addition to commercial objectives, it was claimed that these treaties would facilitate economic growth in Mexico and, in this manner, reduce the earnings gap between Mexico and the United States considered responsible for population movements. While these policies seem to have had economic, social, and political impacts, the literature has been unable to identify significantly large impact in reducing unauthorized immigration.[1]

This study seeks to gain a better understanding of some of the factors facilitating the persistence of successful illegal immigrant crossings into the United States. In particular, we work with a sample of approximately 65,000 unauthorized Mexican immigrants of whom roughly 14,000 were never apprehended during their stay in the United States, while the remaining 51,000 were eventually apprehended either upon crossing the border or sometime after. Using data on these two groups of unauthorized immigrants, we address the following questions:

- Which unauthorized immigrants are successful at eluding detection by immigration authorities? What are some of the characteristics that set them apart from their apprehended counterparts?

- What role do coyotes play with respect to illegal border crossings? Do coyotes increase the likelihood of a successful crossing? Is the successful border crossing rate directly related to coyote prices?

- Once unauthorized immigrants successfully cross the border and settle in the United States, what are their conditional apprehension probabilities? And, if detained, where are they more likely to be seized: on the street, in their jobs, in their homes?

- What role do networks play in the apprehension of unauthorized immigrants? To what degree do migrant networks reduce the risks of detention by immigration authorities?

- Finally, given the span of the data, we examine to what degree the passage of some of the immigration policies referred to above has been accompanied by changes in the profile of successful unauthorized immigrants.

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[1] In this regard, Orrenius (1999) remarks how higher detention probabilities at the U.S./Mexico border resulting from enhanced border enforcement policies have led to longer stays in the United States among Mexican migrants. As such, while the same number of unauthorized immigrants may attempt to cross the border, these immigrants are now more likely to establish a permanent presence in the United States.

We rely on the information collected by the *Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México* (EMIF). This survey is administered by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF)[2] in eight different cities along the United States-Mexico border: Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros. These cities account for more than 90 percent of the migration flux from Mexico to the United States and vice versa (Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social 1998). Additionally, the survey methodology is designed to constantly update the data flow to obtain a sample that properly represents where and when migrants cross the border into Mexico. Individuals are surveyed who cross on foot, by train, car, bus and plane. During each survey shift, an interviewer applies a screening form that permits differentiating migrants from tourists and individuals born in the United States. Once a person is considered eligible (i.e. a migrant), the EMIF questionnaire is administered anonymously by a trained interviewer.

We use data from five consecutive waves of the EMIF: 1993-1994, 1994-1995, 1996-1997, 1998-1999, and 1999-2000. Each wave includes four quarterly surveys administered separately to four groups of migrants in the border regions: migrants coming from South of the Northern Mexican border region, migrants in Northern border cities originating from another Northern border community, migrants returning from the United States to or through the Mexican Northern border region, and Mexican migrants deported from the United States. Given the purpose of this study, we focus on two of these four surveys: Mexican migrants returning (voluntarily) from the United States and those who have been deported. These two groups include individuals who are 12 years old or older, not born in the United States, and who migrated or attempted to cross into the United States with the purpose of visiting family, friends, complete some business, or to work for more than one month. We exclude individuals who are authorized to work and travel to the United States and focus our attention on unauthorized immigrants. Our data, therefore, contains unauthorized immigrants who successfully cross the border, live and/or work in the United States, as well as their counterparts who end up being apprehended and deported by the immigration authorities either upon crossing or after establishing homes and jobs in the United States.

Tables 1 through 3 provide a glimpse of some of the data we work with. According to the figures in Table 1, a higher percentage of unauthorized immigrants who successfully cross the border are male, married, and household heads relative to their apprehended counterparts. Additionally, unauthorized immigrants who successfully elude immigration authorities are, on average, older, have smaller families and are slightly less educated than deported immigrants. As is common knowledge, the data in Table 2 reveal that the vast majority of deported immigrants are not apprehended at their jobs as would be the case if employer sanctions were truly being used as the preferred means to stem the flow of undocumented immigration. Instead, most detentions occur while immigrants are "on the street" or near the border. Furthermore, Table 3 seems to suggest that, for these deported immigrants, the use of a coyote does not seem to significantly reduce their likelihood of being apprehended near the border as one would anticipate when purchasing smuggling services.

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[2] COLEF carried out the survey for the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social and the Consejo Nacional de Población.

In our paper, we employ more detailed descriptive statistics along with limited dependent variable regression techniques to gauge the marginal impacts of unauthorized immigrants' personal and work characteristics on the likelihood of eluding deportation. We also account for multiple attempted entries and reliance on coyote and on migrant networks to further understand what distinguishes successful from unsuccessful entries. Overall, the analysis informs on some of the characteristics and circumstances that set successful unauthorized border crossers apart from their unsuccessful counterparts and, in this manner, help us gain a better understanding of some of the factors driving the persistence of unauthorized Mexican immigrant flows into the United States.

References

Orrenius, Pia M. "The Role of Family Networks, Coyote Prices and the Rural Economy in Migration from Western Mexico: 1965-1994." Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas Working Paper, 1999, 99-10.

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Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Successful and Unsuccessful Unauthorized Immigrants

Variables	Successful Crossers			Unsuccessful Crossers		
	Observations	Mean	S.D.	Observations	Mean	S.D.
Male	13760	0.93	0.25	51378	0.84	0.37
Age	13668	30.10	5.82	51356	23.06	6.30
Married	13670	0.56	0.50	51378	0.45	0.50
Household Head	13660	0.59	0.49	51320	0.46	0.50
Family Size	13652	3.72	0.61	51298	5.58	1.56
Years of Schooling	13662	6.69	3.19	51311	6.82	3.07

Table 2
Where are the Deported More Likely to Be Detained?

Places to Be Detained	Frequency	Percent
At Work	1,234	2.40
At Home	661	1.29
On the Street	22,598	43.98
Crossing the Border	17,530	34.12
Any Other Place	8,543	16.63
Non-specified	812	1.58

Table 3
Do Coyotes Reduce the Likelihood of Being Apprehended at the Border?

Variable	Observations	Mean	Difference	t-stat
Apprehended at the Border?				
Did Not Use a Coyote	43426	0.36	0.11	19.27***
Used a Coyote	7143	0.25	-	H$_a$: diff < 0

Notes: *** Statistically different from zero at the 1 percent level or better, ** statistically different from zero at the 5 percent level or better and * statistically different from zero at the 10 percent level or better.