ESSAY • IMMIGRATION

# How Mexican Immigration to the U.S. Has Evolved

Image of Mexican immigrants waiting with soldiers to cut weeds along the side of a road outside of Chicago in 1931 Chicago History Museum/Getty Images

THIS ESSAY IS PART OF TIME'S MEXICO IN AMERICA

*This year in collaboration with The John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress, which brings together scholars and artists from around the world to pursue the study of human creativity, TIME has exclusively published on the Kluge Center blog with the title The Mexican Mexican Immigration to the U.S. in the Early 20th Century.*

As a Kluge Fellow at the Library of Congress, Jonathan Julio Young is currently researching a new book on Mexican immigration to the U.S. during the 1920s. He sat down with Jason Steinhauer to discuss the history of this migration and the similarities and differences to immigration today.

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**Hi, John. By way of background, could you provide an overview of the flow of immigrants from Mexico into the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries?**

For almost a half century after the annexation of Texas in 1845, the flow was barely a trickle. In fact, there was a significant migration in the other direction: Mexican citizens who left the newly annexed U.S. territories and resettled in Mexican territory.

Beginning around the 1890s, new industries in the U.S. Southwest—especially mining and agriculture—attracted Mexican migrant laborers. The Mexican government was not initially opposed to this flow, and it even sent agricultural scholars fan to the United States to escape the violence. Mexicans also fell under areas in search of stability and employment. As a result, Mexican migration to the United States rose sharply. The number of legal migrants to the United States grew 20,000 migrants per year during the 1910s to about 30,000–100,000 migrants per year during the 1920s.

**This same period saw massive numbers of immigrants arrive to the U.S. from Southern and Eastern European countries. Were Mexican immigrants viewed similarly or differently?**

There was concern among the U.S. public, as well as policymakers and the press, that "new" immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe as well as Asia were somehow different from previous generations of Western European immigrants. Many of the "old" immigrants from Western Europe had already posed a threat to U.S. security and culture. The so-called science of eugenics helped drive this concern—the notion that ethnic groups had inherent qualities of intelligence, physical fitness, or a propensity towards criminality and that some ethnic groups had better qualities than others. These beliefs led to directly to concerns about immigration and immigration policy.

However, Mexicans were sometimes said to have certain positive qualities that made them "desirable" immigrants. Mexicans were said to be "good" or thought to be docile, tractable, physically strong, and able to put up with unhealthy and demanding working conditions. Perhaps more importantly, they were perceived as temporary migrants, who seem far more likely to return to Mexico than to settle permanently in the United States.

**Some after the quotas, the Cristero War erupted in Mexico. What impact did this have on immigration?**

Between 1926 and 1929, Catholic partisans took up arms against the Mexican federal government to protest against a series of laws that placed strong restrictions on the public role of the Catholic Church. In a country that was 95 percent Catholic, this provoked a furious response. Many Mexican Catholics were determined to go to war against their government until the laws were overturned.

The Cristero War had a tenfold effect. First, it led to new waves of emigrants, exiles and refugees who fled the violence and economic disruption. Second, it created a new wave of Mexican Catholic immigrants who were anti-clerical. While not all Mexican migrants supported the Catholic side of the conflict, thousands did. They organized many protests of the Mexican government from within their communities in the United States.

**You've found evidence of a court case in Arizona that sheds light on this period. Could you tell us about it and why it's significant to your research?**

While researching my book I kept coming across mentions of a case named José Gándara, a Mexican immigrant who tried to start a Catholic revolt from the U.S. side of the U.S. Mexico border in 1927. He was eventually caught in Tucson, where he was subsequently put on trial. In the Library of Congress collection, I found a transcript of the trial. Gándara's lawyers argued that he discovered the case the Tucson Citizen and the Arizona Daily Star. Both had extensive coverage of the Gándara trial, which was quite dramatic—Gándara had planted arms on retired Catholic bishop from Mexico, along with numerous other Mexican migrants, and he had enlisted the support of members of the Tucson Mexican community. The plot was uncovered by agents working for the U.S. Department of Justice.

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During the trial, Gándara's lawyers—who were prominent Catholics from El Paso—mocked the Mexican government and made conspiracy arguments in his defense. In the end, though, Gándara was convicted of arms smuggling and violating neutrality laws and sentenced to prison. He was released and was able to get his sentence commuted, thanks to some powerful supporters within the U.S. Catholic hierarchy. His story was important because it demonstrated how the same Mexican immigrants were willing to go to war to fight the Mexican government during the Cristero War years.

**Fascinating. And shortly after that, the Stock Market crashed and altered Mexican immigration once again.**

Yes. At the onset of the Depression in 1929, anti-immigration drive up, and the need for immigrant labor decreased. Many Mexican migrants found themselves suddenly impoverished and tens of thousands of rural workers were back in Mexico. Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans were also deported under unofficial "repatriation" policies led by federal, municipal or city authorities.

**As you listen to immigration debates in the 21st century, what strikes you as being similar and what strikes you as being different from debates in the early 20th century?**

I'm often struck by the similarities. Some of the rhetoric and debate about immigration, particularly immigration from Mexico and Latin America, echoes the 1920s. Many of the same arguments are made about immigrants being "not different" from the majority culture, as being unable to assimilate or acculturate.

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